INLAND EMPIRE
PURCHASING EFFECTIVENESS NETWORK
(IE-PEN)

Increasing Levels of Government Procurement from Local Businesses

And

Improving Effectiveness of Local Government Purchasing

September 2001

IE-PEN Member Entities

California State University, San Bernardino
City of San Bernardino
County of San Bernardino
Quiel Brothers Sign Company
San Bernardino Community College District
San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools
University of California, Riverside

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines strategies by which public agencies might (1) increase levels of purchasing from qualified local vendors where appropriate, and (2) collaborate to increase efficiency and effectiveness of purchasing operations, to the betterment of their communities and constituents. The report is directed toward government agencies and businesses in the Riverside-San Bernardino/Inland Empire area, however, in practice its ideas will be applicable to many California regions. By intent, the report does not address the issue of local vendor preferences, but focuses instead on approaches that reply upon process improvements, outreach to the business community, and use of technology, believing these to be of the greatest ultimate benefit to citizens, businesses, and public agencies. Recommendations are presented in two sections, as follows:

Six strategies for increasing buying from local businesses:

1. Review internal agency purchasing policies and procedures to increase likelihood local that vendors will be able and willing to bid/quote.

2. Seek to increase usage of state-authorized credit cards (e.g., CAL- Card) for purchasing, which are both less costly than processing standard purchase orders, and make it easier to buy from all vendors, including local ones, while providing vendors immediate payment.

3. Use Chambers of Commerce as points of contact to disseminate information to member businesses about local government purchasing opportunities.

4. Create a purchasing video for use by agencies, Chambers, and other groups to help businesses understand the local government procurement process.

5. Create a simple, generic vendor questionnaire format that may be commonly used or modeled by agencies.

6. Use agency web sites to make purchasing opportunities more accessible for businesses.

Four strategies for collaborating among agencies to increase purchasing effectiveness:

1. Increase use of piggybacking clauses in contracts and purchasing agreements to help secure common pricing for local agencies.

2. Organize and conduct purchasing workshops for agency buyers of particular types of products/service (e.g., computers, office supplies).

3. Investigate creating a local government purchasing cooperative to help agencies obtain lowest prices for goods/services.

4. Encourage use of online purchasing service networks to gain greater access to lowest-cost goods/services.

I. IE-PEN: ORIGINS AND PURPOSE

Inland Empire Purchasing Effectiveness Network (IE-PEN) and the present report are an outgrowth of efforts initiated by the City of San Bernardino in the summer of 2000 to identify ways that local government procurement in Riverside/San Bernardino counties might be utilized more effectively to enhance economic growth and vitality in the region (see article, "No biz like local biz for local tax dollars" at end of report). The rationale behind the effort has been twofold.

First, governmental budgets are a significant part of the local economy (approximately $460 million annually just for IE-PEN's member agencies). Through expanded outreach and communication efforts by public agencies, qualified local vendors not presently competing for available purchasing dollars can be identified, brought into the pool of potential suppliers, and assisted as feasible to bid for contracts or orders. The more successful these efforts are, the larger will be the portion of locally-generated tax revenues kept within the local/area economy rather than shifted outside it, to the benefit of citizens and businesses alike.

Second, as a result of the increasing emphasis on regional approaches to governing, as well as the growing communication efficiencies of the internet and electronic purchasing, there are growing opportunities for public agencies to collaborate with each other to improve purchasing efficiency and effectiveness, be it through joint purchasing activities or information sharing.

Accordingly, in its meetings and discussions, IE-PEN has pursued the following goals:

- Identify ways that local government entities in Riverside-San Bernardino counties can increase utilization of qualified local vendors in buying goods and service, where feasible and appropriate.

- Identify ways to collaborate among local government entities to improve efficiency and effectiveness and reduce costs of procurement operations.

This report outlines recommendations for pursuing the foregoing goals. Discussed first are ways to increase buying from qualified local vendors (Section II, pages 4 - 7). Then, ideas are presented for collaborating among agencies to increase purchasing effectiveness (Section III, pages 7 - 9). A final section (IV) briefly addresses implementation (pages 9 - 10). Although the report is directed toward government agencies and businesses in the Riverside-San Bernardino/Inland Empire area, in practice its ideas will be applicable to many California regions. By intent, the report does not address the issue of local vendor preferences, which for a variety of reasons are gradually being phased out by many public agencies nationwide. Instead, the document focuses on approaches that reply upon agency process improvements, outreach to the business community, and use of technology, believing these to be of the greatest ultimate benefit to citizens, businesses, and public agencies.

