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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

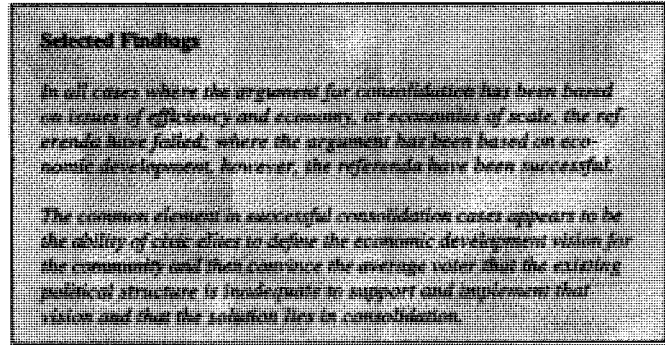


Table 1/1 THE 38 CITY-COUNTY CONSOLIDATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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 1990* (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

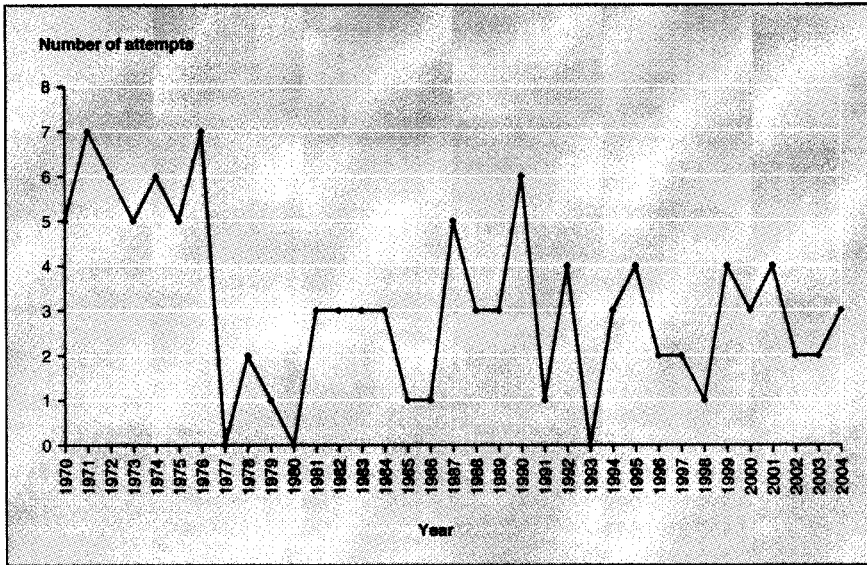


Figure 1/1 City-county consolidation attempts since 1970, by year

with more than 750,000 residents, and that was in Sacramento, California, in 1990 (Table 1/3).

So what is all the buzz about? Is consolidation becoming more popular or is it all talk? Are attempts actually on the rise? Are the chances of passage increasing? Consolidation reformers are anxious to learn from the previous attempts in other cities and counties—both successes and failures. In the remainder of this article, we present our recent research on the factors that influence the success of city-county referenda.

THE IMPETUS BEHIND CITY-COUNTY CONSOLIDATION

We analyzed 12 cases of city-county consolidation from 1970 to 2004 (see Table 1/4, page 8) to determine which factors have the greatest influence over the success of a consolidation referendum.¹⁷ Then, using a rigorous comparative case-study design, we tested several hypotheses posited in the literature regarding critical factors in city-county consolidation referenda.¹⁸

It seems clear from our 12 cases that—win or lose—consolidation attempts are motivated by civic elites (i.e., elected officials, business leaders, chambers of commerce, and others who wield a substantial amount of power in local government) who see consolidation as the solution to underlying economic development problems facing their communities. Economic development in a community is the product of both an improved overall quality of life, which requires an abundance of high-paying and attractive job opportunities, and a diversified, resilient base that adapts to changing economic circumstances. Any concerted effort to energize the community (regardless of most political boundaries) to act in support of its economic future requires a unified voice to meet with state and federal legislators as well as with prospective businesses. If the contemplated action is consolidation, a successful referendum

will depend on the ability of the community leaders to (1) craft a charter that meets the community's economic development needs without losing the political support of key constituents and without violating principles of the federal Voting Rights Act,¹⁹ (2) convince the average citizen voters that the current governmental structure is unable to achieve the economic vision that is key to their economic future, and (3) create a new local government constitution that restructures the organization to effectively implement the proposed economic development plan. It is not an easy task, and most efforts fail.

THE C³ MODEL OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONSOLIDATION

From our analysis of the 12 cases of city-county consolidation and the relevant literature, we developed the city-county consolidation (C³) model of the consolidation process. (A complete discussion of the hypotheses and model are found in Leland and Thurmaier.)²⁰

The matrix in Figure 1/4 (see page 8) shows four potential types of consolidation efforts, depending on the strength or weakness of the campaign efforts for and against consolidation. Our sample cases suggest that a successful referendum campaign is not about outspending opponents; in fact, pro-consolidation forces greatly outspent consolidation opponents in all of the unsuccessful consolidation cases. Rather, in all cases where the argument for consolidation was based on issues of efficiency and economy, or economies of scale, the referenda failed; where the argument was based on economic development, however, the referenda were successful. This pattern is discussed in depth below.

