



KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES Research REPORT

JULY 2003

City/County Consolidation—An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

By Scott M. Kenefake, Legal Intern, KAC

The economic slump of the past few years has dramatically reduced the financial resources of cities and counties across the country. Governors and state legislatures are decreasing revenue transfers to local governments as they seek to balance state budgets with diminishing tax receipts. And because there is little appetite for the idea of increasing taxes at any level of government, consolidation of city and county governments (in order to reduce costs, eliminate any duplication of services, and enhance the efficient delivery of services) is an idea on the minds of many city and county leaders across the nation.

Currently there are 3,043 county governments in the United States, including 33 city/county consolidated governments. A city/county consolidated government is a government in which there has been a formal joining of a city (or cities) with a county government.¹ This consolidation creates one unified governing organization that assumes the responsibilities of both the city and the county. These governments are not confined to one specific region of the country. They can be found in several states across the nation (see Table 1 on page 3).²

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The Kansas Association of Counties, an instrumentality of member counties under K.S.A. 19-2690, provides legislative representation, educational and technical services, and a wide range of informational services to its member counties.

Cities and counties consolidate for several reasons. Consolidations can be a result of state initiatives/acts or in response to the need to address certain governmental challenges. For example, in 1970 the Indiana General Assembly enacted legislation that consolidated the governments of Indianapolis and Marion County under the “Unigov.” This is the only consolidated government in the nation that was formed by an act of a state.

Moreover, in the early 1960s conditions in the city of Jacksonville, Florida, were daunting—waste was being dumped untreated into rivers, high schools were discredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the city and county governments did not work together. As a result of these conditions, a group of local business leaders asked the Florida Legislature to pass an enabling act that would allow the citizens of Duval County to vote on consolidation. The Florida Legislature approved the formation of a government study commission. In 1966, the commission issued its recommendation to consolidate and proposed a governmental charter. In 1967, the Legislature approved the charter of Jacksonville/Duval County and later that year consolidation was passed by the voters.³

Note that each consolidated government’s structure is clearly defined in the government’s charter. For instance, when Kansas City and

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TABLE 1.

*There are
3,043 county
governments
in the United
States, includ-
ing 33 city/
county con-
solidated
governments.*

City/County Consolidated Governments	Merger Date
New Orleans-Orleans Parish, Louisiana	1805
Nantucket Town-Nantucket County, Massachusetts	1821
Boston-Suffolk, Massachusetts	1821
Philadelphia-Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1854
San Francisco-San Francisco County, California	1856
New York (5 Boroughs), New York	1890s
Denver-Denver County, Colorado	1902
Honolulu-Honolulu County, Hawaii	1907
Baton Rouge-East Baton Rough Parish, Louisiana	1947
Hampton-Elizabeth City County, Virginia*	1952
Newport News-Warwick County, Virginia*	1957
Chesapeake-South Norfolk-Norfolk County, Virginia*	1962
Virginia Beach-Princess Anne County, Virginia*	1962
Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee	1962
Jacksonville-Duval County, Florida	1967
Juneau-Greater Juneau County, Alaska	1969
Carson City-Ormsby County, Nevada*	1969
Indianapolis-Marion County, Indiana	1969
Columbus-Muscogee County, Georgia	1970
Sitka-Greater Sitka County, Alaska	1971
Lexington-Fayette County, Kentucky	1972
Suffolk-Nansemond County, Virginia*	1972
Anchorage-Greater Anchorage County, Alaska	1975
Anaconda-Deer Lodge County, Montana	1976
Butte-Silver Bow County, Montana	1976
Houma-Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana	1984
Lynchburg City-Moore County, Tennessee	1988
Athens-Clarke County, Georgia	1990
Lafayette/Lafayette Parish, Louisiana	1992
Augusta/Richmond County, Georgia	1995
Kansas City/Wyandotte County, Kansas	1997
Louisville/Jefferson County, Kentucky	2000
Hartsville/Troosdale County, Tennessee	2000

**Denotes independent cities which historically are city-county consolidations.*

Source: Beardlee (with 2000 update)

TABLE 2.

