A MESSAGE FROM THE CENTRE REGION COG EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

More than Football...

When people think of the State College area, images of warm fall afternoons enjoying Penn State University's Nittany Lions are often brought to mind. But the area is characterized by more than a football dynasty. The six local governments in “Happy Valley” field another winning team . . . the Centre Region COG.

COG’s team members are State College Borough, and College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris, and Patton Townships. They are collectively known as the Centre Region and have a combined population of 85,000 residents, and a land area of about 150 square miles. It is one of the fastest growing areas in Pennsylvania, with the population increasing by about 10% each decade over the last 30 years.

In 1969, three years after Joe Paterno started as Penn State’s head coach, the six municipalities established the COG. Over time, COG has evolved into one of the most effective intergovernmental organizations in the United States in terms of the number of services provided and budgetary appropriations ($16.6 million budget in 2010).

COG is governed by the General Forum, which is comprised of 32 elected officials from the six municipalities. In addition, there is a non-voting representative from Penn State University and a liaison from the local school district. Surprisingly, despite its large size, most General Forum votes are unanimous. In large measure, this consensus flows from the COG’s Committee system, which is designed to prepare recommendations to be developed on regional policy issues. Each municipality appoints one elected official to each of the COG Committees – Executive, Finance, Personnel, Public Services, Code Administration, and Transportation.

Committee recommendations are presented in the form of a motion that provides a starting point for the General Forum’s discussions. If the issue is particularly “politically” charged, the Committee may refer the issue to the individual municipal Boards/Councils for comment. Municipal responses are considered by the Committee in preparing its recommendation.

The position of General Forum Chair rotates annually among the municipalities. Each municipality also has the opportunity to host one General Forum meeting per year. COG meetings are cablecast on the area’s local government/education access channel. The local media is a regular attendee of General Forum meetings and has been an ally in helping to inform the public about regional policy issues.

The COG offers a menu of services ranging from library operations to park maintenance. Some specific examples of cost savings achieved through COG’s cooperative programs include:

- **Fire Suppression and Rescue Services**: There is a single COG-funded fire company protecting the four largest municipalities (about 74,000 residents) and Penn State University. The company operates from three stations, with a volunteer force of about 120
individuals. Each year the company responds to over 1,000 alarms. The per capita cost in the Centre Region for fire protection services is $17.00 per year; the national average for communities of comparable size is $150.00.

- **Regional Refuse/Recycling Services:** The COG has a contract for providing collection services to over 14,000 residential customers. The service contract is competitively bid every three years. Because of regional cooperation, the monthly customer rate is **26% less** than the typical customer payment in 1992, the year prior to the implementation of the COG program. Benner Township joined the contract in 2010, which is an exciting step for intergovernmental relations and also reflects the success of the program. While controversial at first, the program is currently strongly supported by the public and has a delinquency rate of less than 1%.

- **Code Administration Services:** The COG’s Building Code Agency performs inspections on approximately $120 million in new construction annually; and inspects 15,000 rental units once every three years. For the last 35 years, the program has been supported entirely through building and rental housing permits; **no tax monies fund the program**.

The COG also maintains 53 municipal parks, a nature center, two pools and a senior citizens’ center. In 2003, the COG’s parks program received *Sports Illustrated*’s Sportstown, U.S.A designation as Pennsylvania’s premier sports community.

The COG’s play book also incorporates coordinated planning efforts which include:

- **Regional Comprehensive Plan** – The Centre Region municipalities have been working cooperatively on regional land use planning for over 50 years. The Regional Comprehensive Plan establishes a blueprint for how the Centre Region should look in the future. The Plan includes a Regional Growth Boundary (RGB), which identifies the area where most of the Region’s growth should occur in the next 30 years. Areas within the RGB are zoned for growth and are provided with public utilities and services. Locations outside of the RGB are targeted for open space, and agricultural and rural preservation efforts.

- **Regional Sewage Facilities Plan** – This document outlines a plan to prepare the Region’s sewage facilities for the future. The Region’s six municipalities work cooperatively to prepare this document, and the plan is adopted in a regionally consistent manner. The Plan identifies a Sewer Service Area, which matches the Regional Growth Boundary contained in the Comprehensive Plan. In addition, the Plan studies and provides recommendations for areas of the community served by on-lot sewage disposal systems. As an example, the Region’s sewage facility planning has resulted in the implementation of an on-lot system preventive maintenance program administered by the COG’s Building Codes Agency. This sewage management program is considered a model for other communities in the State.

- **Regional Emergency Management Plan:** The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Code (Title 35) requires each municipality to have an emergency management coordinator, an emergency operations center, and an emergency operations plan. For over 20 years, the six municipalities have opted to fulfill these requirements through a regional COG
program. In the event of a declared disaster, the communities will respond in a coordinated manner instead of pulling in separate directions.