Failed Consolidation Campaigns

The weak pro-merger campaign message is about either efficiency and economic gains from elimi-

nating duplicated structures, or the reduction or elimination of metropolitan fiscal disparities. Our sample cases suggest that such a campaign is most certainly doomed to fail because there is little evidence that consolidation actually produces such benefits. And even if the evidence were there, it seems difficult to convince voters, who are very skeptical, that government can be more efficient in any form. As can be seen from Figure 1/4, weak pro-consolidation campaigns can be defeated as much by weak opponents as by strong ones.

Weak Support Defeated by Weak Opposition Weak opposition campaigns result when the civic leaders are united in support of consolidation, leaving a power vacuum with no leader available to take charge of the opposing side. Moreover, weak opposition campaigns lack a significant in-terest group, whether a minority voting bloc or a public employee union, to provide organization and funding. Yet even weak opposition campaigns can defeat weak arguments supporting consolidation.

The Knoxville case represents a weak pro-merger campaign that failed despite weak opposition (Figure 1/4). Civic elites in Knoxville touted efficiency gains from consolidation;²¹ they argued that consolidation would reduce taxes, shrink government, and eliminate duplication between the city and county. While economic growth was cited from time to time, this was not the major focus of the campaign. Proponents did not even try to convince voters that there was a community crisis that could be solved via consolidation. Thus, although the opponents of consolidation were not well organized or well funded, they ultimately prevailed because the proponents' argument for the efficiency of merging the two governments was difficult to prove and even harder to sell to voters.²²

Weak Support Defeated by Strong Opposition Opposition campaigns are strong when they have the support of one or more leading elected officials. Successful opposition leaders can be former council members, mayors, members of the consolidation study commission, sheriffs—anyone who has the power and influence to mobilize grassroots opposition and disaffected groups. And when such opposition reveals disunity among civic elites over the issue of consolidation, a united minority community can provide the margin of defeat for a consolidation effort.

When consolidation came up for a vote in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1995, its proponents argued on the basis of efficiency rather than economic development, which, as already noted, constitutes a weak campaign (Figure 1/4). In addition, consolidation was proposed by county officials in an effort to thwart the city's most recent annexation plan. But North Carolina consolidation enabling legislation requires that the largest municipality in the county be abolished as a result of consolidation, and the strong opposition was spearheaded by several elected city officials who wanted to keep Wilmington's city identity distinct from that of New Hanover County.

Economic development has been an issue in Des Moines, Iowa,²³ but here, too, the consolidation campaigns have focused on efficiency and economies of scale, not on an economic vision of

the community (Figure 1/4). Absent a strong campaign to the contrary, proponents could not convince the wealthier suburbs that they shared a common economic destiny with the central city.²⁴ Critical to the defeat of the referenda in both 1995 and 2005 was also a lack of unity among civic elites in greater Des Moines, whereas significant opposition was organized throughout the suburbs and rural areas of Polk County and among many of the county commissioners.

Even Odds Consolidation Campaigns

As already noted, the strongest arguments supporting consolidation are based on economic development claims. In these cases, civic elites look ahead 10 to 20 years and argue that the only way the community is going to realize prosperity in the future is if it is united behind a common economic development vision and plan, one that spans the "artificial" political boundaries of cities within the county. This vision requires that the multiple government voices (i.e., the city and county commissions and departments) be consolidated into a single instrument of economic development. Proponents argue for one set of zoning laws, one planning commission, one economic development department, and one set of development incentives with a single source of economic development decision making. They want to rid the community of competing political voices and contradictory arguments about economic development strategy, and have the community speak with one voice to current employers seeking to expand within the community as well as to prospective employers seeking to settle there. To accomplish this goal, they need to convince citizens that this economic vision can be realized only through a change in the local constitutional structure and that consolidation is required to restructure community governance for economic development.

In 1990, convinced of the need for consolidation as a key to their community's economic future, civic elites in Louisville, Kentucky, mounted a strong campaign arguing that Louisville faced a crisis of economic decline if it did not retain its status as the largest city in Kentucky.²⁵ Unlike the previous failed campaigns, this one was structured around the economic development message more than around arguments of efficiency and economies of scale. The opposition forces—a grass-roots coalition comprising a black county commissioner, small cities, organized labor, and gay rights advocates—organized under the banner of CO\$T in an attempt to defeat the merger, arguing that consolidation would bring little or no efficiency or economy gains.²⁶ But the economic development message of the pro-consolidation campaign insulated it against the opposition's arguments; the singular issue was about the economic future of the community, and consolidation was approved in the 2000 referendum (Figure 1/4).

