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Lessons from 35 Years of City-County Consolidation Attempts

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City-county consolidation is often discussed as a possible solution to the economic problems that plague American cities and counties. As a 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article reports, confronted with reductions in federal and state grants as well as rising health care and pension costs, "more cities are considering mergers with surrounding counties to slash expenses and attract revenue-generating economic development."¹ Consolidation proponents argue that a consolidated government will bring about technical efficiency by ridding governments of duplication, patronage, and corruption, all of which rely on limited transparency and contribute to more expensive service delivery.² They further maintain that through improved efficiency, consolidated local governments can ultimately lower property taxes and compete with the nearby suburbs that are gaining residents while cities that are considering consolidation are experiencing population loss.³ Other benefits include achieving economies of scale and improving the localities' bond ratings.

But reformers who advocate consolidation have typically overlooked or discounted the competing value of local democratic control and self-determination available through the formation of additional units of government, especially in metropolitan areas. For many American voters, retaining independent local governments and maximizing pluralistic grass-roots control and the likelihood of governmental responsiveness seem preferable to the centralization of local government, despite claims of economy and efficiency promised by consolidation.⁴

In fact, city-county consolidation is a rare occurrence; the 38 consolidated city-county governments make up only slightly more than 1% of the 3,043 county governments in the United States and about 0.24% of the 19,371 city governments.⁵ Voters seem to find the alternatives to consolidation more enticing. Municipal expansion through annexation, interlocal government

agreements, and the use of contracting are often more politically feasible options for local governments seeking cost reductions and therefore are a more common means for achieving the same objective.⁶ Nevertheless, despite the long odds, the attraction of consolidation continues unabated. As University of Georgia professor Dan Durning notes, "The history of city-county consolidation has shown it to be an 'evergreen issue.'"⁷

PATTERNS OF MERGER ACTIVITY

City-county consolidation—the merger of a county and the cities within it to form a single government entity—is a radical outgrowth of the progressive reform tradition that emphasizes the structural reform of local government.⁸ It is distinctive in that, compared with other forms of metropolitan cooperation, it involves the most visible and comprehensive change in the local government landscape.⁹ When a county and its cities consolidate, the boundary lines of the jurisdictions become coterminous.¹⁰ In most cases, school districts and city- or county-owned utilities (other than water and sewer) are excluded from consolidation;¹¹ smaller suburban towns are also typically exempt at the outset but have the option of joining at a later time.¹²

The history of city-county consolidation began prior to the second industrial revolution in such commercial centers as New Orleans (1805), Boston (1821), and Nantucket (1821). By the 20th century, the modern city of New York had been created via consolidation. Denver consolidated in 1902 and Honolulu in 1907. As seen in Table 1/1, all these consolidations occurred through state legislation.¹³ The next wave of city-county consolidations began in 1947, when Baton Rouge and East Baton Rouge Parish were consolidated by a referendum. With the exception of Indianapolis (1969) and Broomfield, Colorado

(1998), all other mergers since 1952 have occurred via referenda (Table 1/1).

The real boom in city-county consolidations occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the number of consolidated governments increased from 16 to 24. Since the mid-1970s, there appears to be a downward trend in the number of consolidation attempts, and many of those attempts have been made by repeat players (Table 1/2). Certainly there has been more activity since the dry spell of the 1980s, and about half of that activity occurred in the early to mid-1990s.