It is the intent of IE-Pen participants to circulate the report as widely as possible among purchasing officials, county and city managers, Chambers of Commerce, and other interested parties in order to stimulate in-depth discussion of the present proposals. Hopefully this may lead to detailed development and implementation of some, if not all of the report's recommendations.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING BUYING FROM LOCAL BUSINESSES

Six strategies for increasing outreach to and utilization of local vendors are discussed in this section.

1. Review Agency Internal Procurement Policies and Procedures

Traditionally, many cities and counties have instituted local buyer preferences that deduct some percentage value (e.g., 1%) from the cost of a vendor's proposal to give an advantage to local businesses. For a variety of reasons however, vendor preferences are coming under increasing criticism among purchasing professionals. Of potentially greater benefit to a community and its businesses are the following actions:

(1) To increase the likelihood that local vendors will submit bids/quotes, review all purchasing policies, procedures, and documents to identify requirements or application and payment processes that unnecessarily burden vendors, or that complicate or delay selection for a contract/order or subsequent payment of vendors. Seek to reduce the problem areas or complexities. Particularly for smaller local businesses, government purchasing procedures can sometimes be (or merely seem) so difficult or time-consuming that qualified vendors will decline to bid. Additionally, long payment times (actual or feared) may lead a business to decline local government business. The more that agencies can reduce such impediments, the greater the likelihood that local vendors will compete for government purchasing opportunities. Because it is of particular importance, we emphasize the desirability of reducing as far as possible the size, length, and complexity of application and bid documents. Of course, agencies must include all necessary descriptive and protective language in contract/bid documents (e.g., specifications, legal requirements, including applicable education and civil code compliance rules). But it is also the case that this paperwork can easily expand through the process of what might be termed "bureaucratic bloat," the accretion of documentation that may not actually be necessary, but which is never weeded out by an agency. Reviewing procurement paperwork with an eye to eliminating unneeded documentation – and in the process, reducing the "We've Always Done It This Way, Why Should We Change?" mentality – can help make government procurement more accessible to local firms. (See also item 5 below, "Common Vendor Questionnaire Format.")

(2) Instruct purchasing staff and agency managers in the economic advantages of patronizing qualified local vendors as much as possible, with the goal of encouraging them to ensure that qualified local vendors are sought out. The benefits of "buying local," both in terms of tax revenues retained within the community and the goodwill it builds with local businesses, may seem obvious, but in practice purchasing officials and/or agency managers may often give them little thought. Consistently requiring multiple quotes/bids, while also encouraging departments to seek out qualified local vendors, can enhance the likelihood that local businesses will at least bid, particularly where an agency has not previously given this much emphasis. Another suggestion is to review buying patterns on some periodic basis (e.g., annually) to identify trends in the utilization of local vendors. Such review can provide data on the extent to which

local procurement is decreasing, increasing, or holding steady, and whether more diligent efforts may be called for in order to increase it.

2. Increase Usage of Credit Card Procurement

Credit card purchasing offers real opportunities to reduce complexity, costs, and time delays in purchasing. One commonly used program is CAL-Card, a Visa bank credit card program created and overseen by the State of California Department of General Services that enables participating non-State agencies (including cities and counties) to make single-day purchases up to $25,000 without use of purchase orders. Purchases may be walk-in or placed by telephone, fax, or online, thereby expediting the buying process at the front end and reducing time delays for cardholders. The local government agency determines which employees receive cards and rules governing use of each card, including purchase restrictions with daily and monthly dollar limits. The agency's cardholders and approving officials each receive a consolidated monthly purchasing statement and account statement status report. Needless to say, CAL-Card purchases are not limited to local vendors; their primary advantage for increasing patronage of local vendors is that CAL-Card purchases allow for prompt payment of vendors – typically within just a few days – thereby eliminating a major barrier that leads many small businesses with cash-flow constraints to decline government business. In the San Bernardino County Schools office, credit card purchasing has been well received by employees utilizing it for travel expenses, subscriptions, memberships, registrations, and small purchases of various types of hardware, office, and medical supplies. County Schools has issued some 300 cards, ranking them second to the Sacramento General Services Office in usage. An estimated 30% reduction in number of purchase orders has been realized as a direct result. The negative impact has been felt in the Accounts Payable Department, but only because stringent audit requirements in place are being monitored with a zero-defects tolerance. All purchases must have all necessary paperwork (internal audit checklist with requirements) for payments to be authorized and paid.

