

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan



Michigan Public Policy Survey March 2011

## Local leaders are mostly positive about intergovernmental cooperation and look to expand efforts

This report presents Michigan local government leaders' assessments of their jurisdictions' intergovernmental cooperative efforts. The report is based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Fall 2010 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is conducted by the **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)** at the University of Michigan in partnership with the **Michigan Association of Counties, Michigan Municipal League, and Michigan Townships Association**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the MPPS include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers from over 1,300 jurisdictions across the state.

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# CLOSUP

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## Key Findings

- Intergovernmental cooperation is a common feature of local public service delivery today, all across the state of Michigan. Overall, 72% of local jurisdictions report that they are currently involved in some type of formal collaborative effort with another unit of government. This increases to 92% among the state's larger jurisdictions (those with more than 10,000 residents).
- Most local officials say collaborative efforts have been successful. Overall, 81% of respondents say their current collaborative efforts have been generally successful, 14% report mixed success and failure, and only 2% say their efforts have been generally unsuccessful. With some small variations, this generally holds true for communities of all sizes, in all regions of the state.
- A large percentage of Michigan officials believe their jurisdictions should increase collaborative efforts even further. Overall, 44% of local government leaders say their current level of intergovernmental cooperation is "not enough." This increases to 85% among officials from the state's largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents).

>> Local officials also report a lack of opposition among groups in their communities regarding intergovernmental cooperation. Only 2-3% of officials say majorities of their jurisdictions' board members, local business leaders, or citizens feel that current levels of cooperation are "too much."

- When asked about potential initiatives from Lansing to encourage even more intergovernmental collaboration, local leaders express much more support for incentives rather than for mandates from the state government.

>> Overall, 68% of local officials indicate they would not support such state mandates under any circumstances. However, among the largest jurisdictions this drops to 36% of officials opposed to these mandates.

>> Meanwhile, in terms of incentives, 50% of local leaders say revenue sharing incentives would be effective at encouraging more cooperation, while 69% say grants to offset higher costs that are often found in the first few years of new collaborative efforts would be effective.

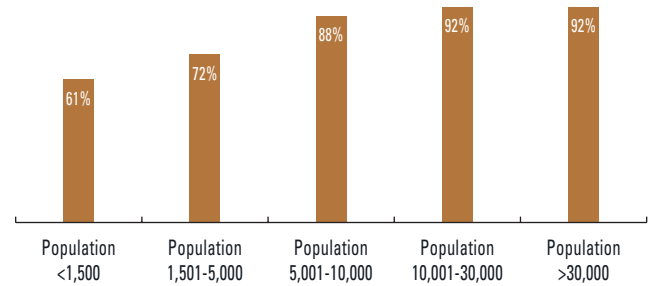
## Significant levels of collaboration are underway currently among Michigan’s local jurisdictions

Previous reports in the MPPS series have documented a fiscal crisis that is spreading across the state of Michigan, increasingly affecting communities of all sizes, in all regions of the state.<sup>1</sup> Due to both falling revenues and rising costs, this crisis has left many Michigan local governments struggling to provide services for their citizens. One commonly discussed potential solution to these challenges is intergovernmental collaboration (or cooperation, used interchangeably here). Collaboration can result in economies of scale and “economies of skill” (i.e., sharing of employees with specialized technical expertise capable of serving multiple jurisdictions), which are often proposed as solutions to increase efficiency and decrease costs. In order to get a better understanding of how local leaders view intergovernmental collaboration and how state and local policymakers may be able to foster additional cooperation, the Fall 2010 Michigan Public Policy Survey asked local government officials across the state about their experiences with current cooperative efforts and plans for future collaboration with other local units of government.