From Figure 1/1 it appears that consolidation activity goes in cycles: once a major city-county passes consolidation, there is typically a flurry of activity. In 2000, Louisville, Kentucky, became the 34th government to elect to unify and, three years later, the first major city to consolidate in three decades.¹⁴ Des Moines, Iowa (1994, 2004), Knoxville, Tennessee (1996), and Albuquerque, New Mexico (2003, 2004), are some other large cities that have voted on merging their city and county governments in the past decade. While these latter efforts failed, those in some smaller cities, such as Haines, Alaska (2002), and Cusseta, Georgia (2003), were successful. In cities and counties that have voted on city-county consolidation in the past, the issue continues to reemerge. For example, Durning estimates that there have been 22 different proponent groups in Macon-Bibb County, Georgia, since 1923, yet voters have rejected consolidation at the polls five times.¹⁵ The issue is once again on the agenda there, as it is in Wilmington-New Hanover County, North Carolina, where consolidation has already been defeated four times in the last 80 years. And even if the idea of consolidation never goes to an actual vote, the impression (although hard to document) is that more and more cities and counties are actively researching it.

Nevertheless, all this activity averages out to only about three attempts a year, and the vast majority of modern consolidation efforts across the

Selected Findings

In all cases where the argument for consolidation has been based on issues of efficiency and economy, or economies of scale, the referenda have failed; where the argument has been based on economic development, however, the referenda have been successful.

The common element in successful consolidation cases appears to be the ability of civic elites to define the economic development vision for the community and then convince the average voter that the existing political structure is inadequate to support and implement that vision and that the solution lies in consolidation.

Table 1/1 THE 38 CITY-COUNTY CONSOLIDATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Year of vote	Consolidation by legislative decision	Legislative decision
1805	New Orleans—Orleans Parish, Louisiana	✓
1821	Boston—Suffolk County, Massachusetts	✓
1821	Nantucket Town—Nantucket County, Massachusetts	✓
1854	Philadelphia—Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania	✓
1856	San Francisco—San Francisco County, California	✓
1874/1898	New York City (5 counties), New York	✓
1902	Denver—Denver County, Colorado	✓
1907	Honolulu—Honolulu County, Hawaii	✓
1969	Indianapolis—Marion County, Indiana	✓
1998	Broomfield—Broomfield, Colorado	✓

	Consolidation by voter referendum	Vote in favor, %
1947	Baton Rouge—East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana	55
1952	Hampton and Phoebus—Elizabeth City County, Virginia	88
1957	Newport News/Warwick County, Virginia	67
1962	Nashville—Davidson County, Tennessee	57
1962	South Norfolk—Norfolk County, Virginia	66
1962	Virginia Beach—Princess Anne County, Virginia	82
1967	Jacksonville—Duval County, Florida	65
1969	Carson City—Ormsby County, Nevada	65
1969	Juneau and Douglas—Greater Juneau Borough, Alaska	54
1970	Columbus—Muscookee County, Georgia	81
1971	Sitka—Greater Sitka Borough, Alaska	77
1971	Holland and Whaleyville—Nansemond County, Virginia	n/a
1972	Lexington—Fayette County, Kentucky	69
1972	Suffolk—Nansemond County, Virginia	76
1975	Anchorage, Glen Alps, and Girdwood—Greater Anchorage Area Borough, Alaska	62
1976	Anaconda—Deer Lodge County, Montana	56
1976	Butte—Silver Bow County, Montana	62
1981	Houma—Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana	54
1987	Lynchburg—Moore County, Tennessee	52
1990	Athens—Clarke County, Georgia	59
1992	Yakutat—Yakutat Borough, Alaska	90
1992	Lafayette—Lafayette Parish, Louisiana	60
1995	Augusta—Richmond County, Georgia	67
1997	Kansas City—Wyandotte County, Kansas	60
2000	Louisville—Jefferson County, Kentucky	54
2000	Hartsville—Trousdale County, Tennessee	52
2002	Haines City—Haines Borough, Alaska	51
2003	Cusseta City—Chattahoochee County, Georgia	69

Source: Parris N. Glending and Patricia Atkins, "City-County Consolidations: New Views for the Eighties," in *The Municipal Yearbook 1980* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1980), Table 4/2; additional information provided by Jackie Byers from the National Association of Counties, Dr. Suzanne Leland, Dr. Dan Durning, and Dr. Terrell Blodgett.
 Note: n/a = not available.