A strong opposition campaign can neutralize a strong economic development argument for consolidation, producing "even odds" for a consolidation success (Figure 1/4). In the case of Kansas City, Kansas, in 1997, a strong pro-consolidation campaign based on economic development and led by the mayor was matched with a strong opposition campaign led by the old-machine

Table 1/3 CONSOLIDATION ATTEMPTS SINCE 1970 BY POPULATION

City	County	State	Year of vote	Vote in favor, %	City population	County population
Population below 50,000						
Haines	Haines Borough	AK	1998	49	1,811	2,392
Haines	Haines Borough	AK	2002	51	1,811	2,392
Yakutat	Yakutat	AK	1992	90	534	4,385
Lynchburg	Moore	TN	1987	52	4,721	4,721
Lakeland	Lanier	GA	1986	35	2,467	5,531
Sitka	Greater Sitka Borough	AK	1971	77	3,370	6,109
Hartsville	Trousdale	TN	2000	52	2,395	7,259
Metter	Candler	GA	1994	30	3,707	7,744
Moab	Grand	UT	1976	21	5,333	8,241
Emporia	Greensville	VA	1987	57 ¹	5,306	8,853
Hawkinsville	Pulaski	GA	1999	48	3,280	9,588
Anaconda	Deer Lodge	MT	1976	56	12,518	12,518
Ketchikan	Ketchikan Borough	AK	2001	42	7,922	13,320
Cusseta	Chattahoochee	GA	2003	69	1,196	14,882
Okeechobee	Okeechobee	FL	1979	32	4,225	20,264
Campbellsville	Taylor	KY	2002	n/a	10,498	22,927
Volusia Area	Halifax	FL	1985	45	19,050	23,450
Georgetown	Scott	KY	1988	42	11,414	23,867
Okeechobee	Okeechobee	FL	1989	21	4,943	29,627
Tifton	Tift	GA	1984	35	13,749	32,862
Suffolk	Nansemond	VA	1972	76	9,858	35,166
Waycross	Ware	GA	1999	45	15,333	35,483
Butte	Silver Bow	MT	1976	62	37,205	38,092
Broomfield	Broomfield	CO	1999	n/a	38,272	38,272
McMinnville	Warren	TN	2000	28	12,749	38,276
Winchester	Franklin	TN	1999	39	7,329	39,270
Bristol	Washington	TN	1971	18	14,857	40,835
Frankfort	Franklin	KY	1989	36	25,968	43,781
Frankfort	Franklin	KY	2004	25	27,741	47,687
Tullahoma	Coffee	TN	2001	29	17,994	48,014
Morristown	Hamblen	TN	1978	31	19,683	49,300
Population between 50,000 and 99,999						
Fort Pierce	St. Lucie	FL	1972	37	29,721	50,836
Ashland and Catlettsburg	Boyd	KY	1992	34	25,853	51,150
Staunton	Augusta	VA	1984	59 ¹	21,857	53,732
Conyers	Rockdale	GA	1989	55 ¹	7,380	54,091
Griffin	Spalding	GA	1991	31	21,347	54,457
Ashland and Catlettsburg	Boyd	KY	1975	17	30,069	55,513
Griffin	Spalding	GA	1997	39	23,451	58,417
Bedford	Bedford County	VA	1995	24	6,299	60,371
Brunswick	Glynn	GA	1987	51 ¹	16,433	62,496
Athens	Clarke	GA	1972	48	44,342	65,177
Douglasville	Douglas	GA	1994	25	11,635	71,120
Athens	Clarke	GA	1982	50	42,549	74,488
Missoula	Missoula	MT	1975	46	33,388	76,016
Missoula	Missoula	MT	1983	25	33,388	76,016
Bowling Green	Warren	KY	1990	24	40,641	76,673
Jackson	Madison	TN	1987	49	48,949	77,982
Roanoke	Roanoke	VA	1990	45	96,397	79,332
Fairbanks	Fairbanks North Pole	AK	2001	22	30,224	82,840
Wilmington	New Hanover	NC	1973	26	46,169	82,996
Clarksboro	Montgomery	TN	1981	16	54,777	83,342
Owensboro	Daviess	KY	1990	28	53,549	87,189
Athens	Clarke	GA	1990	59	45,734	87,594
Houma	Terrebonne Parish	LA	1981	54	32,602	94,393

