

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 4, “Bridging Social Capital Across Multicultural Communities”

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Hey listeners, this is a just a quick note to let you know that this conversation was actually recorded back in February of 2020. So, when you listen to it, we just wanted to give you the context that it was pre-COVID-19, pre- the death of George Floyd, and as you hear some of the themes that come out we know that they would probably be slightly differently discussed in today’s world.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is City Speak. I'm your host, Adriana Temali-Smith. Today we are sitting down to talk about municipal and tribal relations. [Podcast theme music fades out]

On the face of it, today's episode may seem somewhat niche. Certainly, there are more cities in Minnesota who do not border a tribal nation than cities who do. And yet, while it may seem that this discussion about formal intergovernmental collaborations between municipalities and tribes may only impact a few of our cities, I believe that the lessons I've learned from our guest’s research can be applied to all cities — and perhaps even all Minnesotans.

Firstly, let's acknowledge that all cities regardless of geographic proximity to a tribal nation, are likely serving residents who include indigenous people. Secondly, as Minnesotans we have a history full of trauma towards indigenous populations that in many ways has not been fully reckoned with. Thirdly, much of the findings discussed here today can be applied to strengthen relationships with partners of any background.

So, let's dive in to discussing the advantages and benefits and the skills needed to build tribal, county, and municipal relationships which lead to shared services.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I'm excited to be joined by our guest for today, Dr. Mitchell Berg. Dr. Berg is an adjunct instructor teaching the introduction to public administration course for the political science department at Bemidji State University. He has recently obtained his doctorate in public administration from Hamline University. Dr. Berg is also the city administrator for the city of Mahanomen. It’s a statutory city located on the White Earth Nation, the largest of the 11 federally recognized Indian reservations in the state of Minnesota. Dr. Berg welcome to the show, thank you for being here.

Mitchell Berg:

Thank you, Adriana.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, let's dive in with some questions. You recently obtained your doctorate degree — huge congratulations. That is an achievement that many of us have not done nor do we want to do, so I know that's a huge piece of work. You chose to study tribal and municipal relations; can you tell us a little bit about what motivated you to pursue this topic?

Mitchell Berg:

The doctorate that I'm in is in public administration, so obviously I wanted to do something in that field. And having worked for the city of Mahanomen from 2007 to 2009, I thought it would be something exciting and different. And so, I had the opportunity to go back up to Mahanomen and approached the tribe and suggested to them that I'd be interested in doing something that could be a benefit for both communities, counties, and up in Indian country. And well, we kind of brainstormed and came up with the idea to look at tribal and city and county relationships.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, can I ask you then, in 2007 to 2009 when you were working in Mahanomen, what was the relationship like between the city and the White Earth Nation?

Mitchell Berg:

Well, you know it was, honestly it wasn't um, bad, but it wasn't great.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Mitchell Berg:

There was a situation that, uh, had come out of when the tribe built their casino, they had been paying taxes towards the city and the county and school district. And they decided to take that land and put it into trust, which meant that the city and the county was no longer collecting taxes. For the city, I think that amounted to about 40% of its property tax base ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Oh wow.

Mitchell Berg:

... and for the county 15%.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay.

Mitchell Berg:

The city worked out a agreement for services, of which the city received an annual payment uh for the city services it provided, although the county did not take the approach. And the county and the tribe went into active litigation ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay.

Mitchell Berg:

... and that cost was about four hundred thousand dollars for a county of only five thousand population.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Wow. So, you mentioned the population of the county what is the population of Mahanomen?

Mitchell Berg:

So, the city of Mahanomen, it's about a thousand two hundred residents.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay, and then of those residents, um, do you know what percentage of them are um, native peoples?

Mitchell Berg:

Sure, it's about 50% native, and then 50% non-native.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

What about the schools — we often time use schools to determine the future growth of populations — what's that looking like up there?

Mitchell Berg:

Our K through 12, which approximately 600 students and we have about 85% of student body that is Native American.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay. So, so the city getting along well with the the tribe is probably pretty important?

Mitchell Berg:

It's, I would say, very important. The tribe is going to become more stronger and, and their efforts for self-determination is going to help make improvements to the community and to their members, and so I think that is uh, very important to be at the table engaging them along their way.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

You're here because you've just completed this huge piece of research. Could you tell us a little bit about your research project?