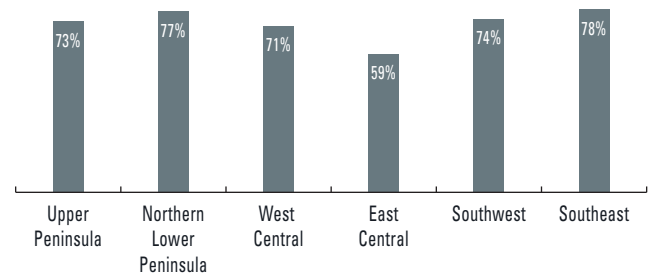
The MPPS finds that statewide, nearly three in four (72%) of Michigan’s local jurisdictions report they are currently involved in some kind of formal intergovernmental collaboration with other jurisdictions. The likelihood of a unit reporting that they are involved in intergovernmental collaboration increases with the jurisdiction’s population size. For instance, while 61% of the state’s smallest jurisdictions (those with fewer than 1,500 residents) say they currently involved in formal intergovernmental collaborative efforts, 92% of Michigan’s larger jurisdictions (those with more than 10,000 residents) report being involved in formal collaborative efforts (see Figure 1a). It should be noted the smaller jurisdictions, with their lack of dense population centers, usually provide fewer services and therefore have fewer opportunities on which to collaborate with others. In addition, smaller rural jurisdictions may face geographic constraints associated with significant distances from other population centers, making it more difficult and perhaps less beneficial to collaborate with others on service delivery.

Among different types of jurisdictions, counties (93%) and cities (90%) are most likely to report being engaged in current collaborative efforts. Still, large majorities of villages (63%) and townships (67%) also report they are currently engaged in collaboration.

**Figure 1a**  
Percentage of jurisdictions currently involved in some kind of formal intergovernmental collaboration, by population size



**Figure 1b**  
Percentage of jurisdictions currently involved in some kind of formal intergovernmental collaboration, by region

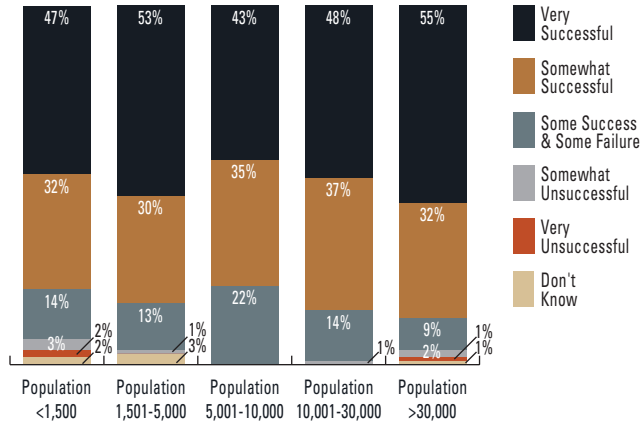


And when looking across different regions of the state (see Figure 1b), the MPPS finds only one notable variation in levels of collaboration, with the East Central region reporting less collaboration than others. While in most regions of the state around three-fourths of officials report their jurisdictions are involved in formal collaborative efforts, only 59% officials from the East Central region say the same.

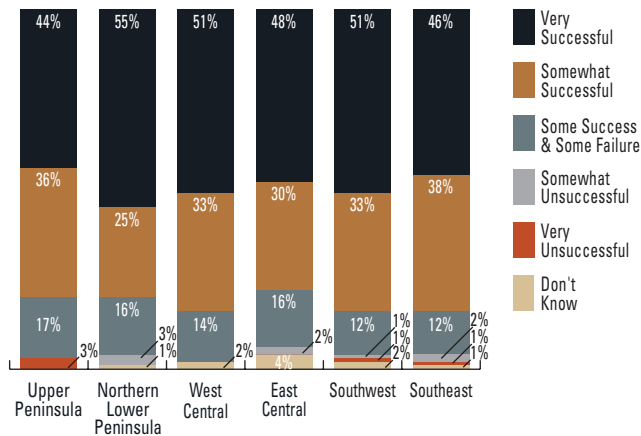
Although many intergovernmental efforts are long-established, there is also significant recent activity in pursuing cooperation. Overall, 42% of local officials report that their jurisdiction has been approached by another unit of government about formal collaboration within the past two years. Among the largest jurisdictions this increases to 67%. Officials from Southeast Michigan were most likely to report that their jurisdictions had been approached by others in the past year about collaboration (50%), while officials in the Upper Peninsula and East Central Lower Peninsula were least likely to report being approached (about 36% each).