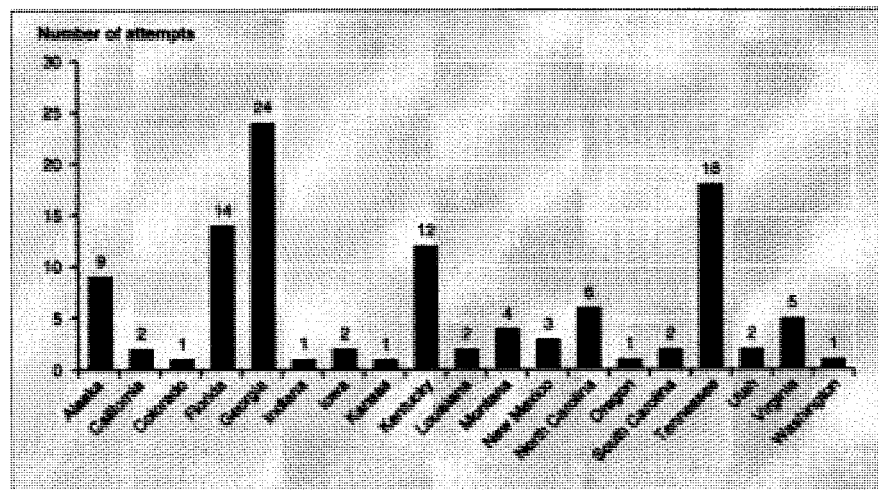


Figure 1/2 Number of city-county referenda since 1970, by state

Table 1/3 CONSOLIDATION ATTEMPTS SINCE 1970 BY POPULATION (continued)

City	County	State	Year of vote	Vote in favor, %	City population	County population
Population between 100,000 and 149,999						
Anchorage et al.	Greater Anchorage	AK	1970	n/a	48,029	102,994
Anchorage et al.	Greater Anchorage	AK	1971	n/a	48,029	102,994
Tallahassee	Leon	FL	1971	47	72,624	103,047
Tallahassee	Leon	FL	1973	46	72,624	103,047
Wilmington	New Hanover	NC	1987	41	55,530	120,284
Durham	Durham	NC	1974	32	95,438	132,681
Clarksville	Montgomery	TN	1996	n/a	103,455	134,768
Gainesville	Hall County	GA	2001	47	25,578	139,277
Macon	Bibb	GA	1972	40	122,423	143,418
Kingsport	Sullivan	TN	1988	32	36,365	143,596
Kingsport	Sullivan	TN	1981	12	32,027	143,968
Tallahassee	Leon	FL	1976	45	81,548	148,655
Population of 150,000 and above						
Macon	Bibb	GA	1976	32	116,896	150,256
Gainesville	Alachua	FL	1975	25	81,371	151,348
Gainesville	Alachua	FL	1976	32	81,371	151,348
Kansas City	Wyandotte	KS	1997	60	146,866	157,882
Wilmington	New Hanover	NC	1995	42	75,838	160,307
Asheville	Buncombe	NC	1982	38	53,583	160,934
Augusta	Richmond	GA	1971	42	59,864	162,437
Augusta	Richmond	GA	1974	52 ¹	59,864	162,437
Lafayette	Lafayette	LA	1992	60	94,440	164,762
Columbus	Muscogee	GA	1970	81	154,168	167,377
Evansville	Vanderburgh	IN	1974	26	138,764	168,772
Lexington	Fayette	KY	1972	69	108,137	174,323
Anchorage et al.	Greater Anchorage	AK	1975	62	174,431	174,431
Gainesville	Alachua	FL	1990	34	84,770	181,596
Augusta	Richmond	GA	1976	46	47,532	181,629
Savannah	Chatham	GA	1973	58 ¹	118,349	187,767
Augusta	Richmond	GA	1988	57 ¹	44,639	189,719
Tallahassee	Leon	FL	1992	40	124,771	192,493
Augusta	Richmond	GA	1995	67 ¹	195,182	199,775
Pensacola	Escambia	FL	1970	25	59,507	205,334
Columbia	Richland	SC	1973	46	101,208	233,868
Charleston	Charleston	SC	1974	40	66,945	247,650
Chattanooga	Hamilton	TN	1970	48	119,082	254,236
Chattanooga	Hamilton	TN	1984	34	169,565	287,740
Albuquerque	Bernalillo	NM	1973	44	244,501	315,774
Knoxville	Knox	TN	1978	n/a	175,030	319,694
Knoxville	Knox	TN	1983	n/a	175,030	319,694
Des Moines	Polk	IA	1994	35	193,187	327,140
Charlotte	Mecklenburg	NC	1971	31	241,420	354,656
Des Moines	Polk County	IA	2004	35	198,682	374,601
Knoxville	Knox	TN	1996	46	173,890	382,032
Spokane	Spokane	WA	1995	41	195,629	417,939
Tampa	Hillsborough	FL	1970	42	277,714	490,265
Tampa	Hillsborough	FL	1972	42	277,714	490,265
Portland	Multnomah	OR	1974	28	379,967	556,667
Albuquerque	Bernalillo	NM	2003	39	448,607	556,678
Albuquerque	Bernalillo	NM	2004	42	448,607	556,678
Salt Lake	Salt Lake	UT	1975	39	163,033	619,066
Sacramento	Sacramento	CA	1974	25	257,105	631,498
Louisville	Jefferson	KY	1982	50	298,451	685,004
Louisville	Jefferson	KY	1983	48	298,451	685,004
Louisville	Jefferson	KY	2000	54	256,231	693,604
Memphis	Shelby	TN	1971	48	623,988	722,014
Sacramento	Sacramento	CA	1990	44	369,365	1,041,219

Source: Parris N. Glendening and Patricia Atkins, "City-County Consolidations: New Views for the Eighties," in *The Municipal Yearbook 1990* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1980): 70; US Census (various).
Notes: n/a = not available.