Mitchell Berg:

Well, I had seen within the community of Mahnomen the struggles to cooperate. And I had also seen several successful stories, as well as some not very good stories. And I really wanted to get a better understanding of what are the barriers, but more so, what are the variables that can work to help improve cooperation. And so that's really what prompted me to do this research.

And having been a practicing administrator working with tribes, I also wanted to look at beyond what can promote cooperation but what can actually achieve intergovernmental agreement.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, you kind of alluded to this, but what are the benefits and barriers to cooperative working between cities and tribes?

Mitchell Berg:

Some of the barriers are historic trauma ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Uh huh.

Mitchell Berg:

... mistrust, power inequity,

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

... and racism. In talking with folks in both Indian country as well as in city and county government, those were pretty much the prevailing themes, too, that I had heard.

So, when you look at the benefits to cooperating there are quite a lot. So, I'll maybe sum it down to maybe two or three good takeaways.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay.

Mitchell Berg:

And that is, too often we get polarized in our positions, and that polarization often will lead to an outcome that results in a lawsuit. And when you get into a lawsuit, you really get into a loose, loose position. You spend a lot of resources that really could be otherwise spent on programs and services that could benefit either the tribal nation or the taxpayers of that community, county, or city.

The other benefit I would say to cooperation is, we're in an environment where we have devolution. Where the federal government is passing the buck to the state government, state government's passing the buck to the county, or down to the city, and there's fewer resources. It's an unfunded mandate. And when you couple that with a wicked problem such as an opioid, homelessness, where problems don't, and issues don't, end at a geopolitical city boundary, or county boundary, or tribal boundary where they overlap. Finding those partners to leverage those resources, it's really important.

The Shakopee Mdewakanton Nation and the city of Prior Lake is one example. They went together, the Mdewakanton Shakopee tribe built a water treatment plant, and the city of Prior Lake is purchasing water from the tribe. And really, it is one of those where it's a win-win because the city is benefiting by getting water that would have been much more expensive had they put in their own well and treatment plant. And the tribe is benefiting as well because they are able to assert their sovereignty, and they're able to ensure that the water that's being taken out of the ground is being taken out in a manner that it's going to be sustainable ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Uh huh.

Mitchell Berg:

... for future generations to come.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, Mitch, the other thing that you alluded to was uh, different levels of governmental operations. You alluded to sort of the federal level the state level, and then of course the the local government level which is where our cities typically operate. With a tribal nation, I mean, the majority, if not all of our tribes, are sovereign nations, and I know that they all, perhaps operate a little bit differently from one another. But, correct me if I'm wrong, don't most of them operate in sort of that federal level, or what does that look like from a local government to a federal government working relationship?

Mitchell Berg:

So, that's a real good question. Um, treaties and the Constitution basically state that it is Congress and the president that have the interactions with federal tribes.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay.

Mitchell Berg:

And so, you do have a federal government to government relationship. It is where the federal government has developed their federal responsibilities to the states and then vice versa, the states to the local governments, such as law enforcement through a act called PL 280 — which, by the way, there's only six states in the union that are PL 280 states.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

And Minnesota is one of them?

Mitchell Berg:

Minnesota is one of them.

And so that interaction means that instead of tribes interacting with the federal government, they are now interacting with the cities and the counties. And that has led to, in some cases, greater mistrust because several years ago, the counties and the cities had a lot of political clout. And so, they would, in essence, take advantage of those relationships, and hence the historic inequities and the mistrust.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Mitchell Berg:

It is unique now because with the Indian Gaming Regulation Act, that tribes now have greater resources so their ability for self-governance, self-determination is much more solidified. And so now they are better at leveraging relationships with cities and counties. And hence, now you are seeing, not only agreements, but agreements that really are to the benefit of tribes.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Let's take a quick break to hear from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council.

Message from a member of the League's Business Leadership Council:

[Music begins] Your city is more than your career — it's your community. And it needs leaders with the skills to lead and the compassion to make a difference. Take the next step in your career with a Master of Public Administration from Hamline University. Or, expand your skills with a certificate in topics like public sector management or public policy. Take your lead at www.hamline.edu/mpa. [Music ends]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay, let's get back with the show.