3. Collaboration with Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce potentially can be an effective conduit between a local government entity and businesses for purposes of increasing local vendor participation in procurement. We emphasize "potentially," because relations between local governments and Chambers may sometimes be strained, for whatever reasons. To realize the latent potential of Chambers to help pull more local businesses into the local government vendor pool:

- The outreach effort must be planned thoughtfully (i.e., just mailing bid packages to the Chamber will probably have limited impact).

- A partnership with the Chamber must be managed on an ongoing basis. Purchasing officials should approach it as a relationship that will be strengthened by periodic discussion about problems, solutions, and opportunities for extending and improving the business outreach system.

Creating a procurement partnership with a Chamber may encompass any number of tactics. At a minimum, the following are suggested, particularly if no such relationship exists currently:

(1) Contact Chamber officials to arrange a "get-acquainted" meeting. In the meeting, propose creating a partnership to involve the Chamber in helping the public agency utilize local vendors more extensively. Emphasize the desire for a long-term, two-way relationship. Demonstrate clear understanding as procurement officials of the economic benefits of local purchasing, and commitment to maximizing it as much as feasible. Solicit Chamber ideas for identifying and patronizing qualified local firms.

(2) Develop a presentation or workshop explaining how businesses can get on a public agency's vendor list, and requirements or hints for completing related paperwork. Arrange to make the presentation to Chamber members on a recurring basis.

(3) Where agencies are equipped to register vendors or accept bid documents online, the Chamber of Commerce can provide a computer in its offices that local businesses that are not computer-equipped can utilize to fill out and submit bid forms electronically. Chamber staff can also be trained to answer questions and assist businesses with completing forms. Ideally, the online service would be provided free to all local businesses, Chamber members or not, so as to maximize access. (A selling point for Chambers is that providing the service to non-members may help in recruiting new members.)

Local government agencies should make all possible efforts to collaborate with Asian, Black, or Hispanic Chambers of Commerce in the community, if separate ones exist. Needless to say, the partnership methods just described can also be employed with other business groups, such as Kiwanis, Rotary, or neighborhood business associations.

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4. Purchasing Video

A video explaining an agency's purchasing process, which outlines requirements and provides suggestions for negotiating within that particular organization's purchasing system, may be a useful tool in educating local businesses about how to compete for government procurement opportunities. Such a video could be prepared and used in conjunction with a Chamber of Commerce outreach partnership, as discussed above.

A related approach might be for a group of agencies to pool resources to create a video that would be used in their respective jurisdictions. If need be, and assuming basic purchasing processes for different agencies are similar enough, the video could be pitched at a broad level that would be applicable to all. Alternatively, agencies partnering in creating a video could first seek to harmonize their purchasing practices, then produce a common video.

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5. Simplified Vendor Questionnaire Format

The need for a business to complete and submit multiple vendor questionnaires to different agencies can be a barrier to competing for government purchasing opportunities, particularly where there is significant variation in the kind and extent of information required by individual agencies. There are two paths to mitigating this problem, the first addressed here, the second under item 6 following.

Although it may be impossible to develop a standard vendor questionnaire used by all agencies, discussion among agencies may help reduce the length and complexity of vendor questionnaires. To the fullest extent possible, it would helpful if vendors are asked the same information by different agencies, preferably in the same sequence and with the same requirements for content and / or supporting documentation. This will help vendors know what to expect in completing questionnaires. Needless to say, all effort should be made to minimize requirements for information that is not actually essential to the agency.

