

# Multi-State Collaboration

## Introduction

Every State and local government in the nation is under extreme pressure to do more with less, due to the economic downturn. To find new or to capitalize on current efficiencies, States must question the status quo, and find new and innovative ways to serve citizens. Collaboration between State and local governments, with common problems and interests, is one way to find efficiencies. Such was the case, when the State of Montana began looking for more cost effective solutions for its Geographic Information System (GIS) program needs. Being able to work with other governments allows the State to obtain purchasing power and discounts that otherwise are not available individually.

The GIS Cloud Services procurement is actually the latest in a number of multi-state collaboration opportunities that Montana has participated in. In general, past collaboration opportunities in information technology have been on the purchasing side via such vehicles as the Western States Contracting Alliance (WSCA). However for GIS, the states needed to think beyond simple purchasing, to an aggregate shared service model.

The vision was to bring together the buying power of four states around two goals; finding an affordable platform for hosting large amounts of data and establishing a purchasing vehicle that would further extend the buying power to all federal, state, and local governments. There is power in numbers as evidenced by major cloud service providers like Google, Microsoft, and Amazon coming to Helena for a meeting in June 2011 to participate in the GIS solution kick-off process.

While major collaboration like this in IT is fairly new territory for Montana, it is not necessarily for other states. This work is the embodiment of “shared services,” which is a nationally recognized high priority for state Chief Information Officers. Even the federal government is looking to have states cooperate more on common solutions. The federal government is currently funding a collaborative unemployment insurance system effort between four states; Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Montana also has recently participated in a shared hosting solution for the Montana Department of Labor. Along with hosting Montana’s site, the State is currently being reimbursed to host a federally required website for Arkansas, Michigan, and Nevada.

## Process

The current effort on GIS services collaboration consists of Montana, Oregon, Utah, and Colorado, under the oversight of WSCA. The states agreed to share responsibilities for developing the governance documents, and the Request for Information (RFI) and Request for Proposal (RFP) processes. Oregon led the governance development, while Montana managed the RFI process. Utah, with its broad, technology based acquisition laws, guided

the RFP process. At the time of this writing, the RFP is in process with contract signings projected in a few months.

It is anticipated that a similar process would be used in future multi-state purchase and collaboration opportunities. This allows the appropriate spreading of tasks and activities among the participants to achieve the best outcome.

### **Drivers/Benefits**

- The largest benefit is the purchasing influence generated by such a collaborative process. Montana does not command the attention or the buying power that even larger U.S. cities have, nor could it have attracted the intensity of national vendor response without this collaborative process. For the GIS effort there is an expected savings because of the participation of the additional three states and potential participation of other states and the federal government.
- The level of technical uniformity developed through the multi-state purchase leads to a consistent and usable set of inter and intra state standards. It additionally allows for greater flexibility and scalability to meet requirements for new applications, new types of data, and unanticipated growth. Creating a collaborative model and a trusted environment enables a foundation that future shared projects may use.
- By utilizing Cloud purchasing options, states shift expenses from the capital side to the operating side of the expense ledger. This allows funding flexibility of States to respond to rapid changes in technology.
- Another benefit is the reduction of duplicative technical support for similar projects and technologies. By minimizing redundant support within and among states, that support effort can be redirected to other IT needs within the state.

### **Drawbacks to collaborative approach:**

- Multi-jurisdictional collaborative procurements take longer, and require a greater understanding and documentation of business requirements. As long as there is not an urgent procurement requirement, these elements can be managed.
- In a collaborative approach, the entities must compromise on requirements. A collaborative effort normally results in a consensus among participants, not an agreement. A state may not fulfill every single one of its minor requirements, but through flexibility, major benefits can be realized.
- Cloud based and other collaborative services inherently require robust connections between the Internet and the State's data network. These services can consume significant additional Internet and network bandwidth.

### **Summary**

There are pros and cons to the collaborative process, however the pros of cost saving and efficiency greatly outweigh the cons. A shared methodology takes slightly longer, requires more listening and compromise, and incurs some minor extra expenses (e.g., travel).

The four state GIS services RFP is one of the largest multi-state projects ever undertaken in Information Technology data sharing among states. Depending on the level of participation by the four states and other entities like the federal government, the total value of the contract over three years could exceed \$100 million. If successful in becoming a working contract, Montana will be provided a real opportunity to advance technologically, while still efficiently responding to ever increasing budget pressures.