From 1990–2000, only six out of 20 attempts at consolidation were successful.

Unsuccessful City/County Consolidation Attempts	Year
Hawkinsville/Pulaski County, GA	2000
Griffin/Spaulding County, GA	1997
Spokane/Spokane County, WA	1995
Wilmington/New Hanover County, NC	1995
Metter/Candler County, GA	1994
Douglasville/Douglas County, GA	1994
Des Moines/Polk County, IA	1994
Ashland and Catlettsburg/Boyd County, KY	1992
Griffin/Spalding County, GA	1991
Bowling Green, Warren County, KY	1990
Owensboro/Davis County, KY	1990
Roanoke/Roanoke County, VA	1990
Sacramento/Sacramento County, CA	1990
Gainesville/Alachua County, FL	1990

Source: Beardslee (with 2000 update)

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Wyandotte County, Kansas, consolidated in 1997, a seven-member city council and three-member board of county commissioners was replaced with an 11-member unified Board of Commissioners elected for four-year terms. Eight of the members are elected by district and two are elected from at-large districts, each comprising half of the county. The mayor, who is the eleventh board member, is elected countywide. The mayor/chief executive officer has veto power, can vote in the case of a board tie, and appoints the county administrator with the consent of the commission.⁴

Of course, efforts to consolidate governments are not always successful on the first attempt, nor do multiple attempts guarantee success. For two consolidated governments in Georgia, it took over 20 years before consolidation became a reality, and a third has tried twice to consolidate in the 1990s.

For example, attempts to consolidate the City of Athens and Clarke County, Georgia, began in the late 1960s, when the first consolidation referendum was

defeated in 1969. Twenty-one years later, after referenda were defeated in 1972 and 1982, voters finally approved consolidation.⁵

Similarly, voters in the City of Augusta and Richmond County, Georgia, defeated consolidation referenda in 1974 and 1976. Although voters in these governments approved a new consolidated government charter in 1988, it was blocked by the United States Department of Justice, due to Voting Rights Act objections. Seven years later, voters again voted for consolidation; this time the Department of Justice did not have any objections.⁶

From 1990 through 2000, only six out of 20 attempts at consolidation were successful. Unsuccessful consolidation attempts are listed in Table 2.

There are, however, good reasons for cities and counties to consider consolidation in spite of difficulties that may be encountered. For example, local government consolidation is grounded in the progressive reform view that duplication of functions and services is inherently inefficient. In fact, the argument

TABLE 3.

The abundance of local governments in Kansas may also result in an inefficient use of financial resources.

Local Governments in Kansas	
Unit	Number
Counties	105
Cities	627
Townships	1,370
Special Districts	1,524
Unified School Districts (as of 7-01-03)	302
Total	3,928

for tax savings is crucial for consolidation. Initially, experts suggest that there may not be substantial monetary savings, but over the long run (*depending on the design of the new government*) there likely will be increased efficiency and less redundancy in having one government, and savings eventually come.⁷

Furthermore, recent studies suggest that consolidation also benefits local economic development. For instance, it is virtually certain that the new Kansas Speedway (along with major retail and leisure developments, plus new hotels and restaurants) would not have taken place in Kansas City, Kansas, if the Unified Government had not emerged. According to Carol Marinovich, mayor/CEO, “consolidation led to progress.”⁸

Another way consolidation supports growth is by enhancing the planning capacity of local government. Comprehensive planning on a metropolitan-wide basis under a single authority is viewed as a necessary condition for attaining coordinated development. Without comprehensive planning, existing jurisdictions may develop land use regulations based on parochial interests and engage in zero-sum or negative-sum competition for new development. In short, fragmentation can promote socially inefficient competition for development resources by creating incentives to provide unnecessary subsidies to business.⁹

Moreover, consolidation may also facilitate public/

private cooperation on development issues and reduce the costs of gaining approval for new developments. For example, metropolitan government provides a mechanism to streamline the regulatory and development approval process. Rather than having to secure permits and approvals from numerous independent governments, firms can deal with a single jurisdiction. This may be especially important for manufacturing firms that have complicated siting decisions that can be influenced by regulatory uncertainty. Studies of economic development confirm that the confusion, delays, and uncertainty that result from the need to gain development approvals for multiple departments, agencies, and governments can have negative consequences for new development.¹⁰