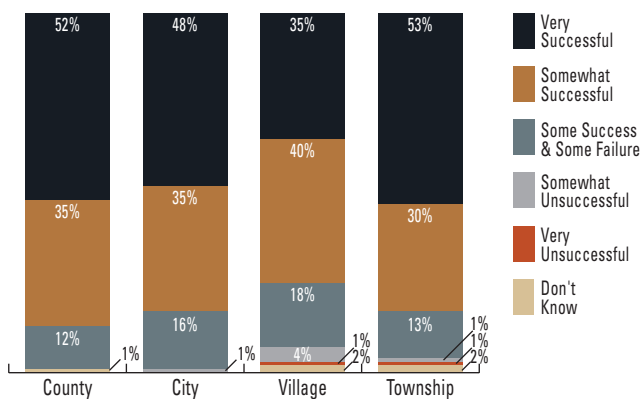
**Figure 2a**  
Local officials' assessments of success in their jurisdictions' collaborative activities, by population size



**Figure 2b**  
Local officials' assessments of success in their jurisdictions' collaborative activities, by region



**Figure 2c**  
Local officials' assessments of success in their jurisdictions' collaborative activities, by jurisdiction type



## Current collaborative efforts are viewed as mostly successful

When asked about the overall success of their jurisdictions' collaborative activities— in terms of cost savings, service improvements, etc.— Michigan's local officials report high levels of success. Nearly half of all local officials (49%) say their collaborative efforts to date have been “very successful” and another third (32%) say these efforts have been “somewhat successful.” Only 2% report their efforts have been generally unsuccessful, while 14% say their experiences have been mixed, with some success and some failure.

Reports of successful collaboration are widespread across communities of all sizes, regions, and most jurisdiction types, as shown in *Figures 2a – 2c*. For example, while 79% of officials from the smallest jurisdictions rate their current efforts as somewhat or very successful, 87% of officials from the largest jurisdictions say the same. This small difference is notable because the MPPS often finds much more significant differences between the state's smallest and largest communities, on a wide variety of policy issues. While the state's mid-sized jurisdictions (those with population sizes between 5,001 and 10,000 residents) are the most likely to report mixed success and failure (22%), it is still the case that 78% of officials from these communities report their collaborative efforts have been somewhat or very successful. (see *Figure 2a*).

While there are no particularly large variations across the state's regions (see *Figure 2b*), officials from the Northern Lower Peninsula are most likely to report their efforts have been very successful (55%), while those in the Upper Peninsula are least likely to say the same (44%). Still, while previous MPPS surveys have found large regional variations on a wide variety of policy issues, what stands out here is the consistently positive views of collaborative success across the entire state. In all regions of Michigan, at least 78% of local leaders say their collaborative efforts have been somewhat or very successful.

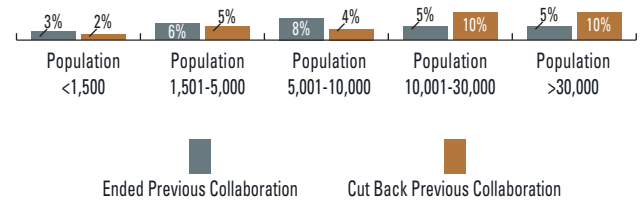
And in terms of jurisdiction types, while village leaders are somewhat less likely than others to report their collaborative projects have been “very” successful, nonetheless three-fourths of village officials (75%) report their efforts have been somewhat or very successful (see *Figure 2c*). Clearly, the overwhelming majority of local government leaders across Michigan view their collaborative efforts as mostly successful endeavors.