Over the past year, the County of San Bernardino has sought to make its form as simple as possible. This form might be considered as a model for other agencies (see http://www.co.san-bernardino.ca.us/purchasing/vendor_app.htm).

6. Use of Agency Web Sites to Help Increase Access to Purchasing Opportunities

Agency web sites offer a means of simplifying business access to purchasing opportunities, and needless to say, are increasingly being used for this purpose. For example, the County of San Bernardino vendor registration web address listed immediately above permits online vendor registration. Similarly, some agencies (e.g., CSUSB) are posting some bid packages on their web sites, permitting bidders to download the paperwork and application forms.

County government (Riverside and / or San Bernardino) has the potential capability both of helping reduce purchasing hurdles for local businesses and of increasing purchasing effectiveness of local agencies. One role that County purchasing might play is to provide a common registration point for vendors that other jurisdictions can utilize. San Bernardino County is currently investigating the creation of such a “one-stop” countywide vendor registration system. Another strategy would be for purchasing departments of other agencies to link their web sites with the County's purchasing department. In addition (or alternatively), the County might host a "clearinghouse" web page that lists major bids of public agencies within the County (see discussion immediately below).

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLABORATING AMONG AGENCIES TO INCREASE PURCHASING EFFECTIVENESS

This section discusses four strategies for helping agencies cooperate amongst themselves to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their purchasing operations.

1. Piggybacking Clauses

While piggybacking clauses can enable other agencies, school districts, and colleges to avail themselves of an existing purchasing contract, for various reasons they often go unutilized. In the case of education for example, bids must meet requirements mandated by the California Education Code and adhere to specific advertising and bid opening procedures. In practice, so many factors influence the decision to use another agency's bid (e.g., hold harmless agreements, penalties, bond requirements) that legal advisors to educational institutions tend to be wary of such use. Nonetheless, it makes sense to try to facilitate wider use of piggybacking clauses where feasible, whether on a local / regional or national basis.

Nationally, purchasing officers are probably aware of the U.S. Communities procurement network (www.uscommunities.org), which gives access to various out-of-jurisdiction contracts. On a local/regional scale, one way to facilitate piggybacking would be, as discussed above, to establish a bid clearinghouse on a web site for other purchasing entities to access (e.g., County web site). If bid language meets the needs of other agencies, they can choose to utilize the bid. Even if not, a copy of the bid could be helpful as a source of boilerplate for other agencies initiating new bids.

It should also be possible to increase utilization of piggyback clauses among similar types of agencies (e.g., cities, schools). Discussions about this could best be conducted by local chapters of purchasing groups like California Association of Public Purchasing Officers (CAPPO) and California Association of Public School Business Officials (CASBO).

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2. Purchasing Workshops

In many agencies, purchasing officials specialize in certain types of equipment or services (e.g., computers, fleet), in the course of which they develop and utilize specialized knowledge and expertise. By developing a set of inter-agency procurement work shops tailored to the practices and needs of such specialized categories of procurement, it would be possible to promote the dual goals of this report to expand outreach to local vendors and improve efficiency and effectiveness of purchasing activities. Workshops would provide a forum for educating buyers from different agencies about the economic benefits of local procurement from qualified vendors, and related issues addressed in this report. Additionally, they would facilitate sharing best practices among agencies, ideas about how to collaborate for more effective purchasing, and contact information about suppliers and sources. Again, this strategy could be facilitated by CAPPO, CASBO, or by County government.

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3. Local Agency Purchasing Cooperative

In a number of locations in the United States, agencies have entered into multi-jurisdictional arrangements to create procurement cooperatives, principally for the purpose of reducing costs by buying common items in large quantity, e.g., vehicles or equipment. One example is the Tarrant County Cooperative Purchasing Program, launched in 1996 and now involving some 60 agencies across North Texas (see article, "Purchasing Co-op Stretches Dollars," *American City & County*, September 2,000 at end of report). Available evidence suggests that the co-op approach can reduce purchasing costs through volume buying, as well as reduce total agency time required to develop and disseminate bid documents, since the number of bids is reduced. In the case of Tarrant County, the focus seems to be on particular items (e.g., autos, bulk fuels, pager contracts), as opposed to covering all purchases. It does not appear that the Tarrant County Co-op requires substantial administrative machinery.

