

Bond Case Briefs

Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

In Snow Removal, a Model for Change.

St. Paul took an unusual path to improving a vital public service, one that holds promise for other city operations.

Clearing roads after a snowfall is not a new problem for cities in northern climes. But government is infamously prone to institutional inertia, and substantial improvement in such routine city services can be slow. After the particularly difficult winter of 2013-2014, St. Paul, Minn., Mayor Chris Coleman decided that the city needed a new perspective on snow removal to reach best-in-class status. The city's approach to achieving this holds lessons for governments everywhere.

As many government officials have learned, excellence in delivering the most basic and essential public services is crucial to bringing the public on board with more ambitious, visionary goals. "If your people aren't convinced that you know how to plow a street, it's difficult for them to embrace your larger vision of how to modernize the city," Coleman says.

Snow removal in St. Paul is the responsibility of the Department of Public Works (DPW), the city's largest agency. To both streamline its organizational structure and improve how DPW delivers services, the mayor's office reached out in August 2014 to a nonprofit called Civic Consulting MN to explore a collaborative, inclusive — and free — model of outside consultation.

The traditional model for management consulting in the public sector is tactical. Teams of external consultants diagnose a problem, prescribe a solution, present a bill for their services and then depart — leaving the hard work of implementing their recommendations to government leaders. Dave MacCallum, who leads Civic Consulting MN, explained that the model it has been developing since 2014 is different, not only pairing pro bono consultants with leaders in municipal government but also seeing the process of change through to completion.

Cities across the country have experimented with models incorporating volunteer help from leading civic and business experts. But approaches that work in the private sector do not always translate well to public problems. The success of such programs depends on the background of the loaned executive and the willingness of the bureaucracy to cooperate. In St. Paul, many of these issues were resolved by working through Civic Consulting MN, a skilled intermediary.

Though snow removal was the original charge, the partnership focused on several issues across the Department of Public Works; in order to make improvements in one area, organizational change was required throughout. And the innovation work had to be done on top of the department's daily operations, so time was in short supply. Scott Cordes, St Paul's director of innovation and an instrumental driver of the partnership, describes the project as remarkable in its speed of completion, which he attributes to thorough buy-in at all levels.

At the outset, Civic Consulting MN connected private-sector human resources experts with DPW leadership to design a team-based model for internal improvement. Together, they established several working groups that included newer employees, experienced public servants, department managers and Civic Consulting MN partners. DPW Director Kathy Lantry says this team-based

model was effective in pairing fresh, external perspectives with institutional knowledge to generate smart, efficient plans for restructuring.

The lesson here is that outside experts can be effective in spurring structural innovation only if they source creative ideas from existing staff. For innovation to be successful, it must be paralleled by a shift in internal culture. The DPW staff participated in the changes from ideation to execution, ensuring that the new shape of the department would immediately be a good fit.

Snow removal, as a result, is a much more efficient operation in St. Paul than before, and the public has taken notice. In a recent snow emergency, for example, the city needed to tow only half as many cars compared to similar events, the result of better communication with the public as to where they can and can't park during a snowstorm. Joe Spah, the city's director of street maintenance, says DPW is now using data to track what trucks are on the road, where they are going, when they are pre-treating streets and how weather forecasts should inform executive decisions.

Mayor Coleman hopes this ethos, which pairs best-in-class operations with structural change, will infuse the rest of the city's operations: "It's going to be a great platform to take across the city into other areas," he says. Indeed, this partnership models a perspective on managing change to which cities everywhere should aspire.

GOVERNING.COM

BY STEPHEN GOLDSMITH | FEBRUARY 17, 2016

Craig Campbell, a research assistant at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School, contributed research and writing for this column.

Copyright © 2026 Bond Case Briefs | bondcasebriefs.com