Table 1/2 REPEAT CITY-COUNTY CONSOLIDATION ATTEMPTS SINCE 1970

City-county, state	No. of attempts
Wilmington—New Hanover County, North Carolina	3
Tampa—Hillsborough County, Florida	2
Tallahassee—Leon County, Florida	4
Sacramento—Sacramento County, California	2
Okeechobee—Okeechobee County, Florida	2
Missoula—Missoula County, Montana	2
Macon—Bibb County, Georgia	2
Louisville—Jefferson County, Kentucky	3
Knoxville—Knox County, Tennessee	3
Kingsport—Sullivan County, Tennessee	2
Haines—Haines Borough, Alaska	2
Griffin—Spalding County, Georgia	2
Gainesville—Alachua County, Florida	3
Frankfort—Franklin County, Kentucky	2
Des Moines—Polk County, Iowa	2
Clarksville—Montgomery County, Tennessee	2
Chattanooga—Hamilton County, Tennessee	2
Augusta—Richmond County, Georgia	5
Athens—Clarke County, Georgia	4
Ashland and Catlettsburg—Boyd County, Kentucky	2
Anchorage et al.—Greater Anchorage, Alaska	3
Albuquerque—Bernalillo County, New Mexico	3

nation have failed, either during the process of drafting a charter or at the ballot box. Since 1970, 110 local government consolidation attempts have reached the referendum stage (Table 1/3); however, only 19 of those attempts, or fewer than 20%, have passed. These 19 consolidations make up half of the 38 city-county consolidations that have occurred over the past two centuries (see Table 1/1).

The 110 city-county consolidation referenda held since 1970 have occurred in 19 of the 50 states (Figure 1/2). Most of these referenda have been held in southeastern states, such as Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia. Since 1970, Georgia has led with a total of 24 city-county consolidation attempts, 4 of which were successful (Columbus—Muscookee County, Athens—Clarke County, Augusta—Richmond County, and Cusseta—Chattahoochee County). These successes can be attributed to the state law in Georgia, which is amenable to structural consolidation; to local governments copying each other's innovations; and to the fact that cities and counties in Georgia provide many similar functions.

Tennessee follows with 18 attempts and 2 consolidations since 1970 (Lynchburg—Moore County and Hartsville—Trousdale County). Florida has 14 attempts without any success since the Jacksonville—Duval County merger in 1967. In Kentucky, consolidation activity is on the rise with 12 attempts since 1970, including the 2003 consolidation of Louisville—Jefferson County. It is interesting to note, however, that with 9 attempts Alaska has the fifth highest total, exceeding that of Virginia (Figure 1/2).

In the industrial Northeast, several cities, such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh, have often discussed the idea of consolidation, but discussion has not yet progressed to referenda. There has not been a merger in the Northeast since 1874 and 1898, when the boroughs of New York City merged. This lack of activity is primarily because, unlike southern states, northeastern states typically do not allow local governments to reform their structures and forms of government. Instead, many choose to transfer specific governmental functions from one entity to the other rather than attempt to overcome the insurmountable barriers to structural consolidation.¹⁶

However, in the Midwest, particularly in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, the issue appears frequently as a top priority on local government agendas. Des Moines has unsuccessfully attempted consolidation twice since 1994; in Kansas, Kansas City and Wyandotte County consolidated in 1997, and Topeka and Shawnee County have formed a study commission that endorses consolidation; and the city and county governments in Omaha, Nebraska, are also seriously considering consolidation, although here, too, they have not yet progressed to referenda.

Besides being predominantly southeastern phenomena concentrated in five states, city-county consolidation attempts since 1970 have typically occurred in smaller counties of less than 200,000 in population (Figure 1/3, page 8). The most notable consolidation cases involved medium-sized counties (150,000–750,000), such as Augusta—Richmond County and Louisville—Jefferson County. Only one referendum was held in a county