In addition, consolidation may also be necessary to ensure a resource base sufficient for promoting economic development. Smaller individual governments may have inadequate jurisdiction, legal powers, and tax sources to deal with development problems. Adequate jurisdictional powers and fiscal resources may only be attained by pooling together the resources of an entire metropolitan or regional area. In fact, the large-scale infrastructure necessary for development such as mass transit systems, downtown redevelopment or sports stadiums can usually only be provided on a regional basis.¹¹

The aforementioned economic development factors are particularly important in the context of Midwest-

ern states like Kansas. More than 80% of Kansas' counties have been declining in population over the past several decades. This decline has resulted in stagnant tax bases to support routine services. The abundance of local governments in Kansas may also result in an inefficient use of financial resources. Furthermore, the availability of interested and skilled persons required to fill official positions has diminished and impeded the ability to attract and retain qualified individuals to serve, both appointed and elected.¹²

Unfortunately, Kansas currently lacks enabling legislation that would allow cities and counties to consolidate without approval of the state Legislature. Legislation was introduced in 1998 (Senate Bill 7) that would have given local governments *permissive, voluntary* choice (not mandated) with regard to city/county consolidation, but the legislation was not approved. Senate Bill 238 (The Efficiency in Local Government Act), introduced in the 2003 legislative session, was a renewed attempt to amend K.S.A. 12-301 and 12-309 and K.S.A. 2002 Supp. 19-205 in order to grant local governments permissive, voluntary choice with regard to city/county consolidation.¹³ The bill passed the Senate, but was not acted on by the House. Therefore, the bill is pending legislation for the 2004 legislative session.

In summary, whether city/county consolidation is viewed as a threat to established governmental norms or an exciting future opportunity, it is clear that current and future economic and political trends require that city and county leaders take a fresh look at consolidation. It promotes public/private cooperation on development issues, facilitates comprehensive planning for land use, and it also may provide significant cost savings and efficiency in the delivery of local public services to communities. (Feasibility is determined by the appointment of a reorganization study commission as required by current statute and proposed legislation).

Although consolidation of city and county governments has largely been an urban phenomena to date, the benefits of consolidation may actually make more sense for small cities and rural counties. These local governments must to come to grips with population decline, a stagnating local tax base, and diminished assistance from state government in terms of revenue or transfer payments. Changing circumstances require openness to new ideas in order to improve the effectiveness of city and county governments as well as the efficient delivery of services. 

Endnotes

¹ This article will focus on formal or “structural” consolidation, i.e. a merger into a single governing structure between local governments such as a city and a county. “Functional” consolidation, on the other hand, is a method whereby local governments enter into operational contacts to render governmental services. The ability to consolidate certain functions or services has been available in Kansas for a number of years. *See* K.S.A.12-3901 to 12-3909. Also note that the *Kansas Constitution* under Article 2, §17 contains a clause authorizing the Legislature to designate areas in counties that have become urban in character as “urban areas” and enact special laws giving to such counties or urban areas such powers of local government and consolidation of local government as the Legislature may deem proper. To date, Johnson County is the only county to have utilized this statutory authority. *See* K.S.A. 19-2682.

² Beardslee, Peggy, 1998. Questions and Answers on Consolidation. Paper presented as a research project to the National Association of Counties (July, 1998) with 2000 updates.