## Few jurisdictions are cutting back or terminating collaborative efforts

The success of Michigan’s intergovernmental collaboration efforts can also be evaluated on a kind of “divorce rate” (i.e., the frequency at which collaborative efforts have been reduced or outright terminated). Remarkably few local officials report that their jurisdictions have cut back or terminated previously existing collaboration projects within the last two years. Overall, only 4% of officials say they have cut back previous collaborative efforts and 5% indicate they have completely terminated previous efforts. The state’s larger jurisdictions are more like to report having recently cut back particular efforts (see Figure 3), although they are also the most likely to be engaged in collaborative efforts in the first place and therefore have more such projects to cut.

Among those few officials who described in an open-end survey question the collaborative programs they have cut back or terminated, 34% mentioned changes to public safety services, 11% mentioned cuts to waste and recycling programs, and 8% mentioned cuts to recreation programs. And among those who provided a reason for the cuts, the most frequently cited cause related to budgetary constraints such as lack of funds due to reduced revenue or costs that were too high for the benefit gained by the service (40%), followed by disagreements, conflicts, or other issues with a collaborating partner (32%).

**Figure 3**  
Percentage of jurisdictions that have cut back or terminated collaborative efforts within the last two years



## VOICES FROM ACROSS MICHIGAN

### On why collaborative efforts were cut back or terminated:

- (1) “We were examining the development of a shared township-county service complex. This effort has fallen victim to the economy - the township backed out of a [specific] agreement, and we all looked at the start-up expense and decided not to move forward at this time.”
- (2) “Economic development didn’t seem to be helping our township.”
- (3) “In the long run certain collaboration cost the city more, based on our ability to provide those services with needed staff.”
- (4) “The township and the village could not come to an agreement on budget issues and the township also stated that they could not afford to pay the village’s fees.”



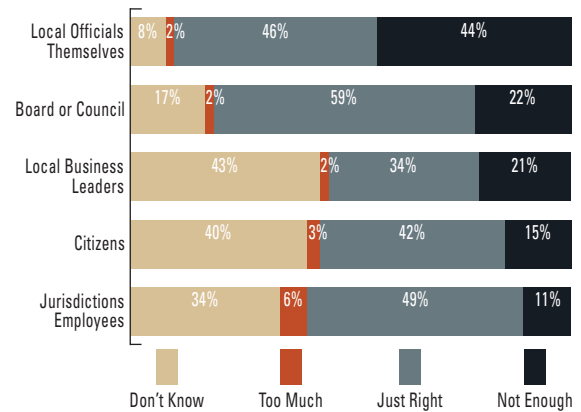
## Officials see generally high levels of community support for intergovernmental cooperation

Plans for collaboration among two or more units of government can be influenced by support or opposition among a variety of actors and groups in the collaborating communities. Conventional wisdom has often been that many community actors and groups oppose intergovernmental cooperation, for a variety of reasons. For instance, citizens have been viewed as opposing regional cooperation due to concerns such as decreased ability to hold their elected officials accountable, less transparency regarding service provision if decisions are made in a larger and more distant bureaucracy, possibly longer wait times for public safety response if a fire or police station is relocated to provide services to a wider region, and so on. In addition, local government board and council members have been viewed as opposing collaborative efforts, out of a concerns about delegating power to other jurisdictions and actors, increasing the complexity of the decision-making process, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

