

---

# A GEM of An Idea

## EMPLOYEES TRY TO SHARE, SAVE ALIKE

One nut and one bolt at a time, a group of public employees is quietly linking 26 government agencies to save tax money in Clark County. Estimates are elusive, but most agency heads think the savings are substantial. "It's got to run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars over six years," said Bruce Cross, deputy director of Clark County public works, who heads the cooperative group.

The effort is known as GEM, for Grounds Equipment and Maintenance. Under GEM, overlapping jobs are orchestrated so agencies share resources: the county with the city of Vancouver and with six smaller cities, the bus system, ports, fire and school districts and soon, perhaps agencies in Kelso and Longview.

In Southwest Washington, GEM's chief participants are the state Department of Transportation, Battle Ground School District, the city of Camas, C-Tran and Clark County, Cross said. Ties also are forming with similar groups in Multnomah and Washington counties in Oregon.

Members are reluctant to talk about the amount of specific savings from the sharing of equipment, brain and muscle power. This reluctance is political. "Some people are

concerned that if they talk too much about the savings, people will expect cutbacks," Cross said. "And the goal here is not to lay anybody off or cut back on service levels.

---

***"The goal is to be able to do more with less."***

---

The effort appears to be working as the cooperative concept expands. In fact, if intergovernmental agreements and accounting systems can be forged to handle the concept, GEM could well lead to big money deals, Cross said. For example, buildings might be built jointly for state, county, school, fire district and city use. One building could serve where before several might have been built.

GEM could lead to intergovernmental equipment repair shops open 24 hours a day, seven days a week with mechanics working together on cars, trucks and buses from multiple agencies. GEM's work could dovetail with the idea of a unified maintenance agency being talked up in Clark County government as a sort of visionary concept:



an independent contracting organization to handle road, park and facilities maintenance for government agencies.

### How Does GEM Work?

The goal is economy of scale, and GEM works informally: a dollar here, \$100 there. Cross says GEM is ready to take on bigger jobs, and one obvious example is the sharing of shops.

The county runs a state-of-the-art equipment repair shop two shifts a day, five days a week; Clark Public Utilities runs its shop two shifts, five days a week; the state transportation department runs its shop one shift a day, five days a week.

C-Tran needs a new shop, and the city of Vancouver is outgrowing its space on Fourth Plain. Cross suggests existing shops might run seven days a week, 24 hours a day, each specializing in certain jobs, taking work from several agencies.

C-Tran, which has 150 buses in a facility built for about 100, has taken GEM's idea seriously, and ordered its consultant to explore joint operations while it looks at enlarging its facility, said spokeswoman Gail Spolar.

The city of Vancouver has doubled its fleet size and has no immediate plan to increase its repair facilities although it is outgrowing its shop.

The Port of Vancouver expects its fleet to grow with the completion of the Mill Plain extension project, Cross said.

***"It just makes sense,"***

In all these cases, cooperation would be logical. "It just makes sense," said Cross.

The idea looks simple, but it will have to run through political mine fields. People tend to be reluctant to give up their power bases; agencies have different pay scales for the same jobs, so that a mechanic in one agency may be paid more than a mechanic in another.

It's also difficult to get workers who are accustomed to laboring independently to think cooperatively.

The challenge is to change attitudes, "so the worker thinks of doing things cheaper and easier," said Steve Canter, maintenance supervisor for the state Department of Transportation.

Monte Brachmann, operations manager at the city of Camas, said cooperative efforts like Camas' shared ownership of a street sweepers with Washougal is fairly easy to manage. A trickier idea, and one not yet tried, would be for Camas to use Clark County equipment and gravel from English Pit in east Vancouver for sanding streets on Prune Hill rather than running city trucks all the way across town to the city's own gravel pit. Camas then would pay the county for gravel, Brachmann said. "This is a concept that's worth looking at," he said.

**How Gem Acts**

- A Clark County dump truck pulls into a city of Camas repair shop to get a flasher light re-

paired, a fix that would have cost \$50 an hour in driving time or dispatching a mechanic. Cost is a new light bulb.

- Larch Mountain Offenders Group puts a new skin on greenhouses at Battle Ground High School. No labor cost.
- Cities of Camas and Washougal jointly own two street sweepers, effectively halving the purchase price.
- C-Tran lends its paint booth to Clark County to repaint a county snow blower.
- City of Portland donates a replacement for a blown engine in a Clark County patrol car.
- Clark County and Battle Ground School District take turns mowing school grounds and parks in the Battle Ground area.

**At a Glance**

- **WHAT:** GEM, an interagency cooperative
- **WHY:** To save taxpayer money
- **WHERE:** Clark County
- **WHO:** 26 agencies: Clark County, cities and school districts of Vancouver, Battle Ground, Camas, La Center, Ridgefield, Yacolt, Washougal, Woodland, plus C-Tran, Washington State Patrol, Washington State Department of Transportation, and Fire Districts 1, 5, and 6.