

## **Merging Police Departments in White County, Minnesota**

*A Case Study for the ISAC Fall School Workshop*

*“Regionalism and Overcoming Barriers to Cooperation among Localities”*

*November 29, 2006*

White County Commission Chair Bob Smith needs your help. He is facing a problem in his county in Minnesota. White County is losing population, and it has become obvious to Bob and other county leaders that White County and its biggest city, Otisville, can no longer afford to staff, equip and operate two separate law enforcement departments. Bob would like to combine Otisville’s five-officer police department with the county’s 20-officer sheriff’s department.

There are good reasons for making this move at this time:

- There are cost savings – but there are even greater service improvements if the two departments are combined.
- A study by the University of Minnesota a few years ago recommended that cities of Otisville’s size seek to combine their departments with larger entities. (Recently Bob talked with one of the study’s authors. He agreed that combining the two departments makes sense in White County.)
- While he hasn’t talked with all the other commissioners, Bob is sure the county board would support it.
- Otisville is struggling to pay for its police department but it hasn’t reached crisis stage yet, so Bob has time to line up his arguments and shore up support. He figures he has a year’s time to make the argument for combining the departments.
- The Otisville police chief has announced plans to retire next year.

But there are obstacles:

- No one is sure how the Otisville City Council will vote, but Bob thinks its first reaction will be negative. The reason: It will fear the loss of control, Bob thinks. After all, the five police officers are a big part of Otisville city government.
- Also, there’s a belief among Otisville citizens that they’ve been taken advantage of in past cooperative efforts. While the numbers don’t seem to support it, Otisville residents maintain that when all the school systems in the county merged in the 1970s, their taxes went up and the new high school went to another part of the county.
- An important person in Otisville, newspaper publisher Tom Johnson, is almost sure to oppose the merger. Johnson’s newspaper, the Otisville Gazette, has complained for years about the county government’s “power grabs.” So Bob can already imagine the editorials about the law enforcement merger idea.

Thankfully, Bob has been able to fly more than 100 Iowa county officials to White County to help him think about strategies.

Your assignment: Help Bob think of strategies for overcoming these common obstacles to government cooperation.

**A Groups:**

Think of three strategies for dealing with the Otisville City Council's fear of losing control of its police department. What could Bob and his allies do to make the Otisville Council more comfortable with the merger idea?

Suggested strategies:

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**B Groups:**

Think of three strategies for dealing with the Otisville citizens' fear that their city will be taken advantage of. What could Bob and his allies do to convince Otisville citizens that the merger negotiations will be fair?

Suggested strategies:

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**C Groups:**

Think of three strategies for dealing with the opposition of an important voice in the community, newspaper publisher Tom Johnson. (Good news: Bob is sure that the Gazette's editor, Sally Brown, will be fair to both sides.) What could Bob and his allies do to deal with the opposition of an important person?

Suggested strategies:

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