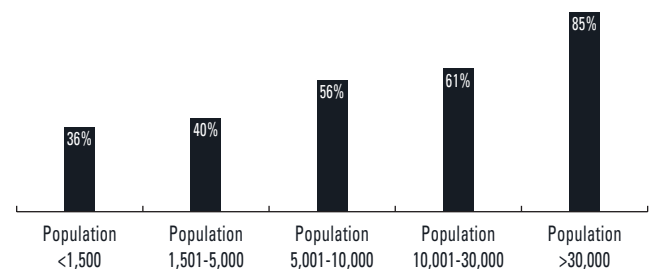
In order to get a sense of the community forces impacting Michigan's local leaders on issues of collaboration, the MPPS asked these leaders how they think groups in their communities feel about the existing levels of collaboration: whether there is too much currently, just the right amount, or not enough. Surprisingly, the responses imply not only a lack of strong community opposition to cooperative efforts, but indeed a high degree of community support for existing efforts, as well as sources of support for expanding cooperation even further. For instance, when reporting on the majority opinion among their jurisdictions' board or council members, only 2% of local leaders say their board thinks there is too much collaboration now. Meanwhile, 59% say their board thinks the current level is "just right" and 22% say it is "not enough" (see Figure 4). Whether reporting on the views of their board members, their local business leaders, their citizens, or their jurisdiction's employees, local leaders see very little active community resistance, as well as significant reservoirs of support for intergovernmental collaboration.

Interestingly, significant percentages of local officials report that they do not know the views of local business leaders (43% say "don't know"), citizens (40%), or their jurisdictions' employees (34%). While this could indicate a lack of consensus among those community groups regarding collaboration, it may also indicate a

**Figure 4**  
Local officials' assessments of support among community actors for intergovernmental collaboration



**Figure 5**  
Percentage of local officials who think current intergovernmental collaborative efforts are "not enough," by population size



general lack of activism in support of or in opposition to collaboration within the community. For instance, whereas some of the Michigan's largest chambers of commerce and most influential business organizations have increasingly begun pushing for greater levels of intergovernmental collaboration, it appears that many local chambers across the state may be less involved in the issue.

The MPPS also asked the local government leaders themselves about their own views on current levels of collaboration, and finds they are the most supportive group of all in terms of desiring further collaboration. While 46% of these leaders say the current levels of collaboration are just right (see Figure 4), 44% say current levels are "not enough." These local officials who think there should be more collaboration are presented by jurisdiction size in Figure 5, which shows support for expanding collaboration grows to a remarkable 85% of local leaders from the largest jurisdictions.

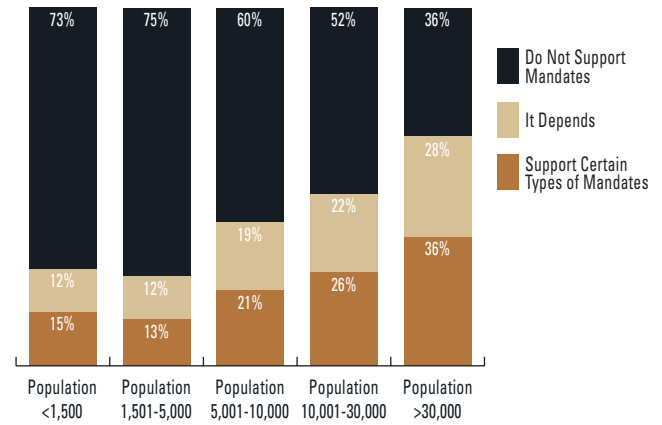
## Local officials are mostly skeptical about effectiveness of state mandates for encouraging collaboration

The MPPS asked local officials whether they believe certain types of state mandates designed to encourage intergovernmental collaboration would be effective or ineffective.

As might be expected, there is substantial entrenched opposition to the general notion of mandates. When asked about state mandates to encourage intergovernmental collaboration, 68% of local leaders overall report that they do not support such mandates under any circumstances. However, there are significant differences by population size of the jurisdiction, with support for certain mandates growing as the size of the jurisdiction increases. For example, 73% of officials from the state’s smallest jurisdictions agree with the statement that “the state should not impose any new mandates because local governments know best how to make their own decisions regarding collaboration” (see Figure 6). By contrast, only 36% of officials from the state’s largest jurisdictions respond the same way, while another 36% say there are certain types of new state mandates to encourage collaboration that they would support, and 28% say it depends upon certain circumstances.