Four additional attempts that appear on Glendening and Atkins's table (Charlottesville-Albermarle County, Holland and Whalesville-Nansemond County, and Front Royal-Warren County, Virginia; and St. Louis-St. Louis County, Missouri) have not been included here because either they could not be verified or the larger city had already been merged.

¹Under state law, unless the referendum won a majority of the vote in both the city and the county, the consolidation attempt failed.

Democrats and county commissioners. In this case, however, the economic development message was reinforced by perceptions of a crisis climate, which was emphasized by the chamber of commerce. The city and county borders were nearly coterminous, and the consolidators focused their argument on tax relief and economic revival by targeting the county government as wasteful and unaccountable. In effect, they argued that the structure of competing city and county governments was broken, unable to meet the demands of citizens for economic revival, and that economic salvation lay in consolidating the unprofessional, inept county government into the professional, council-manager form. The vote for consolidation

ultimately passed without the support of all members of the governor's appointed charter commission:²⁷ as the campaign went on, one member began to speak out against consolidation. But the reversal was too little and came too late in the process to bolster the opposition's campaign.

In the case of Tallahassee in 1976, however, a strong campaign was not able to prevail against strong opposition (Figure 1/4). The pro-consolidation campaign carried a strong economic development message touting such benefits as growth management, unified environmental and comprehensive planning functions, environmental protection, new jobs due to a more friendly business environment, stronger government ethics,

improved human services, and home rule. But the anti-consolidation campaign coalition, which included the sheriff, the county tax collector, the African-American community, and certain corporate interests, was also strong. Two days before the referendum, the sheriff placed a paid political advertisement to present data on the current benefits of his office and the future costs of his office under consolidation. The opposition proved too formidable for the pro-consolidation campaign.

Consolidation Campaigns with Favorable Odds

The Athens, Georgia, case is another excellent example of how campaigns matter.²⁸ The reformers in Athens and Clarke County attempted consolidation in 1969, 1972, and 1982 before they met with success in 1990. These first three attempts, which fall in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 1/4, were very similar: all three campaigns had approximately the same level of involvement from civic elites in the pro- and opposition camps, the same charter provisions, and the same amount of public input. The pro-consolidation forces made their primary appeal to the citizens using efficiency arguments, which our research has shown to be a weaker approach than economic development arguments; the opposition was not particularly strong, either. In 1990, however, the pro-consolidation reformers moved beyond their arguments about efficiency to argue that a single government would be better able to attract new business. In addition, the unification study commission was put together in response to citizen demands; the process successfully attracted citizens to consolidation discussions, was compressed, and kept citizen interest; and the charter was written by citizens, not government officials. These factors made the difference between the previous weak campaigns and the strong one that succeeded.

THE PROPOSED CONSOLIDATION CHARTER

Successful consolidation arguments are not about economies of scale and efficiency, nor about achieving equity between the inner city and the suburbs. Arguments about efficiency gains from consolidation have fallen on deaf ears or have been rejected or refuted by well-organized opposition campaigns; arguments for equity have met with hostility. What has been shown to succeed is a strong economic development message. However, this alone is not enough to gain voter approval for consolidation. Another essential for success is a well-crafted consolidation charter for the proposed unified government.

Civic elites who have pushed the process of consolidation to the point of a study commission need to shift perspectives from development politics to constitutional politics—the politics of what the new unified government will look like and how it will work. Charter provisions are often at the center of the consolidation debate and thus affect the odds of a successful referendum.²⁹ To be successful, the proposed charter must restructure the local government(s) for economic development while avoiding political "poison pills"—those

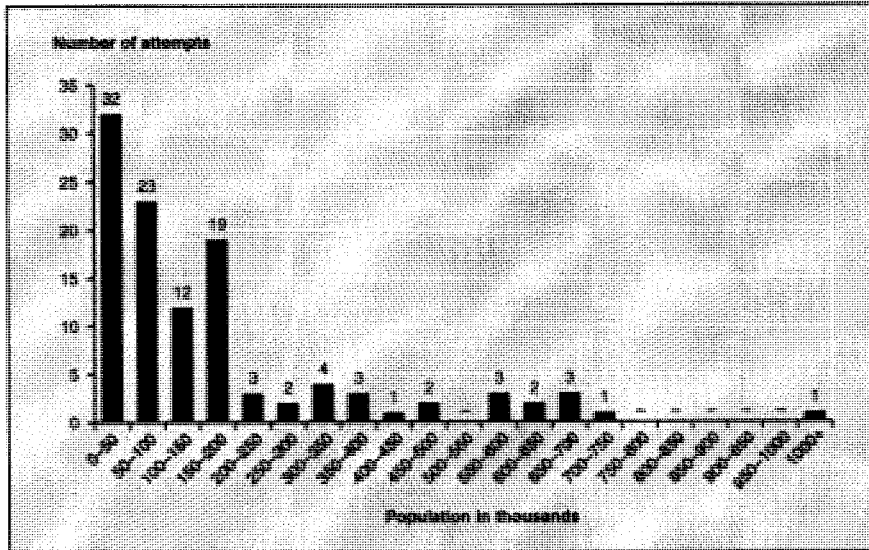


Figure 1/3 Number of city-county consolidation attempts since 1970, by county size

