

- ❗ Old Hickory Branch is closed until further notice due to flooding, but Story Times are back. [Get details.](#)
- ❗ The Edgehill Branch will be closed for maintenance Sunday, December 1 - Sunday, January 5.
- ❗ All library locations will be closed Tuesday, December 24, and Wednesday, December 25, for the Christmas Holiday.


[Login](#) | [Mobile](#) | [Help](#)


[Advanced Search](#)

Short History of Metropolitan Government for Nashville-Davidson County

[Locations](#)
[Downloads](#)
[Books, Movies & Music](#)
[Databases](#)
[Local History & Info](#)
[Events & Classes](#)
[Kids Zone](#)
[Teen Web](#)
[Ask a Librarian](#)

By Carole Bucy

Urban areas across Tennessee began to experience rapid growth after World War II. Suburbs developed in Davidson County outside the city limits of Nashville. These suburbs began to surround the city. While vast development occurred in the county, the city's tax base began to erode. The county could not provide its residents who lived outside the city limits adequate urban services such as sewers. Fire protection in the county was provided only as a private service to those residents who contracted for it. The sheriff was the law enforcement authority in the county. As industry moved from the city of Nashville into the county suburbs, the city's tax base was eroded. Divisions and inequities between the city and the county became increasingly evident. The city and the county competed for tax revenues and there was much overlapping of services. County residents enjoyed many city services such as the use of the libraries and the parks system without paying city taxes which funded those services.

Counties in Tennessee could only perform those services which were specifically authorized by the state legislature. The city, through its governing body, could perform any services that were not prohibited by the legislature. The city had the authority to render services while in the county, the creation of any department or board had to be authorized by the General Assembly.

As early as 1915, a city commission in Nashville recommended massive annexation and the formation of a single city-county government, the concept of Metropolitan government. A unified government would be achieved, but it would be the city's government. This idea did not gain public support and did not pass. As the suburbs areas of the county grew, it became increasingly difficult for the county to provide adequate services for those areas where rapid growth was occurring. The primary services that the county rendered were roads and schools. Much of the county continued to be rural farm land with less needs for urban services than the suburbs.

Davidson County was governed by the Quarterly County Court which consisted of magistrates elected from districts. Fifty-five magistrates made up the court which served as the legislative body for the county. The court appropriated funds, approved budgets, and made zoning decisions. The executive officer of the county was the county judge who presided over the court which met four times each year unless a special meeting was called.

The city operated under a traditional mayor-council form of government. The Nashville City Council had twenty-one members until Mayor Ben West's annexation of 1960. After

Nashville & TN Websites

- [Living in Nashville](#)
- [Transportation](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Government](#)
- [History](#)
- [News](#)
- [Weather](#)

the annexation the size of the council increased to thirty members.

In 1952, a new study, *A Future for Nashville*, was published by the Community Services Commission, a joint commission of Davidson County and the city of Nashville, created to study the provision of services. Only nominal community services were available outside the city limits. Both the city and the county operated separate school systems. This study advocated the consolidation of city and county government into one Metropolitan government. The county health department, headed by Dr. John Lentz, did take over the functions of providing health services for the residents of the city. This was Nashville's first attempt at eliminating duplication of services and this department operated successfully and efficiently.

The state constitution of Tennessee was an initial obstacle in the consolidation of the city and county governments. In 1953, a limited constitutional convention changed the constitution so that consolidation could take place with a majority vote in both areas affected by the consolidation. The state legislature then adopted an act pursuant to the amendment which provided that the city and the county could appoint a Charter Commission.

The Davidson County legislative delegation was elected by the county as a whole until the Supreme Court decision of *Baker v. Carr* in 1962. This meant that the representatives did not represent districts, but ran as at-large candidates for the entire county. The legislative delegation had much authority because no private act specifically related to the city or county could be passed without the unanimous support of the delegation. The delegation, led by State Senator Harlan Dodson, passed the enabling legislation to create a charter commission. The commission was composed of ten members, five of whom would be appointed by the county judge and five of whom would be appointed by the major. County Judge Beverly Briley appointed Cecil Branstetter, Harlan Dodson, Victor Johnson, Dr. George Meadors and Edward Hicks. Mayor Ben West appointed Robert Chenault, Carmack Cochran, Z. Alexander Looby, Thomas McGrath, and Rebecca Thomas. Carmack Cochran was chosen by the commission members to be the chair of the commission.

After several months of work and study, the commission presented its Charter to the voters for referendum. The Charter was supported by Mayor Ben West, County Judge Beverly Briley, and both Nashville newspapers. There seemed to be little opposition to the idea of consolidation. A citizens group, Citizens for Better Government, gave speeches on the Charter, but there was no organized political campaign to get the Charter passed. Shortly before the June 17, 1958 referendum, opposition to the idea began to surface in sections of the county where residents were fearful that Metropolitan government would mean a tax increase. When the referendum occurred, the Charter passed in the city of Nashville, but failed in the county. There would be no consolidation.