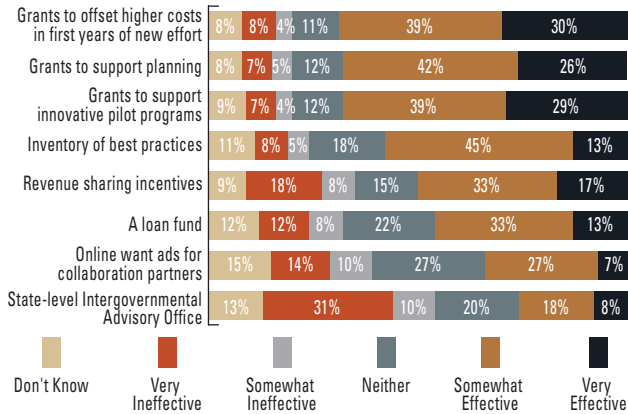
Beyond the general question on mandates overall, the MPPS also asked for opinions about a series of specific possible mandates. Over half of all local officials statewide say that these specific state mandates would be ineffective, including mandates requiring that revenue sharing be used first to support service-sharing agreements (57% say “ineffective”), mandates establishing common minimum operating standards (for example, number of police officers per capita) below which collaboration would be required to provide the service (54% say ineffective), and mandates requiring that certain service-sharing elements be included in local master plans (50% say ineffective). At the same time, there is at least some support for these mandates, with 21% of leaders saying mandated service-sharing elements in local master plans would be *effective*, and 32% saying the same for mandates establishing common accounting and budgeting standards.

**Figure 6**  
Local officials’ views on state mandates to encourage local collaboration

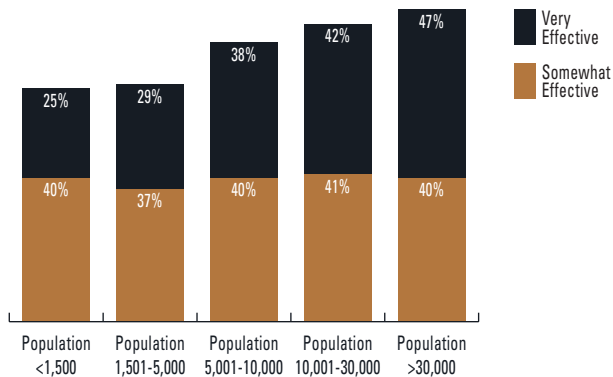




**Figure 7**  
Local officials' assessments of possible state incentives regarding collaboration



**Figure 8**  
Percentage of local officials who believe grants to offset higher costs in first years of collaboration would be effective, by population size



## Local leaders express widespread belief that grants and other state incentives for local collaboration would be effective

Compared to the general skepticism regarding mandates, there is much more widespread belief among local officials that state incentives to encourage collaboration would be effective. In November 2009, the Legislative Commission on Government Efficiency recommended a series of incentives designed to increase collaboration.<sup>3</sup> The Fall 2010 MPPS asked about specific incentives, including those proposed by the Commission, to see how local officials would evaluate them.

Among a series of eight types of incentives, grants to encourage collaboration engender the greatest optimism among local leaders. Over two-thirds (69%) of Michigan's local officials believe that various grants aimed at encouraging cooperation would be either "somewhat effective" or "very effective," while more than half (58%) think developing an inventory of best practices and examples of previous successful collaborative efforts would be effective. In addition, 50% of local leaders say revenue sharing incentives designed to encourage collaboration would be effective (see Figure 7).

Local officials express skepticism about the idea of a state-level intergovernmental advisory office to coordinate and administer programs for encouraging collaboration, with nearly one in three (31%) saying it would be "very ineffective."

