Ohio Local Governments to Explore Shared IT Services

Brian Heaton | February 27, 2012

School districts across Ohio's Mahoning and Columbiana counties have been using shared IT services for decades — and now area local governments want in on the action.

A group comprised of 10 cities and towns and a handful of county representatives met on Friday, Feb. 17, to gauge interest in jointly using the same Internet and email services to save money and be more efficient. The Area Cooperative Computerized Educational Support System (ACCESS) currently provides those services and other technology to schools and is exploring how it could do the same for municipalities.

John LaPlante, executive director of ACCESS — an organization owned by the Mahoning and Columbiana school districts — said questions at the meeting ranged from what types of services cities could expect to how much the arrangement would cost. He added that because discussion at the initial meeting was positive, a feasibility study is now being planned that would provide all the details on how the agreement would work.

The first part of the study will examine how to connect local governments on a private fiber-optic network, similar to what ACCESS has done with county school districts.

Concurrently, a second part of the study will determine what kinds of services will be delivered, from shared email to data center consolidation.

"We're going to look at ways to get them some more robust services including routine backups, offsite backups [and] disaster recovery so if one of the servers fails, it'll automatically fail over to another box so they won't have any downtime," LaPlante said. "Those are the kinds of things small governments really aren't used to having the ability of to do.

"Larger governments can do it, but small governments don't have the ability to provide that type of reliability and redundancy, and that's what we're hoping to bring them through this project," he added.

Next Steps

One of the critical parts of the project is funding. The Ohio Department of Development has approximately $9 million available through a Local Government Innovation Fund for grants to support feasibility studies centered on collaboration and shared services for local governments.

LaPlante said the group will apply for the grant money and applications need to be filed by March 1. Winners will be notified in June, and if funding is awarded, LaPlante said the study would begin later in the summer.

But will the study go forward if the funding doesn't happen? LaPlante wasn't sure. He admitted that while there were a lot of people interested in cities banding together for shared IT services, the grant funding would really help push the prospects of the study forward. But if the grant doesn't happen, there will be more extensive discussions with project participants to see if efforts should continue.

LaPlante added that the grant funding would help retain some outside resources, given that budgets across local governments and school districts are stretched thin. No "in-person" meetings are scheduled before the grant application results are known, but participants keep in touch via email.

But he felt the bottom line is that the grant would help everyone interested in the project explore what's possible in regard to shared services.

"That's what this initial part of the project is about — talking amongst each other and understanding what each of the entities have done with technology and shared services in the past," LaPlante said. "That's where we are right now."

http://www.govtech.com/policy-management/Ohio-Local-Governments-to-Explore-Shared-IT-Services.html