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THE U. S. COMMUNITIES GOVERNMENT PURCHASING ALLIANCE: A MONEY-SAVING PURCHASING SOURCE AVAILABLE TO TENNESSEE CITIES

By Jim Finane
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MTAS has become aware of the existence of a pooled purchasing organization of U.S. cities and counties that could potentially offer local Tennessee governments very competitive prices on commonly purchased supplies and equipment. Jane Ogle, Purchasing Director for Johnson City, discovered the U.S. Communities organization at the national conference of the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing (NIGP). The National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, the U. S. Conference of Mayors, the Association of School Business Officials, and NIGP established the organization to pool the purchasing power of public agencies and achieve bulk volume discounts. Currently more than 5,000 public agencies participate in the Government Purchasing Alliance (GPA) established by the organization through a master interlocal agreement.

Authority for Tennessee Municipalities to Participate

Tennessee municipalities may participate in the U.S. Communities GPA under the provisions of the Interlocal Cooperation Act, *Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.)* 12-9-101 et seq. This act permits local governments to enter into joint agreements to exercise any legitimate governmental function with any other local government, in Tennessee or in any other state. The only requirement is that any participating local government in another state must have the same blanket authority under its own state laws.

In the case of the U.S. Communities GPA, the two primary “lead public agencies” that do the actual procurement and contracting with vendors are Los Angeles County, Calif., and Fairfax County, Va. (Some procurements are handled by other member cities, counties and school systems.) The laws of both California and Virginia, as well as the laws of the states of all other program participants, grant authority to local governments in those states that is identical in scope to that granted Tennessee governments under *T.C.A.* 12-9-101 et seq.

Therefore, Tennessee cities, towns, counties, school systems and special districts all can legally participate by agreeing to the Master Intergovernmental Cooperative Purchasing Agreement that establishes the U.S. Communities GPA. This can be accomplished by a resolution of your city’s governing body or by ordinance if that is required by your city’s charter to enter into such an agreement.

Available Products

The U.S. Communities GPA offers a useful range of supplies and equipment through contracts with nationwide vendors who have locations or representatives in almost every major city in the United States. All of the products under contract are available to all participants without going through a competitive bid process. The lead public agencies have completed that process on behalf of all participating agencies through the Intergovernmental Purchasing Agreement that establishes the organization. They have conducted competitive bidding, selected vendors, and completed contracts with these vendors that allow their use by all state and local governmental agencies in the U.S. Currently, the following supplies and equipment are available to participating local governments:

PRODUCT	VENDOR
Office supplies	Office Depot
Electrical and communications/data networking supplies	Graybar Electric
Industrial supplies	Grainger Industrial Supply
Office furniture	Herman Miller, Haworth, Knoll, Steelcase
Computers and software	GTSI Corporation
Janitorial supplies	Zep Manufacturing
Tools and material handling	Hughes Supply
School furniture	School Specialty, Inc., Virco Mfrg. Corp.
Carpet and flooring	Interface Flooring Systems Inc., Milliken Carpet
Procurement card	American Express

How the U.S. Communities GPA is Operated and Financed

U.S. Communities is funded by a one percent fee on all contract sales by the vendors, which pays for a full-time staff in the U.S. Communities office in Walnut Creek, Calif. There is no charge to participating local governments. The organization is governed by an advisory board composed of purchasing professionals from a number of large U.S. cities and urban counties, including Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Denver and Seattle; Allegheny County, Penn., Dallas County, Tex., Hennepin County, Minn., Maricopa County, Ariz., Miami-Dade County, Fla.; and Los Angeles and Fairfax counties.

How to Participate

The easiest way to register for the U.S. Communities program is by going to its Web site at **www.uscommunities.org**. Read about the program, especially the “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQs) section, get a resolution or ordinance from your city council authorizing participation, then register online. Once you have registered, you can contact participating vendors and mention the Governmental Purchasing Alliance to take advantage of contract prices offered by the vendor.

For More Information

If you need more information about the U.S. Communities program, you can contact them:

- By e-mail: info@uscommunities.org
- By telephone: (866) GPA-SHOP [(866) 472-7467]
- Web site: www.uscommunities.org
- By mail: U.S. Communities
Suite 550
2175 N. California Blvd.
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

Or you can contact your MTAS management or finance consultant.

The Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) is a statewide agency of The University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service. MTAS operates in cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League to provide technical assistance services to officials of Tennessee's incorporated municipalities. Assistance is offered in areas such as accounting, administration, finance, public works, ordinance codification, and wastewater management.

Hot Topics are information briefs that provide a timely review of current issues of interest to Tennessee municipal officials. MTAS provides one copy free of charge to each Tennessee municipality, county, and department of state and federal government. There is a \$2 charge for additional copies and those for the private sector. Photocopying this publication in small quantities for educational purposes is encouraged. For permission to copy and distribute large quantities, please contact the MTAS Knoxville office at (865) 974-0411.

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