³ *Ibid.*

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TABLE 4. State By State Comparisons

State	Census 2000	# Counties	Avg. Pop. per County	Rank	Land Area Sq. Miles	Avg. Land Area per County	Rank
Alabama	4,447,100	67	66,375	21	50,750	757	24
Alaska	626,932	12	52,244	16	570,374	47,531	48
Arizona	5,130,632	15	342,042	44	113,642	7,576	47
Arkansas	2,673,400	75	35,645	12	52,075	694	21
California	33,871,648	57	594,239	48	155,973	2,736	42
Colorado	4,301,261	62	69,375	23	103,729	1,673	35
Connecticut	3,405,565	0	N/A	N/A	4,845	N/A	N/A
Delaware	783,600	3	261,200	42	1,955	652	15
Florida	15,982,378	66	242,157	41	53,937	817	26
Georgia	8,186,453	156	52,477	17	57,919	371	3
Hawaii	1,211,537	3	403,846	46	6,423	2,141	39
Idaho	1,293,953	44	29,408	7	82,751	1,881	37
Illinois	12,419,293	102	121,758	34	55,593	545	11
Indiana	6,080,485	91	66,819	22	35,870	394	4
Iowa	2,926,324	99	29,559	8	55,875	564	12
KANSAS	2,688,418	105	25,604	6	81,823	779	25
Kentucky	4,041,769	119	33,964	10	39,732	334	1
Louisiana	4,468,976	60	74,483	24	43,566	726	22
Maine	1,274,923	16	79,683	28	30,865	1,929	38
Maryland	5,296,486	23	230,282	40	9,775	425	6
Massachusetts	6,349,097	12	529,091	47	7,838	653	16
Michigan	9,938,444	83	119,740	33	56,809	684	20
Minnesota	4,919,479	87	56,546	19	79,617	915	31
Mississippi	2,844,658	82	34,691	11	46,914	572	13
Missouri	5,595,211	114	49,081	15	68,898	604	14
Montana	902,195	54	16,707	3	145,556	2,695	41
Nebraska	1,711,263	93	18,401	4	76,878	827	27
Nevada	1,998,257	16	124,891	36	109,806	6,863	46
New Hampshire	1,235,786	10	123,579	35	8,969	897	30
New Jersey	8,414,350	21	400,683	45	7,419	353	2
New Mexico	1,819,046	33	55,123	18	121,364	3,678	44
New York	18,976,457	57	332,920	43	47,224	828	28
North Carolina	8,049,313	100	80,493	29	48,718	487	10
North Dakota	642,200	53	12,117	2	68,994	1,302	34
Ohio	11,353,140	88	129,013	37	40,953	465	9
Oklahoma	3,450,654	77	44,814	14	68,679	892	29
Oregon	3,421,399	36	95,039	32	96,002	2,667	40
Pennsylvania	12,281,054	66	186,077	39	44,820	679	19
Rhode Island	1,048,319	0	N/A	N/A	1,045	N/A	N/A
South Carolina	4,012,012	46	87,218	31	30,111	655	17
South Dakota	754,844	66	11,437	1	75,896	1,150	33
Tennessee	5,689,283	93	61,175	20	41,219	443	8
Texas	20,851,820	254	82,094	30	261,914	1,031	32
Utah	2,233,169	29	77,006	27	82,168	2,833	43
Vermont	608,827	14	43,488	13	9,249	661	18
Virginia	7,078,515	95	74,511	26	39,598	417	5
Washington	5,894,121	39	151,131	38	66,581	1,707	36
West Virginia	1,808,344	55	32,879	9	24,087	438	7
Wisconsin	5,363,675	72	74,495	25	54,314	754	23
Wyoming	493,782	23	21,469	5	97,105	4,222	45
U.S. Total		3,043					

Endnotes, continued from page 6

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Rogers, Chris, 2002. Seeking Improved Government Through Consolidation. *North Carolina Political Review*, March-April, 2002.

⁸ 2003 State of the Government Address, January 28, 2003.

⁹ Feiok, Richard C. and Jered B. Carr, 1997. A Reassessment of City/County Consolidation: Economic Development Impacts. *State and Local Government Review*, Fall 1997.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Caplan, Richard, 1998. Remarks made before the Special Committee on Local Government, Kansas Legislature, September 16, 1998. Note that Kansas also has one of the highest number of local elected officials of any state in the country, as well as the sixth highest number of government units: 3,950. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Governments 1997, Volume 1: Governmental Organization. Issued August 1999).

¹³ Note that K.S.A. 19-101a(2) prohibits the consolidation of a county with another county. However, consolidation of counties, particularly in areas of declining population, may need to be seriously considered in the future.



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