

# How to Manage Public-Private Partnerships

By **Diccon Hyatt** - December 18, 2019



*Bill Metro*

When Bill Metro, CEO of IXP Corporation, meets with municipal governments to persuade them to hire IXP to run their 911 call centers, he is often asked by officials, who are familiar with the pitfalls of privatizing government services, how they can be sure his company will be around a few years from now.

His reply is that IXP will almost certainly outlast the officials asking the question.

This year IXP celebrated its 20th anniversary. The company, which is located in Forrestal Village, was founded in 1999 and was the first private company in the country to operate a 911 center. Today it has done emergency communications work for more than 100 state and local governments and more than 40 colleges, universities, and medical campuses. It is moving to a new location at Forrestal Center to make more room for its 200 or more employees as it continues to expand.

IXP's bread and butter has been operating 911 call centers for local governments. IXP will modernize a town's call center and hire its own workforce of emergency communications personnel to run it.

Metro has learned a lot about successful public-private partnerships in the two decades that he and COO Larry Consalvos have run the company. In an interview with U.S. 1, he shared some of his advice on running a company with an eye on long-term success.

But why would a government want to turn over a vital public service to a private company in the first place? "The main reason why a municipality will want to do a public-private partnership is that it gives them the opportunity to reinvent or transform a particular operation or technology they've been using," he said. "It allows the company, such as IXP, to implement something better, faster, and less costly than they could have done themselves. We are the specialists. We've been doing it for 20 years, and we have people who have been doing it their whole careers."

Metro says it lets municipal law enforcement focus on police work rather than having to manage technology and telecom operations. A contract with IXP also offers municipalities predictable costs over a three to five-year period, so they can budget accordingly.

Among the common objections to privatizing 911 service is that IXP's operators won't have the same kind of relationship with emergency services personnel that the municipal operators did. Metro says that's not an issue since the operators are working in township facilities anyway, where they have the chance to build relationships with police, fire, and EMS. "What's unique with our type of partnership is that we are providing it in their own facility, and everything is owned by them," Metro said. "The relationship with police departments and officers and dispatchers still exists since we're in their facility."

Critics also often say that IXP dispatchers do not know the area that they will be working in. "Our dispatchers are trained well before they take their first call, and there are mapping systems and technology systems to solve that problem more now than in the past. We make sure our dispatchers do ride-alongs and get to know the area before they take over," Metro said. "That doesn't end up being a problem at all."

After 20 years the core business of IXP has not changed. "We've just stuck to what we do best," Metro said. "When it comes to growing our business over 20 years, the founders needed to make a decision early on and say, 'we are going to be in it for the long term.' We stayed focused, hired people from within the industry, and we made a long-term commitment." Some of its clients are now in 11 through 15-year contract extensions.

IXP not only operates 911 call centers, but upgrades them to the latest technology. As a whole, 911 operations throughout the country, which were designed in an age of land-lines, are struggling to keep up in an era where mobile phones are the dominant form of communication.

"Next Gen 911 and FirstNet are the two large industry activities going on to improve communication among the public and responding agencies," Metro said. "The problem we have right now is that we've kind of gone backwards in time in our ability to actually find the person calling because there's no longer a wire there. There are now a couple of products that will enable callers from the field to be able to transmit text message and video directly to the communications center and allow dispatchers to find the person's location."

Metro has worked with emergency services communications since he graduated from college. He grew up in Pittsburgh, where his father and grandfather were steelworkers. When the industry took a nosedive, Metro's father moved the family to Seattle and got a job at Boeing. Metro went to Seattle University and studied computer science. His first job out of college was at an emergency dispatch center in Seattle, where his job was to operate the computers that ran the dispatch system.

He liked working with computers and with emergency dispatch and has stuck with both.

Metro says going forward IXP plans to continue its current business model and focus on expanding it to more places. He says that most people don't know that it's even possible to hire a company to run a dispatch center. "When police chiefs and municipalities find out there's a company that can actually run their entire 911 operation and upgrade an emergency communications center, they are somewhat surprised and want to talk to us," he said.

He said the key to sustaining and growing the company has been the employees, some of whom have been with IXP since the beginning. "We have a very consistent group of leaders, and our technical and operations teams are just great," Metro said. He said the key to retaining those core employees has been empowering them to do what they do best and not ask them to do things outside their areas of expertise – the same logic that has led the company to stick with the same business strategy for so many years.

That philosophy even applies to the relationship between the founders, Metro and Consalvos. "He and I have the perfect working relationship, where he focuses on a lot of the things that are external to the company, and my job is primarily the internal side, doing company oversight and management and everything within the company. It has worked out incredibly well for us. We know what we're good at, and we stick to that."

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