Table 1/4 CITY-COUNTY CONSOLIDATION CASES IN SAMPLE

Consolidation case and years	Consolidation attempts		
	Successful	Unsuccessful	Continuing
Jacksonville—Duval County, Florida (1967)	X		
Columbus—Muscogee County, Georgia (1970)	X		
Tallahassee—Leon County, Florida (1971) (1973) (1976)		X	X
Sacramento—Sacramento County, California (1974) (1990)		X	
Athens—Clarke County, Georgia (1969) (1972) (1982) (1990)	X		
Lafayette—Lafayette Parish, Louisiana (1992)	X		
Des Moines—Polk County, Iowa (1994)		X	X
Augusta—Richmond County, Georgia (1971) (1974) (1976) (1988) (1995)	X		
Wilmington—New Hanover County, North Carolina (1927) (1973) (1987) (1995)		X	X
Knoxville—Knox County, Tennessee (1996)		X	
Kansas City—Wyandotte County, Kansas (1997)	X		
Louisville—Jefferson County, Kentucky (1982) (1983) (2000)	X		
Total of 12 cases (27 attempts)	7	20	3

Source: Suzanne M. Leland and Kurt Thurmaier, eds., *Case Studies of City-County Consolidation: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 24. Used with permission of publisher.

		Pro-consolidation campaign	
		Strong arguments (economic development)	Weak arguments (efficiency, economies of scale)
Anti-consolidation campaign	Strong opposition	Louisville Kansas City (KS) Jacksonville Tallahassee EVEN ODDS FAVORABLE ODDS	Des Moines Wilmington FAIL FAIL
	Weak opposition	Athens Augusta Columbus Lafayette	Knoxville Sacramento

Source: Adapted from Suzanne M. Leland and Kurt Thurmaier, eds., *Case Studies of City-County Consolidation: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 316. Used with permission of publisher.

Figure 1/4 Predicted results for combinations of city-county consolidation campaigns

measures that guarantee and even enhance opposition. As Anthony Nownes and David Houston note, “it is far more difficult to get a proposed charter adopted than it is to draft one.”³⁰

The most critical elements that can affect the passage or defeat of the consolidation attempt involve the county sheriff, the status of the new chief executive, taxation, minority representation on the new city-county council, public employees’ job security, and the status of minor municipalities.

Support of Elected Officials

Overwhelming support of elected officials is essential to any pro-consolidation campaign. A sheriff who is not part of the civic leadership pursuing consolidation—or is at least neutral regarding the merger—is a source of leadership and organizational capacity for the opposition campaign. Strong mayoral support can also provide support for the consolidation campaign. In many cases where consolidation passed, such as Columbus, Georgia, and Lafayette, Louisiana, the charter commission members were very vocal in their support of consolidation.

The County Sheriff Changing the county sheriff from an elected to an appointed position or substantially reducing the sheriff’s duties without the sheriff’s consent virtually guarantees a referendum failure. As was apparent in the failed cases in Tallahassee, Des Moines, and Wilmington (in 1987), unhappy sheriffs have consistently made very effective opposition leaders. The resistance to consolidating public safety functions is paradoxical in that technical efficiencies can actually be increased by combining city and county policing functions, such as in unified 9-1-1 dispatch centers. Prior to their political consolidations, Athens and Kansas City had reorganized the public safety function, assigning the elected sheriffs to administer the county jails and protect the courts, and assigning the police chiefs to administer traffic enforcement and criminal detective work. As a result, when full political consolidation efforts became active in these communities, the sheriffs remained neutral since the charters did not substantially affect the preexisting arrangements.

The Chief Executive The powers of the new executive can be at the heart of the debate, especially if the status of the sheriff is not an issue. A unified executive branch is an effective way to achieve a unified approach to economic development. It provides a singular voice to speak with state and federal legislative delegations, a singular point of reference for negotiations with prospective business developers, and a well-defined chain of command to manage the governmental apparatus necessary to plan and implement the economic development vision. Consolidation charters typically propose a county executive (usually called a mayor), elected at-large, to head the unified government. The new powers of this chief executive can be augmented or diminished depending on the public’s approval of the mayor or county leader who will assume this position, particularly when it is known that that official aspires to be the chief executive officer of the future unified government. Term limits are essential where citizens are concerned about the strength of the new mayor.