Overall, assessments of the effectiveness of these incentives are fairly consistent among officials from all types of jurisdictions, although there are some differences. For example, as the population size of the jurisdiction increases, views on the effectiveness for various incentives increases. Figure 8 illustrates, for example, some of the differences based on population size, regarding the perceived effectiveness of grants to offset the higher costs often found in the first years of a new collaborative effort, with 65% officials from the smallest jurisdictions believing such grants could be effective, while 87% of officials from the largest jurisdictions believe in their effectiveness. Again, these types of population size differences may reflect the fact that smaller jurisdictions tend to have fewer services on which to collaborate in the first place.

## Conclusion

Many of Michigan's local governments are currently engaged in intergovernmental collaboration and many local leaders are looking to expand these efforts further. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of Michigan's local governments report they are already participating in some kind of formal collaborative effort, and by a wide majority they report that those efforts have been either "very successful" (49%) or "somewhat successful" (32%). In another signal of success, very few jurisdictions have decided to end or even just cut back current collaborative efforts over the past two years. Moreover, 44% of local leaders overall feel that their jurisdictions' current collaborative efforts are "not enough," including 85% of leaders from the state's largest jurisdictions. In addition, local officials report little opposition to collaboration among key community groups, such as citizens, local business leaders, and their jurisdictions' employees.

State policymakers should understand that a great deal of intergovernmental collaboration is occurring already across the state, even without further state mandates or incentives designed to expand collaboration, and that many local governments are already looking to expand these efforts. Policymakers wishing to foster additional collaboration should also understand that local officials believe incentives would be more effective than mandates, in general. Over two-thirds (68%) of local leaders oppose state mandates to boost collaboration under any circumstances, although officials in larger jurisdictions express some levels of support for mandates. Meanwhile, local officials believe that a variety of potential incentives could be "somewhat" or "very" effective in facilitating additional cooperation.

State policymakers should also understand that smaller and more rural jurisdictions are likely to have fewer opportunities for collaborative programs. Any new state-level programs designed to encourage collaboration should be carefully considered so as not to harm jurisdictions for which collaboration may not make financial or operational sense.

Meanwhile, local jurisdictions that are not currently involved in collaborative efforts should understand that they are in the minority. While collaboration is not appropriate in all situations, local policymakers looking to expand cooperative efforts with other local jurisdictions should understand that their peers generally give high marks to their existing efforts, and that many of them are also looking to expand collaboration.

Overall, the Michigan local government environment appears to offer a large and active marketplace for cooperative endeavors, with many opportunities for expansion.

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In addition to the opinions and issues covered in this report, the MPPS also collected data on officials' assessments of the factors that encourage and discourage collaborative efforts in their jurisdictions, as well as more specific information about collaborative efforts they are studying or planning for in the future. A report on the findings from these questions is forthcoming.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP). “Local governments struggle to cope with fiscal, service, and staffing pressures.” August 2010. <http://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). “Intergovernmental Cooperation: Strategies for Overcoming Political Barriers.” September 2003. <http://library.semco.org/InmagicGenie/DocumentFolder/PoliticalBarriers.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Legislative Commission on Government Efficiency. “Charting A Way Forward: A Path Towards Fiscal Stability For the State of Michigan.” November 2009. [http://council.legislature.mi.gov/files/lcge/lcge\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://council.legislature.mi.gov/files/lcge/lcge_final_report.pdf).

## Survey background and methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan’s 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys were sent via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials in all 83 counties, 274 cities, 259 villages, and 1,240 townships. A total of 1,189 jurisdictions in the Fall 2010 wave returned valid surveys, resulting in a 64% response rate by unit. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the  $p > .05$  level or above, unless otherwise specified.

Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Data are weighted to account for non-response.

Regional breakdowns definitions used in this report are available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>.

*The views reported herein are those of local Michigan officials and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Michigan.*

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The **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)**, housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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