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New COG holds first gathering

Representatives of five area communities attended the informational meeting.

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Less than a month into his new role as director of operations for the Mon Valley Alliance, Ben Brown — and the Mid Mon Valley Council of Governments — is ready to hit the ground running.

More than a year after the Mon Valley Alliance announced it would be revitalizing the Mid Mon Valley Council of Governments, the group met informally for the first time on Thursday.

While only five municipalities — Monongahela, Donora, Charleroi, Brownsville Township and Dun-levy — were represented at the meeting, at least nine communities have passed ordinances to be involved.

During the informational meeting Thursday, Brown, MVA and COG Solicitor Todd Pappasergi and several community representatives discussed initial objectives of the organization.

Brown said the goal of the group is not to push for consolidation. It is about communication, cooperation and collaboration to help municipalities that face similar issues.

The COG will help communities face those problems by providing them with various resources in several ways such as bulk purchasing, connections to state and county funding and the coordination of shared services.

The first Mid Mon Valley Council of Governments was formed in the 1960s to provide efficient and expanded municipal services to member municipalities, but the organization began to fall apart in the early 1980s.

As the new organization gets on its feet, the Mon Valley Alliance has agreed to pay the dues for the initial year of operation, which sets the group apart from past efforts to start similar organizations.

"It is one thing to have an organization, but it is another to know who is doing the work," Brown said. "As a regional organization, the alliance has decided to be the facilitator to get this started. The MVA will provide the initial funding to get this up and moving to give this the best shot of success as we can and to let this grow into what it will become."

Eventually, the alliance hopes the COG will be self-sustaining.

Pappasergi said the financial support the organization already has puts the COG ahead of the game. "This is fully staffed from the get-go," Pappasergi said. "As we investigated COGs and looked at the proper way to get this off the ground, one thing we realized is that it needs to be staffed properly." Though Brown will be in charge of handling day-to-day operations, decisions will be made by the COG's board of representatives.

The COG will have a board of directors made up of the primary or alternate representatives from each community, along with an executive board that includes a nominated chairperson, vice chair, secretary and treasurer who will run meetings.

"At the end of the day, the COG will be run by a board of directors that is a representative from each of your communities," Pappasergi said. "The direction and the breadth of the council of governments will really be what the board of directors wants it to be."

Concerns

Ken Kulak, a Monongahela councilman, said one of the biggest worries he has experienced is municipalities feeling like they are losing control of their own choices. Pappasergi explained that municipalities are not required to participate in bids or contracts.

If the COG submits a bid for a good or service, members will have 45 days to decide to participate once the bid is awarded, but they are not required to do so.

Some contracts would not have an option to opt out once awarded, and members would be notified before the bidding process is started so they can choose not to be involved in that particular bid. If municipalities want to withdraw from the organization entirely, they can do so at any time.

"The idea here is to work for you and your municipality," Brown said. "If this does not work for you, there is no reason to have it. It is important to know that complete control is still in your hands. This is just giving you another option, and hopefully we are thinking, a better option to the things you already do on your own."

Kulak said he is also concerned about membership.

"Looking around this room we have (five) communities here," he said. "That is a big concern. I would like to see what we can do to reach out to our neighbors because there are some that are on an island, and I think that is a job for all of us around this table."

Brown said he is hopeful that once the organization has a few "small wins," people will be seeking them out to join.

"We are not going to be able to conquer the world, but once we get started and we get some wins, I think other folks will start to see that it makes sense," Brown said. "Let's get to work, see what we can do, let the work speak for itself and people will come."

"It is a hard sell," Kulak said. "But I think if we can show them financially, in one or two things that we can accomplish and save enough money that pays for the cost of our membership, to me it is a no brainer."

Pappasergi said advertising for contracts or ordinances is a good example.

He explained that advertising for such things can cost municipalities thousands of dollars.

"To publish a large contract or ordinance twice, or in two newspapers for some municipalities, can cost up to \$3,500 for one ordinance," he said. "If your cost of joining happens to be \$3,500, by the COG taking that single ad off of your plate the membership has paid for itself in one ad." Ronald Zupic, from Brownsville Township, said he is interested in anything the COG has to offer.

In a small township, with only one truck and one back hoe, a lot of work is done in house, he said.

"Every now and then we have to bid things out," he said. "But we are looking to save money on anything we can. We are in the black right now and we want to stay there."

Matt Claybaugh, representing Dunlevy, echoed similar sentiments.

"We have about 400 people and things can get tough," Claybaugh said. "But this could be a big help for us. If we can piggyback and improve our town, that is what we want to do."

John Conger, a Donora councilman, said he would like to see communities work together to tackle blight they are all facing.

"I would like to see the COG have a group where we could go community to community to demolish our own buildings," Conger said. "When you have to bid things like that out, you end up paying out the nose."

He suggested pulling laborers from each community, utilizing the same equipment provided by the COG, who travel from community to community to do demolition work.

Charleroi Councilman Larry Celaschi is also concerned about tackling big issues in addition to road repairs and blight.

Celaschi talked about the benefits of larger group health insurance deals, which could be tough to obtain because of various unions but would be financially beneficial to small communities.

"We see some sort of rate hike every year, but we are not seeing an increase in tax revenue every year," Celaschi said. "If we were able to get everything under one large group, we could see a significant cost savings around this entire room."

Dennis Gutierrez, a Donora councilman, said while salt and paving are good, he would like to see what could be done to save taxpayers money on utilities by trying to work with authorities for water, sewage and even cable.

"The prices are getting outrageous and that is something that would impact us a great deal," he said. "To be able to get a better price for our people."

Pappasergi said the COG's possibilities in that regard are endless and that as the organization expands, authorities, school districts and other entities could become involved. Brown agreed, but suggested starting smaller.

"There are some big issues out there and I am not naive enough to think that I can solve those within our first year," he said. "I think there are going to be easier wins than others. I don't want to bite off more than we can chew on the front end, but I think this can be the group to start those conversations about those bigger issues and learn as we go."

"I don't want to say we can conquer the world, but maybe we can with enough time and a small piece at a time." Brown said the road ahead will not be easy.

"I am fully aware that there are relatively few people who expect success," Brown said. "So no, this is not going to be easy. But we don't do it because it's easy; we do it because we think it needs to be done and there are valid reasons to do it."

"I am not going to sit here and say rosy projections all ahead, but I will sit here and say that I will work to make this happen. And while I will not be perfect, I will do everything I can to make this work the right way with all of your input and help."

Next up

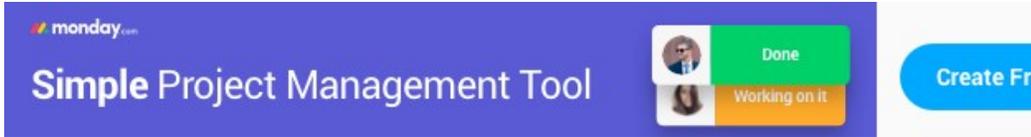
Community representatives who attended Thursday's meeting will report back to their respective municipalities and if they have not already done so, select an official representative and alternate during February business meetings.

The COG will hold its next meeting in March, but a tentative date has not been determined.

During the March meeting, representatives will be elected to the executive committee and bylaws will be adopted.

All meetings of the COG will be open to the public and subject to Sunshine and Right to Know laws.

Communities still wishing to join will be accepted throughout this year at no cost, but officials must pass an ordinance first.



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