Taxation

All successful consolidations create separate tax and service districts that protect newly united "neighbors" from assuming each other's preexisting debt. These "prenuptial" taxation agreements are important issues in charter politics. In the successful cases of Lafayette, Augusta, and Kansas City, original debt burdens remained separated. In the failed cases of Des Moines and Knoxville, preexisting debt was to be mixed and assumed by the new entity. All of the successful consolidation case charters (except those for Kansas City and Louisville) also created separate urban and rural service districts, reflecting the different levels of tax burdens used to support different urban and rural public service levels throughout the county. And several successful charters (e.g., those for Augusta, Louisville, Jacksonville, and Kansas City) included provisions for a moratorium on tax increases or specified reduced expenditure targets.

The Proposed Council Structure

Generally speaking, the size of the proposed new council and the type of council representation (at-large, districts, or mixed) neither increase nor decrease the likelihood that a consolidation referendum will pass. Most consolidation charters reduce the total number of elected officials, signifying a clear savings to voters. Successful consolidation charters to date have included four district structures and three mixed (at-large and district) structures; among the failed consolidation charters were four district structures and one mixed structure. The more critical aspects of council structures relate to *how* districts or super-districts are drawn.

The key issue—particularly in cases affecting a large African-American population in the South—is the preservation of the number of minority-majority district seats. If voters perceive that minority representation will not be preserved by the new charter, substantial opposition can be generated against consolidation, providing the necessary margin for defeat. On the other hand, the emergence of key African-American leaders in the 1995 Augusta case was critical for the referendum's passage. It is especially important that consolidation plans in southern states meet requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act. Minority media support or opposition can also play a critical role, but not so much as to ultimately sink consolidation.

The importance of protecting minority interests is not restricted to the South. The reformers in Kansas City carefully crafted districts to ensure that the potential representation of African Americans in a unified government would likely be the same as or greater than that in the city and county councils at the time of the consolidation vote. This provision minimized opposition to consolidation by the minority groups in the community. Similarly, several key African Americans, primarily pastors of influential churches, supported consolidation.

Assurances for Public Employees

Any proposed new, unified personnel structure inevitably triggers concern and potential opposi-

tion among public employees, who may fear that the projected reduction in duplication that results from city-county consolidation will lead to layoffs. For example, in the case of Kansas City, county employees (including those in the sheriff's office) were hired and fired via an antiquated patronage system while city employees were managed through a professional classification system. How the two systems would merge was a critical issue. Would county employees now be subject to layoffs once their position descriptions were more clearly defined and monitored? Ultimately, the political machine had to give up its patronage power in the new system, but the charter included a provision that all existing employees would be retained by the unified government.

Guaranteeing jobs or salary levels helps to quell opposition to consolidation among public employees. In Augusta, there was no guarantee of jobs for existing city and county employees, but salaries were kept the same. In Knoxville, the unified personnel system as outlined in the proposed charter would have lowered civil service protection for workers, fueling the opposition of public employees.

The Status of Minor Municipalities

In successful consolidation cases, minor municipalities (i.e., smaller suburban towns whose total combined population makes up a small fraction of the entire county) typically have been excluded from or allowed to opt out of the merged government, even though they have still retained the right to vote on the consolidation referendum. This protection is typically put in place by state enabling legislation because smaller governments lobby to retain their independent identities in fear of large tax increases. Some minor municipalities have even retained representation in the new unified government; this was the case with the mayor of Edwardsville, Kansas, who won a seat on the new unified board. If the minor municipalities are forced to be a part of the proposed consolidated government, they typically can muster enough support to defeat consolidation. This was certainly the case in the defeat of proposals in Des Moines, Sacramento, and Tallahassee.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Civic elites, largely led and funded by the local business community, are motivated by the central and enduring issue of whether the community as a whole faces economic decline or economic growth. The economic conditions do not need to be in crisis. The more important concern of these civic leaders is whether the current government structure of multiple, competing jurisdictions is capable of supporting and nurturing their vision for the economic development of the community—a vision larger than the city, encompassing the county as a whole. As our research has revealed, the common element in the successful consolidation cases we studied was the ability of civic elites to define the economic development vision for the community and then successfully convince the average voter that the existing political struc-

ture was inadequate to support and implement that vision and that the solution lay in consolidation.

One need not ignore the efficiency effects of consolidation. Efficiency is achieved over the long run by a combination of factors. First, economies of scale can be achieved by combining select services that both the city and county provide, such as benefit plans, vehicle maintenance, and specific areas of administration. Second, with professional management structures comes increased accountability, as can be seen in a city-county manager with day-to-day administrative powers, a personnel system based on merit rather than on patronage, and improved budgetary transparency that fosters opportunities to reallocate resources (positions and dollars) for more effective uses. The paradox is that reform arguments that rely on making the case that one government is more efficient than two are still likely to fail. They do not pass muster with voters in referenda.

¹Kris Maher. "To Cut Costs, Cities Ponder Mergers with Counties." *Wall Street Journal*, 22 February 2005, A2.