All right, so you spent how many months doing this research?

Mitchell Berg:

Several.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

[Laughter] Several.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I want to ask you about your findings, and I know that that's kind of the purpose of doing a research report like this. What were the factors that create a successful partnership with a tribal nation?

Mitchell Berg:

So, there were about 30 to 40 variables that I was looking at. There were really only a couple variables of all the 30 to 40 variables, that I found that led to cooperation to occur. And one of the neat things about the research was nothing that I found should surprise anybody. It's really all common-sense stuff.

And so, I was disappointed that I didn't find any earth-shattering research because I really wanted that Pulitzer Prize. But given that that...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

[Laughter] That will be your next doctoral thesis.

Mitchell Berg:

I'm hoping.

The research that I found on the variables that had significance with cooperating between tribe, city, and county — and when I say promoting cooperation, it's really amongst the leaders, in this case mostly the elected officials ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yep.

Mitchell Berg:

... and that was trust.

There were two other variables that were very interested in how leaders promoted cooperation, and the first was the percentage of Native Americans that lived in the community. So that'd be either within the reservation, the city, or the county, and the distance between tribal headquarters to the city hall or the county government center. And in both of those two variables, the research found that the fewest Native Americans that lived in each city, county, or reservation, the greater level of trust ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Interesting.

Mitchell Berg:

... between the elected officials. And then the greater the distance between the tribal headquarters to the city and county government center, the greater level of trust between the three elected officials.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, the lower the percentage of Native Americans who live in the community equals greater trust, and the distance — further distance away, equals greater trust?

Mitchell Berg:

Correct.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's interesting! And then of course we're talking about this really nebulous concept of trust — which itself is so difficult to define and grow — develop with another entity where there's been historical mistrust.

Mitchell Berg:

One thing I forgot to mention when it came to getting an agreement done was social connections. It was really about your interpersonal ties, how well do you know the other person, how long you get along. City of Prior Lake has a new city administrator, and one of the first questions I asked the tribal administrator of

the Shakopee Nation was, how did you reach out? And he said, "Well, I wanted to know if he wanted to play squash." Just having the interpersonal connection, I think is important.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, you did this research, you spoke to multiple municipalities both cities and counties as well as um the majority of the tribal nations in the state. I'm I'm wondering if you could share some outcomes of partnerships that you've seen, uh, throughout your research.

Mitchell Berg:

So, the Shakopee and Mdewakanton Nation, with the city of Prior Lake and the city of Shakopee, they've actually had some real good positive uh steps.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yes.

Mitchell Berg:

Uh, Prior Lake has done some cooperation with Shakopee on wastewater, with water. Uh, there's police services agreements, there's trails.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Mitchell Berg:

Pine County and uh the Mille Lacs Band have a very good uh working relationship. I believe the Mille Lacs Band actually built an affordable housing ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Okay.

Mitchell Berg:

... unit just outside of Hinckley. A lot of the interactions that you see between cities and tribes might be uh police agreements.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Yeah.

Mitchell Berg:

Um, they also might have water and sewer agreements.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Uh huh.

Mitchell Berg:

Another good partnership is with Cass County, and, and the Leech Lake Band ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Uh huh.

Mitchell Berg:

... and in respect there are some, uh, positive things working with Beltrami and the three tribal nations that surround Beltrami County, as well as with White Earth in Mahnomen County.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, Mitch, you just referenced law enforcement as an area that there's oftentimes partnerships, um, and I understand that the city of Mahanomen actually has a great partnership around law enforcement. Could you say a little bit about that?

Mitchell Berg:

Yeah, I'd be really happy to. The White Earth Nation is, uh, one of the very first tribal police departments — at least in Minnesota, if not in the nation — to have purchased body cameras for all of their police officers. And so ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

That's awesome.

Mitchell Berg:

... you know they're very much on the forefront of addressing you know, law enforcement needs.

So, the city had actually entered into a partnership with the White Earth Nation uh for police services. And when we talk about how to build cooperation when there's been a lot of mistrust and historic trauma ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

... one good example is with our police contract. Because by creating a contract, and building that relationship together on that common issue, you can build that trust. A lot of times if have you've had trouble creating a partnership or there's been lack of trust, getting that foot in the door then incrementally growing that can be a help.

