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Through the Looking Glass: Local Execution of Federal Projects

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By Jonathan Weinstein, PMP

Projects in the government arena increasingly include all levels of government and are executed across political and geographic boundaries. An idea and requirement that is defined at the federal level is often analyzed and funded at the state level, to be implemented by local authorities. Conflicting priorities among the various players in a cross-jurisdictional project can add complexity to public sector project management.

One key challenge highlighted by Ira Levy, the Howard County CIO and lead sponsor of the cross-jurisdictional Inter-County Broadband Network (ICBN) project, is the "misalignment of the management approach – where the federal government's perspective is grant management and the 'local' perspective is construction management." At times, the federal reporting requirements are viewed by local jurisdictions as too focused on grant execution, and inconsistent with the "internal" reporting that is akin to construction and procurement projects. This misalignment adds complexity to the general challenges projects face, permeating all elements of project management – scheduling, budgeting, reporting, and performance measurement. As an example of the misalignment, federal schedule and cost requirements and constraints do not allow for deviations, including those caused by external factors outside anyone's control such as weather, or the cost and availability of materials (e.g., fiber optic cable).



The ICBN in the state of Maryland is a recent and unfolding case study of managing varying interests across political boundaries and different levels of government.

The Project and Players

ICBN is a consortium established in 2009 to obtain broadband stimulus funding. ICBN has received \$72 million in grant funding, making it the largest component of the \$115 million One Maryland Broadband Network grant.

The entire state-wide project will connect 1,006 community anchor institutions directly, including schools, community colleges, hospitals, and government agencies. The completed network will span 4,200 square miles and touch every county in Maryland.

The project has a large stakeholder roster: the grant is funded by an agency within the Department of Commerce, and the project will be fulfilled by a handful of Maryland county and city jurisdictions, as

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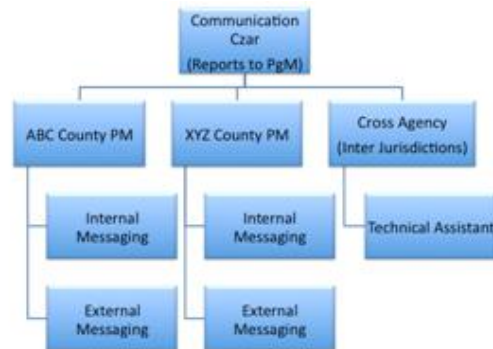
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well as state institutions such as the Maryland Department of Information Technology and the University of Maryland academic system. Howard County is the ICBN administrator and will manage the funds and deploy the network throughout the 10 partner jurisdictions and connect to the wider One Maryland Broadband Network.

The Solution: Emphasis on Communication

While the project is moving from the proposal and initiation phase to planning and execution, the lead jurisdiction, Howard County, is working to establish an environment that will enable the ICBN's success. Their approach takes into account fundamental project management practices as well as elements to address the specific challenges of this multi-jurisdictional endeavor.

Ira Levy, the Howard County CIO, plans to address the misalignment between the federal and "local" management approaches by building and maintaining a strong coalition focused on common concerns and goals. He anticipates that by establishing a "Communication Organization" (see graphic below) the ICBN will be able to satisfy federal reporting and monitoring requirements while building and maintaining project momentum. According to Levy, "A structured and effective communication program will mitigate many of the challenges the program will face and strengthen the ICBN consortium."



In addition to emphasizing communication, the ICBN project management approach will include:

Documenting a clear project structure including roles and responsibilities. Project managers will be assigned to different ICBN regions, each working closely with the jurisdictions in the region including internal personnel and IT departments.

Building and staffing a Project Management Office as a resource to "Regional" PMs and responsible for project monitoring, reporting, and compliance to state and federal entities.

Aligning objectives across jurisdictions through the establishment of a governance committee and key functional working groups, *e.g.*, Technical, Legal, Economic Development.

The ICBN effort is representative of an increasing share of projects in the government arena – federally funded and locally managed across multiple jurisdictions. Though some of the challenges may seem similar to "ordinary" projects, the complexity and approach to addressing those challenges require new processes and methods.

The local agencies responsible for executing federal projects must demonstrate that their project management capabilities are effective and can fulfill appropriate levels of accountability. Federal agencies should consider enabling local jurisdictions to utilize their own tools and processes and remove unnecessary layers of reporting and costly management overhead. The result will be fewer hours and dollars spent on overhead and an increased focus on project execution and results.

About the Editors

Timothy Jaques, PMP, and **Jonathan Weinstein, PMP**, are founding partners of Line of Sight (www.line-of-sight.com), a project management, process design, and organizational change management services organization. They work with both the government and private sectors and have written extensively on project management and organizational change.