²Jered B. Carr and Richard C. Feiock, eds., *City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004); Suzanne M. Leland and Gary A. Johnson, "Consolidation as a Local Government Reform: Why City-County Consolidation Is an Enduring Issue," in *City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives*, 25–28; and Hank Savitch and Ron Vogel, "Merger in Louisville-Jefferson County," in *Case Studies of City-County Consolidation: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape*, eds. Suzanne Leland and Kurt Thurmaier (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 272–290.

³David Rusk. *Cities without Suburbs* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 1995); David Pierce, *Cities: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Comparative World* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1993).

⁴Gary Halter. "City-City Consolidations in the United States," *National Civic Review* 82 (Summer 1993): 282–289.

⁵Dan Durning, "Consolidated Governments," in *Encyclopedia of Public Administration and Public Policy*, ed. Jack Rabin (New York: Dekker Encyclopedias, Taylor and Francis Group, 2003), 226–230.

⁶Jered B. Carr and Bethany G. Sneed, "The Politics of City-County Consolidation: Findings from a National Survey," in *City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives*, ed. Jered B. Carr and Richard C. Feiock (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 183–218; Kurt Thurmaier and Curtis Wood, "Interlocal Agreements as an Alternative to Consolidation," in *City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives*, 113–130.

⁷Durning, "Consolidated Governments," 230.

⁸Walter A. Rosenbaum and Gladys M. Kammerer, *Against Long Odds: The Theory and Practice of Successful Governmental Consolidation* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1974).

⁹Carr and Sneed, "The Politics of City-County Consolidation."

¹⁰Parris N. Glendening and Patricia Atkins, "City-County Consolidations: New Views for the Eighties," in *The Municipal Yearbook 1980* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1980), 68.

¹¹Suzanne M. Leland and Kurt Thurmaier, eds., *Case Studies of City-County Consolidation: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004).

¹²Glendening and Atkins, "City-County Consolidations," 68.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Hank V. Savitch and Ronald K. Vogel, "Suburbs without Cities: Power and City-County Consolidation," *Urban Affairs Review* 39, no. 6 (July 2004): 758–790.

¹⁵Durning, "Consolidated Governments."

¹⁶Glendening and Atkins, "City-County Consolidations."



¹⁷Contributors for individual cases include Bert Swanson, Arnold Fleischmann, Jennifer Custer, Linda Johnson, Glen Sparrow, Hunter Bacot, Paul Coates, Alfred Ho, Rick Campbell, Dan Durning, William Gillespie, Gary Johnson, David Houston, Tony Nownes, Hank Savitch, and Ronald Vogel. In addition, Beth Honadle reports on the case of Branch-North Branch, Minnesota, a consolidation of two cities.

¹⁸See Richard C. Feiock and Jered B. Carr, "Private Incentives and Academic Entrepreneurs: The Promotion of City/County Consolidation," *Public Administration Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2000): 235-245; Linda S. Johnson and Richard C. Feiock, "Revolutionary Change in Local Governance: Revisiting the Rosenbaum and Kammerer Theory of Successful City-County Consolidation," *The Journal of Political Science* 27 (Fall 1999): 21-52; Boyd R. Messinger, *Local Government Restructuring: A Test of the Rosenbaum-Kammerer Theory*, Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh (1989); and Rosenbaum and Kammerer, *Against Long Odds*.

¹⁹Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the U.S. Department of Justice can reject any local government structural changes in the South that affect a standard, practice, or procedure with respect to voting if such changes would negatively affect African Americans.

²⁰Leland and Thurmaier, eds., *Case Studies*.

²¹Anthony Nownes and David Houston, "A Predictable Failure: The Knoxville/Knox County Experience, 1996," in *Case Studies*.

²²Other proponents of metropolitan consolidation construct their arguments around redistributive or equity arguments. These arguments also are likely to fail. Reformers who highlight the value of equity typically advocate consolidation so that a struggling city with an eroding tax base but high service levels can begin to tax suburban wealth. For consolidation to be a success in their eyes, the process must incorporate a relatively wealthier new territory into the central city's tax base to improve the overall financial position of the central jurisdiction. This is a very challenging way for consolidation reformers to approach the issue, and they typically fail.

²³Paul Coates and Alfred Tat-Kei Ho, "A Consolidation Attempt without Power Deflation," in *Case Studies*, eds. Leland and Thurmaier.

²⁴Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs*.

²⁵Savitch and Vogel, "Merger in Louisville-Jefferson County."

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Bill 464, the state enabling bill for consolidation in Kansas City-Wyandotte County, Kansas, called for the governor to appoint a bipartisan commission to study the issue of consolidation and develop a recommendation of whether to move forward with a vote of the people.

²⁸Dan Durning, William L. Gillespie, and Richard W. Campbell, "The Better Way: The Unification of Athens and Clarke County, Georgia," in *Case Studies*, eds. Leland and Thurmaier.

²⁹Linda S. Johnson, "Revolutionary Local Constitutional Change: A Theory of the Consolidation Process," in *City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives*.

³⁰Nownes and Houston, "A Predictable Failure," 254-255.



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