An Inland Empire Purchasing Co-op could be a helpful mechanism for increasing purchasing effectiveness. It could be initiated by as little as two cities or agencies (e.g., City of San Bernardino, Cal State San Bernardino), with others joining in the future if and as they wished to.

4. Online Purchasing Networks

Just as online business-to-business buying is revolutionizing private-sector procurement, the "new frontier" of government purchasing clearly is the internet, which offers open access to goods / services from anywhere, along with the eventual promise of reduction of much paperwork traditionally necessary for procurement. In addition to online ordering by an agency from individual vendors, online purchasing networks are coming into existence that may make it possible to reduce purchasing costs through large-scale inventorying by many vendors coupled with high-volume utilization by many buyers. CSUSB recently investigated participating in an Inland Empire "demonstration project" with AcquireX.com (www.acquirex.com), a recently launched on-line procurement system. For internal reasons, the University elected not to proceed at the present time, but there seems little doubt that the private sector will continue to seek to cultivate a government purchasing market. If and as a satisfactory service emerges, public agencies are likely to begin using it.

It must be acknowledged that this technological trend may sometimes run counter to the goal of increasing patronage of local vendors by local government agencies, because of the ease of access it provides to outside vendors, along with the cost-efficiencies of volume buying, which many local vendors may not be able to match. On the other hand, agencies participating in online purchasing networks can stipulate that local vendors be registered with the service. Potentially, this can expand the markets of local vendors, and as more agencies participate in online buyer networks and share information with neighbor agencies, still more local businesses are likely to be pulled into the purchasing system.

It remains to be seen what impact online networks will have on local vendors and the volume of business that local government does with them. In any case, agencies have little choice but to investigate use of online buying networks, and if they produce promised cost savings, to utilize them as extensively as appropriate, judged against other procurement criteria (e.g., quality, availability of local service).

IV. IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated in the introduction, IE-PEN has no formal authority (or resources, for that matter) to implement its recommendations of this report for increasing patronage of qualified local vendors and improving effectiveness of purchasing operations. Instead, our intent is to disseminate the document as widely as possible in order to encourage discussion of its proposals. Our hope is that through the process of deliberation and debate, an interest and approach for implementing these ideas will emerge, which agencies, purchasing officials, and area businesses may then pursue.

There are three primary entities through which the report will be disseminated:

- California Association of Public Purchasing Officers (CAPPO)
- California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO)
- County of San Bernardino East Valley Promotional Group

IE-PEN members will arrange presentations of the report to these groups in order to initiate discussion of its recommendations. Additionally, the report is available on the web sites of the City of San Bernardino (http://www.ci.san-bernardino.ca.us/) and California State University San Bernardino (http://purchasing.csusb.edu/) so that it can be obtained by public agencies or businesses / business groups (e.g., Chambers of Commerce) interested in it. Efforts will also be made to publicize the report in the local press.

Note on Participants

The following institutional representatives participated in preparing the report:

- *California State University, San Bernardino*: Carol Davies, Cathy Hansen, Lee Hanson, Marie Rivera
- *City of San Bernardino*: Marsha Zeller
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- *Quiel Brothers Sign Company*, San Bernardino: Larry Quiel
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SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SUN

BUSINESS

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No biz like local biz for local tax dollars

City Hall focus group gets business leaders, agency procurement managers together

By DAN EVANS
Staff Writer

SAN BERNARDINO — As president of a printing company in Redlands, Mark Smith is willing to explore areas to find new business.

But trying to find work with different city, county and educational agencies can be downright exasperating, Smith said.

"The challenge is there are so many departments in different agencies that have different spending limits — just finding out about bids can be a major undertaking," Smith said.

Still, local agencies maintain they have a need to support businesses like Smith's Printing Solutions, both to keep local tax dollars in the area and help small businesses grow.

Smith took part in a focus group meeting held Thursday at City Hall by San Bernardino's Business Support Network and Cal State San Bernardino's Community-University Partnership.

With about 20 participants, the meeting was a chance for business leaders to brainstorm with procurement managers for city, county, school district and university agencies about doing business locally.

"It's critical that local government agencies understand that the fates of all (their economies) rise and fall together," said Lee Hanson, a management professor at Cal State and consultant for San Bernardino.