As soon as the Charter was defeated, Mayor West began to implement plans to improve the tax base for the city. He saw annexation as a means to achieve consolidation. Annexation, however, would mean that the city would incorporate large areas of the county into the city until the city limits reached the boundaries of the county. Annexation would raise needed taxes to provide city services, however, no plan for the delivery of additional city services was implemented. The Nashville City Council passed two annexation ordinances and created the wheel tax or green-sticker law taxing the automobiles of commuting residents of the suburbs. The city annexed forty-two square miles of residential property which affected 82000 residents of the county. The affected residents saw their property taxes increase after annexation, but received few, if any, city services.

Many of the residents of the newly annexed areas were outraged that they were now living inside the city with no additional city services. They began to call for another referendum on consolidation. In March 1961, the Davidson County legislative delegation passed another private act to create a Metropolitan charter. Mayor West appointed Joe Torrence and Judge Briley appointed Charles Warfield to fill two vacancies that had occurred on the commission and the second charter commission began to meet. The

second commission studied the first charter and why it had failed.

When the Charter was completed, the size of the Council had been increased from twenty-one members to forty members. There were specific details in the Charter to provide for existing personnel in the city and the county. The functions of health and hospitals had been combined in the first Charter; the second Charter separated these two boards. Provisions were made in the Charter for a transition school board to implement the consolidation of the schools. The second Charter attempted to address the concerns of the residents of the county who had been annexed. The Charter created two service districts, the General Services District and the Urban Services District, to provide for a differential in tax levels. Residents of the Urban Services District had a full range of city services. The areas that comprised the General Services District had a lower tax rate until services were provided.

After the Charter was written, a county-wide political campaign was launched to urge support of the Charter. Mayor Ben West and the Nashville Banner no longer supported consolidation and now opposed this Charter. Judge Beverly Briley and The Tennessean led the campaign in support of consolidation. On June 28, 1962 a majority of 56 percent of the voters of the city and the county voted in favor of the creation of Metropolitan government. Beverly Briley was elected the first Mayor in November and Metropolitan government was implemented on April 1, 1963. Nashville became the national pioneer in Metropolitan organization. Although other cities had partial consolidation, Nashville was the first city in the country to achieve true consolidation.

Metropolitan government is a consolidation of two governments rather than the county taking over the city or the city taking over the county government. It is, in reality, a third form of local government with a range of options and flexibility to provide for population shifts to the suburbs. Today, there are some seventeen consolidated governments in the United States out of over 3100 county units. Each of these seventeen units of local government is some variation on the Nashville plan of 1962.

The Charter provided a mechanism for changes to be made in the document through the Charter Revision Commission. This Commission was given the responsibility of making recommendations for amendments to the Charter to the Council. Amendments passed by the Council would then be placed on the ballot to be voted on by the population. Since 1962, the Charter has been amended for several housekeeping measures, but there has not been a major, comprehensive revision of the Charter since its adoption.

For Further Reading:

Booth, David A. *Metropolitics: The Nashville Consolidation*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1963.

Bucy, Carole S., ed. *Your Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County*. Nashville: The League of Women Voters of Nashville, 1990.

Coomer, James C. , Charlie B. Tyer. *Nashville Metropolitan Government, the First Decade*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

Zuzak, Charles A., Kenneth E. McNeil, and Frederic Bergerson. *Beyond the Ballot: Organized Citizen Participation in Metropolitan Nashville*. Nashville: Urban Observatory of Metropolitan Nashville and Bureau of Public Administration of the University of Tennessee, 1971.

updated 11/95

Apps



Email Newsletter



Connect



Library Information

Outreach

Site search (will not locate items in catalog):

- ▶ About Us
- ▶ Jobs
- ▶ Art Gallery
- ▶ Contact Us

- ▶ Limitless Libraries
- ▶ Library Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- ▶ Talking Library
- ▶ T.O.T.A.L.

Nashville Public Library
615 Church Street | Nashville, TN 37219 | USA | Phone: +1-615-862-5800
Copyright © 2006-2012 Nashville Public Library, All Rights Reserved

[Privacy Notice](#)

Services

- ▶ Assistive Devices
- ▶ Interlibrary Loan
- ▶ Job Search Center
- ▶ Meeting Rooms
- ▶ Tours
- ▶ Wireless Printing

Get a Card

Support Your Library

- ▶ Book Sales
- ▶ Donate Used Books
- ▶ Cafepress Store