But back to the police department. You know, we feel that that has been very, very strong. Our residents I know greatly appreciate it. They interact very well with the county, and so, this is one of those where, you know, it's been truly a win-win-win.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

I think it's interesting for a couple of reasons. One is that I think when a lot of people think about law enforcement partnerships with a tribal nation, they're thinking about the city's police officers who might be contracted to police the jurisdiction within the tribal nation. And, and that might be a misrepresentation, so I like that this is actually the opposite of that.

And then the second thing that I find really interesting about this is, thinking of historical trauma, thinking of um, systemic racism and barriers that may have impacted people from tribal nations in the past, law enforcement and policing would certainly be up there. And so, the idea of having, you know, perhaps a majority-run police department from a city that polices a population that's 50% native peoples, might not go as far for trust-building as the opposite — of having people from the tribe who are representative of 50% of the population there. So, I just find it to be a really fascinating, really great example.

So we've talked a lot about trust and trust came up a lot in your research findings. I'd like to share a quote by an author that you cite named Krile from 2006 who stated that “many community-building efforts across racial and cultural lines start from a place of distrust, and that in a multicultural community, trust is built through a history of intentional and consistent behaviors that reflect key values such as fairness and consistency, promise fulfillment, and availability and receptivity.” How have you personally worked through trust building when there are cultural differences at play, and how have you seen trust be built throughout this research project?

Mitchell Berg:

Well, I think you need to be transparent and open in your communication. It's having good reciprocal uh conversations, and meaningful conversations. Now one of the research findings that I thought that would have statistical significance did not. And that was frequency of communication.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Interesting.

Mitchell Berg:

So, Collard, who had found out that the greater level of communication, or the greater frequency of communication, the greater level of trust ...

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Mm-hmm.

Mitchell Berg:

... you would have between the elected officials.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

So, I'm gonna take that as quality over quantity.

Mitchell Berg:

Yes, yes. And you know, so if I were to have redone the dissertation question that would probably be one of those questions I would ask.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well I want to firstly thank you for coming in and sharing your research findings with us and another congratulations again on a wonderful doctoral thesis. So for those of our listeners who have further questions, um, who maybe are thinking through how this applies to them or have been wondering how they could work on their relationship with their tribal neighbors, are they able to reach out to you?

Mitchell Berg:

Yes, they can.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

All right we will link you in the show notes then.

Mitchell Berg:

And in the Ojibwe word for thank you, I will say miigwech to you.

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Well thank you for being here and thank you so much for sharing everything with our listeners. My personal background in structural racism and race equity, I found this to be very interesting and much-needed, so thank you.

Mitchell Berg:

Thank you.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Here at City Speak we like to wrap up [podcast theme music fades out] by reflecting on the important lessons that our guests bring us.

The first thing that I want to mention after our conversation with Dr. Mitch Berg today is just the impact that trust has on relationships of all kinds and the difficulty in forming trust. And so, the first thing that I heard was that it's about quality and not quantity. Um, Dr. Berg talked a lot about the fact that he did not find statistical significance around the frequency of interaction or relationship building between cities and tribes. But what he did find was that openness and reciprocal dialogue — that quality piece — were much more important than just the frequency itself.

And that kind of leads me into the second thing which is that, you know, having a purposeful engagement with your partner going beyond just uh, niceties or the, the pressing issue at hand and getting to know them and their needs, is what's going to help build that trust — and also build the relationship that's going to lead to um, shared services and wider outcomes.

The third thing that I heard is that wicked problems don't end at jurisdictional boundaries. And so wicked problems are those problems that are really difficult, uh, and really complex to solve such as homelessness and opioid addiction. There's benefits in addressing those jointly rather than singularly, and so there's strength in partnerships. And if you're able to work with a tribal nation to tackle some of these wicked problems, you're more likely to have success.

[Podcast theme music begins]

That's it for our show today. I want to thank you for listening to City Speak. Episodes are released regularly and are posted on the League's website and via Twitter. You can find us on iTunes, Google Play Music, and other podcast applications. If you have an idea for an episode, you have feedback, or you just want to get in touch, you can connect with us at podcast@lmc.org. Until next time, take care.

[Podcast theme music ends]