



City-County Consolidations

A formal joining of a city (or cities) with a surrounding county government is called a city-county consolidation. The resulting unified body assumes the responsibilities of both the city and the county. Although city-county consolidation has been the most widely attempted metropolitan reorganization model, the Census Bureau identifies only 34 city-county consolidated governments out of a total of 3,069 county governments. For a list, see Consolidated City-County Governments.

Purpose

While city-county consolidations are rare, there have been many state and local initiatives attempting consolidation. The rationale for consolidation is to address certain government challenges. Consolidations have the potential to do the following:

- **Produce cost savings.** In the short term, studies have shown that municipal expenditures increase, but over the long-term there may be monetary savings.
- **Increase Efficiency.** Government inefficiencies associated with overlapping or duplicated city and county services can be eliminated.
- **Improve Resource Base.** A consolidated government may become more powerful with increased legal powers, [revenue](#) sources and jurisdiction.
- **Enhance Planning Capacity.** Under a comprehensive planning system, dealing with land development issues and controlling sprawl may prevent service fragmentation. The development approval process may also be streamlined and greater cooperation with the private sector may be fostered.
- **Improve Accountability.** As a consolidated entity, responsibility for services can no longer be in dispute as it may have been between separate governments.

Process

Almost every state has provisions in general law to change local government boundaries through municipal annexation or incorporation, but few states permit city-county consolidation in general law. In most places, a majority of citizens must pass a referendum before it can be approved by the state legislature: once the issue becomes part of the local public agenda and petitions and studies have been completed, a commission drafts a new [charter](#). After the referendum, the proposed charter will be ratified or rejected.

Over the last 40 years, nearly 100 referenda and initiatives have proposed city-county consolidations, but voters have rejected three-fourths of them. Multiple attempts at consolidation are typically necessary. In Georgia, for instance, it took 20 years for two consolidations to take place. Georgia voters repeatedly defeated the measures. Across the nation in the 1990s, only six out of 20 attempts were successful. Some consolidations fill a need for a basic service and occur where there are a small number of incorporated suburbs. Despite continued interest in consolidations, there are simpler and less controversial ways to achieve the objectives, such as [annexations](#), special districts or the formation of new municipal governments.

The government charter of a consolidated government defines its structure and is based on the local context. The "pure model" involves the combination of several municipalities and a county government in a metropolitan area into a single government. In this model, two distinct service districts may also be created, with one to provide services for the urban population and another for the rural population. In this case, taxation is linked to the level of services provided. In practice, however, most consolidation efforts do not result in only one government; often small municipalities, special districts and autonomous authorities and boards (for example, health, hospital, the school board, planning board, the port, the electric authority) continue to operate. It is also possible that certain incorporated jurisdictions within the new boundary lines may opt to be excluded.

The most common form of consolidated government is a single chief executive and a multi-district council with a few at-large seats. The executive, or mayor, has veto power, while the council has both legislative and fiscal functions. Occasionally a city manager is appointed.

Examples

- The City of Jacksonville, Florida consolidated with Duval County in 1968 after the industrial city experienced the symptoms of central city decline. As the population shifted to the suburbs, its tax base was eroded and its services overlapped with other governments in the area. Three major scandals led to a breakdown of city services, including the sewer and education systems. A reorganization plan was created, modified then ratified. The consolidation called for an elected chief executive and a 19-member council, 14 of which were elected from the member districts and 5 elected at-large. For the four cities within the new borderlines that remained autonomous, the consolidated county exercises budget and review authority over each of them.
- The City of Baton Rouge, Louisiana was one of the first to consolidate with its county (locally termed a parish) in 1949 to form a [mayor-council structure](#).
- The consolidation in Kansas City-Wyandotte County, Kansas in 1997 replaced their seven-member city council and three member county commissioners board with an eleven-member Board of Commissioners (eight elected by district and two elected countywide). The eleventh board member is the mayor, who is also elected countywide, has veto power, and can vote to break a board tie. The mayor appoints the county administrator with the consent of the commission.

Sources

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