Procurement officials talked about their reliance and willingness to work with local vendors to do business.

Still, some perceptions hurt agencies' ability to attract new vendors, said Dave Batson, purchasing manager for San Bernardino.

"Frankly, a lot of public agencies scare away a lot of business because they are afraid of the paperwork," he said.

In addition to San Bernardino, procurement officials represented Redlands and Moreno Valley, as well San Bernardino County, the county schools superintendent's office, Cal State and UC Riverside.

Bill Jacocks, owner of Creative Business Services in Rialto, said there were concerns from minority and female business owners that needed to be addressed in procurement procedures.

"The county did a study (in the '80s) about ways to increase women- and minority-owned businesses' participation," he said, "and it found the biggest reason they weren't involved was because they believed (agencies) didn't want them to participate.

"It wasn't that the agencies were slow to pay or the businesses got hung up in red tape. It was a perception."

Batson said procurement agencies have to show a continued willingness to be business friendly in attracting new vendors.

One thing San Bernardino started doing about 1½ years ago was sending bid packages to the San Bernardino Area Chamber of Commerce to circulate among its members.

"It's been extremely successful, and it's such a small thing," Batson said.

Purchasing co-op stretches dollars

By Marc Flake

The author is the public information officer for Tarrant County, Texas.

If procurement officers are looking for ways to decrease the cost of supplies, the options are limited. In procurement, the more units that are ordered, the less the units will cost. But if the number of units ordered annually does not vary much, the overall cost of the contract is going to stay about the same.

Governmental agencies buy pretty much the same things — office supplies, pagers, diesel fuel, asphalt and other day-to-day necessities. If two agencies join together and increase the number of units ordered on a single contract, both agencies will see a decrease in costs.

That is the idea behind the Tarrant County Cooperative Purchasing Program, which began four years ago when Tarrant County Purchasing Agent Jack Beacham began calling cities within the county to gauge their interest in forming a cooperative. The city of Colleyville was the first to sign on, joining the county in buying fuel. Through additional phone calls — but mainly by word of mouth — other agencies joined the co-op. Now, 67 agencies across North Texas — from water districts and cities to school districts and counties — are able to stretch taxpayers' dollars by purchasing supplies under the program.

The cooperative also saves time for its members. Tarrant County prepares bid specifications, gets quotes and reviews bids on behalf of the other members, producing approximately 100 contracts for bid each year. Additionally, it benefits smaller agencies by ensuring better service from vendors. Suppliers are more likely to listen to a complaint from a member of the co-op rather than to a small city with a single contract.

When specs are being written, Tarrant County e-mails program members to determine whether they will participate in an order. While participation is voluntary, the savings are hard to pass up.

The program has demonstrated its success in the money it has saved its members. Last year, for example, the cooperative's contract price for digital pagers was $1.95 per month per unit. That was a dollar less than the state's contract, and considerably more savings over the average $4.95 per unit that other Texas agencies were paying.

The cooperative also got a great price — $19,148 each — on fully packaged police cars. In recent bids by agencies not participating in the program, Collin County paid $19,192 for the cars; Denton County paid $19,219; and the state of Texas paid $19,250. Also, the cooperative's cost for tires is 10 percent to 12 percent less than the state's cost.

"When we were doing our bidding locally, we were paying $200 to $300 more per car," says Ellis County Purchasing Agent Hannah McCleary. "But we were only putting out bids for four cars. Jack (Beacham) puts out bids for 150 to 250 cars at a time."

Membership in the program is a two-way street, allowing Tarrant County to take advantage of purchasing bargains made by other members. For example, the county is currently buying fuel under Fort Worth's contract, which saves the county about $25,000 a year. Other agencies also may hold contracts for the entire cooperative. In fact, Dallas County is expected to host the next round of bids for police cars.

The program is especially helpful to small communities that do not have the staff to manage bids on their own. Not only does the co-op help save money with higher volume buying, it also saves on costs related to the bidding process, such as advertising.

While cities and counties may have many operational differences, there are enough similarities in their basic day-to-day necessities to make a purchasing cooperative successful. ☆

While participation is voluntary, the savings are hard to pass up.