Like any winning team, the COG also has first-rate facilities and equipment including:

- **Regional Library**: Cooperating through COG, the municipalities contributed $4 million to the construction of a new regional library. Because of the COG contribution, the Library Board was able to leverage an additional $7 million in public donations and state and federal grants. The result is a beautiful and functional 38,000 sq. ft. library that is located at a gateway intersection in the Region.

- **Regional Parks**: In 2005 the COG acquired 68 acres of land to be developed as a regional park. DCNR provided $300,000 to the purchase of this land. Another 75-acre regional acquisition of potential parkland may occur in 2006. Again, a DCNR grant was a major component of the funding proposal. COG grant applications tend to be highly competitive because of their regional nature. In addition, currently the Centre Region municipalities are exploring the feasibility of the COG acquiring the four youth and adult softball fields at Hess Field as local public facilities. Without the COG involvement in this acquisition the fields could be lost as a recreation resource.

- **Park Forest and Welch Swimming Pools**: The COG, on behalf of the participating municipalities, secured over $7.2 million to fund the reconstruction and expansion of the Centre Region’s two public swimming pools. Both facilities are completely new, provide about twice the swimming area, offer zero entry points to access the pools, and are equipped with slides and other fun water features.

- **Traffic Pre-emption System**: Nine years ago, four of the Centre Region municipalities entered into an intergovernmental agreement to have COG install, maintain, and replace traffic pre-emption equipment. The agreement created a regional system that permits fire and ambulance apparatus, in route to an emergency call, to change traffic signals to green. Over time the pre-emption system should reduce response time and the number of vehicular accidents occurring between emergency apparatus and the public. The municipalities appropriate funds in the COG budget to equip existing intersections with pre-emption equipment each year. In addition, municipalities adopted ordinances, recommended by the COG General Forum, that require that traffic pre-emption devices be installed in all new traffic signals.

- **COG Building**: After many years of discussion, the COG opened a new 16,000 sq. ft. building. The building is owned by the municipalities through a condominium agreement. The rent that each of the COG agencies pay to the municipalities for their office space is based on the percentage of building ownership. This business arrangement enables the municipalities to receive a return on their investment in the construction of the $2.5 million building.

The essential strategies for COG’s winning record are:
- **Presence of Stakeholders**: All of the elected officials participate in the COG. In the Centre Region, typically, each elected municipal official attends two COG meetings per month: a session of the General Forum and his/her assigned COG Committee. Unlike many other COG’s, all of the elected officials are actively engaged in the organization and have ownership of its projects and services.

- **Patient Persistence**: Consensus-building is hard work, and it may take years to achieve an agreement on a major topic. For example, the funding agreement for the COG’s regional library took place over nine years as municipal officials wrestled with questions relating to the allocation of costs and building location. The Agreement establishing the COG requires unanimous consent of all the municipalities in matters relating to real estate. A tremendous amount of effort was invested in obtaining each municipality’s approval of a single building site. The process was possible because the elected officials openly identified their concerns, carefully listened to their peers from other municipal Boards/Councils, and were willing to explore and analyze all options.

- **Multiple Partnerships**: The COG not only consists of partnerships among the municipalities, it also has relationships with the local water, sewer and transit authorities, the school district, the County government, and Penn State University. The relationships increase COG’s capacity to provide services and coordinate land use plans. For instance, the COG maintains five school district playing fields in exchange for the community having access to those fields when school is not in session. This joint COG/school district approach has expanded the number of playable ball fields available to residents, while at the same time avoiding the need to purchase additional property.

- **Adequate Funding Support**: Regional cooperation requires funding for staff support to prepare minutes, agendas, reports, and communications, and to schedule meetings. It is essential that all of the elected officials be kept informed of COG activities; elected officials will not support what they don’t know about. Keeping people informed costs money.

Municipal contributions for COG programs are calculated in a variety of ways. Most COG programs use a standard formula with three component elements (assessed property evaluation, population, and earned income tax base). Other programs employ usage. For example, the costs for the regional library programs are allocated based on the percentage of items checked out to residents of a particular municipality. There have been a few cases where contributions were based on each municipality paying the same amount.

- **Detailed Documentation**: Each COG program is established by each individual municipality adopting, by ordinance, Articles of Agreement that clearly define the terms for membership, governance, scope of services, funding, and withdrawal. Having detailed agreements that identify these ground rules has enabled the COG to avoid many misunderstandings among the member municipalities.

Participating in the COG makes common sense to its member municipalities. Working through the COG, the municipalities make effective use of public funds; provide high quality public services; and coordinate community planning in a highly dynamic area. Additionally, the COG makes sound
business sense. Because of its large service area, the COG is able to realize economies of scale in the production of its services, and the costs of many COG services are recovered through fees paid by the users (e.g. building permits, pool membership, etc.). Together, the municipalities are better able to leverage their funds to obtain grants and public contributions.

Unlike their football counterparts, COG officials will never march in the Rose Ball parade. But in the stadium of local governance, they are champions in working together to provide high quality, cost-effective public services to their residents.

Jim Steff
COG Executive Director