

Appendix A

Factors Influencing City Finances

The finances of cities are affected by many different factors. Some of the variation results from decisions made by city officials. Some is due to factors outside the control of the elected officials, such as a city's size, the economic status of its residents or the proximity of similar services provided elsewhere. The amount of revenue available may be influenced by rising or falling property values, the use of fee-based services, intergovernmental grants for projects, access to taconite aid, and many other factors. Expenditures may be affected by the demographic, geographic, historical or political landscape of the city. Large swings in expenditures may reflect demands caused by extraordinary weather events such as floods and tornados, high levels of snowfall, public safety events such as forest or brush fires, or large-scale investigations of high-profile crimes. Some factors have an on-going effect on city finances, while others might be one-time events.

A. Demographics

Age of Housing. In the metropolitan area, the average age of housing in a city reflects not only the probable condition of the city's infrastructure, but several other conditions as well. The League of Minnesota Cities found the average age of housing to be indicative of a variety of characteristics, including a higher relative rate of poverty, more tax exempt property, more subsidized housing, and a declining population base. Each of these factors tends to contribute to a demand for public services.

Population. Cities with larger populations face certain challenges not encountered by smaller cities. Simply dealing with large amounts of traffic is one challenge that can become very costly, depending upon the burden carried by an area's streets and highways. Large populations may also indicate high population densities that in turn are associated with higher poverty and crime rates.

Population Decline. A large loss of population can have a very significant effect upon a city's spending. The costs of a city's infrastructure and many of its services do not go down immediately when a number of city residents move away. The city must then make decisions to do without certain services or to raise the property taxes on the remaining citizens to pay for the services.

Income. Income is indirectly related to a city's ability to raise revenues. Where incomes are lower, property values may also be depressed, reducing a city's tax capacity. Poverty rates, in turn, will be higher creating greater demand for public services.

Crime Rate. Higher crime rates require a correspondingly higher level of public safety services. Cities that host sporting and other entertainment events can draw large crowds of nonresidents and create unusual public safety service demands. In addition, higher levels of poverty are also associated with the crime rate of a city and contribute to an overall greater demand for police protection. In addition to these demands, expenditures can be affected by a number of different factors, which include the number, type and use of personnel, the scope of services, and amount of shared services. In addition, the demographics and mix of facilities within the city may affect expenditures for public safety.

B. Geographic Location

Different areas of the state often operate within quite different economic environments. Just the presence of one large business or industry can impact an entire region. Declines in industries or companies that dominate local economies may result in a reduction of the tax capacity of the area. Trends in agriculture may result in lower property values and a decline in revenues for cities in regions whose economies are primarily based on agriculture. Cities located in these areas may experience difficulty raising revenues at the same time that they face higher demands for public services.

C. Revenue Sources

Tax Capacity. The amount of money any individual or entity spends is directly related to the amount that is available to spend. Likewise, the costs of doing business are directly related to the amounts of revenue that can be generated to meet the costs.

Taconite Aid. Many cities located in the “Iron Range” are eligible to receive special funding in the form of taconite aid. For a number of years, revenues in these cities were greater than they might have been without the distribution of taconite aid, especially for cities without taconite processing plants. In addition, the availability of taconite aid enabled these cities to spend without raising property taxes.

Enterprise Funds. Services provided through enterprise funds allow cities to pass the costs of services directly onto the users of the services. By using this type of accounting mechanism, cities may be able to keep down the level of general property taxes needed to provide services.

D. Shared Services, Joint Powers Agreements

A significant practice among cities is the sharing of services and the use of joint powers agreements to provide necessary services. "Joint exercise of powers" is defined in Minnesota Statutes § 471.59. Such arrangements allow cities to provide services jointly with other cities and thus pool their resources. For example, the metropolitan cities of Circle Pines, Lexington, and Centerville have a joint powers agreement to provide police protection services.

A number of cities share services through the use of contracts. For example, the City of St. Paul contracts with several other cities in Ramsey County for the provision of water. The City of St. Anthony contracts with Falcon Heights and Lauderdale to provide police protection. In Greater Minnesota, the City of Thief River Falls provides fire services to five townships on a contractual basis.

Shared service arrangements are not necessarily formal; some cities provide services to other jurisdictions on an informal basis. By sharing the costs of services, cities can achieve greater economies of scale and avoid duplicating services and capital investments. Cities that provide a service to a number of entities may show higher expenditures for that service, but will have these costs defrayed by fees provided by the other participating entities.

E. Proximity to County, Regional, or State-Run Programs/Facilities

Cities that are located near county, regional or state-run facilities may decide to have their citizens take advantage of those facilities and services rather than provide them on their own. For example, the city that houses the county library probably won't build their own. Similarly, cities located close to a regional or state park may opt not to develop or expand their own park program. Smaller cities located near larger cities may do the same.

The degree of isolation experienced by a community, whether geographic or technological (e.g., lack of advanced telecommunications capability), can also affect service demands and costs. Cities that are remote from other communities may not have the opportunity to participate in joint powers arrangements or have access to urban amenities, and thus may need to provide a wider range of services out of their own budgets.

F. Types of Industry Present and Service Demands

One factor that can have a significant effect on an individual city's situation is the type of industry present in the city. For example, industries such as paper mills may place particularly heavy burdens on the city's water supply, sewers, fire department, or streets. At the same time, the presence of these industries contributes to the property tax base of the city. Expenditures for these services may be higher than for other cities, but the cost is not necessarily borne by the residents of the city.

G. Source of Labor

Numerous factors can impact local governments' levels of expenditures for labor. Use of part-time employees, reliance on volunteers, unionization of workers, retention of workers, and use of independent contractors for specific projects or general services can all effect the salary and fringe benefit costs paid by local governments.

H. Other Factors

The effects of weather and natural disasters can significantly affect the expenditures for certain services over a period of time. Cities affected by floods and tornadoes may have higher public safety, streets and highways, and other infrastructure costs. During winters in which there is an unusually high snow fall, cities may have increased expenditures for snow removal. There are many other incidental factors not included in this list. Explanations of differences in city expenditures should be pursued with city officials.