

THE URGE TO MERGE: STILL WAITING FOR A SURGE

Consolidating local governments is as difficult a political task as it ever was.

We reported last month on the current vogue among states for merging and streamlining bureaucracies. The same hunger for efficiency is evident among local officials, many of whom are turning to previously merged cities and counties for tips on how to share their loads. A good place for them to look right now is Indianapolis--not because its 35-year-old Uni-Gov system is still a hot model but because Mayor Bart Peterson's recent failed attempt to achieve further consolidation offers new instruction in the difficulty of the effort.

Peterson's task was difficult in large part because the architects of Uni-Gov, the original city-county merger, punted on so much of the politically touchy work of consolidation. Police, fire and other basic services were left out of the 1970 plan. Peterson wanted to change that and needed the state legislature to sign off on his plan. But legislators were quick to kill the idea, for a number of instructive reasons.

Supporters of stronger consolidation drew much of their enthusiasm from the successful merger vote in 2000 in Louisville, where that city's government was merged with surrounding Jefferson County. But Peterson and his allies may not have learned the most important lesson from the Louisville experience: the need to sell any merger plan in the most positive terms.

Boosters in Louisville never tired of boasting that Louisville would become a "Top 25" city merely by combining the local populations. That reinforced their message that consolidation was necessary to grow and compete economically. Peterson tried to offer the same message in Indianapolis, but somehow it all came out sounding negative. Peterson warned that Indianapolis might suffer the blighted fortunes of a Cleveland or a Detroit unless his plan went through. Those warnings didn't help a great deal politically.

Peterson did claim that his plan would save taxpayers some \$35 million a year. But his refusal to offer specifics lent credence to charges that the new system could weaken police or fire protection. In any case, talk of fiscal savings was swamped by Peterson's request for state money for a new \$500 million Colts football stadium--an unrelated item that nonetheless became conflated with the merger proposal. All of this tapped into the usual out-state resistance against doing too much to help Indianapolis and convinced legislators they might be better off backing away from a proposal that didn't even command consensus locally.

Maybe the important point about urban consolidation right now is that, Louisville notwithstanding, the better strategy might be to try and sell it piecemeal, rather than in one fell swoop. Officials from Buffalo to Des Moines have been learning that even if they can't win approval of a full-scale city-county merger, they can take an important step by sharing some services that don't command high-powered political constituencies, the way police and fire do. Voters in Des Moines rejected a city-county merger just last year, but Des

Moines and Polk County officials are moving ahead anyway with plans to set uniform building codes, share computer maintenance and road salt purchases and combine some housing programs.

TWO BECOME ONE

Status of city-county consolidation attempts

	Year	
	Successful	# of attempts
Jacksonville/Duval Co., Fla.	1967	1
Columbus/Muscogee Co., Ga.	1970	1
Tallahassee/Leon Co., Fla.	Continuing	3
Sacramento/Sacramento Co., Calif.	Unsuccessful	2
Athens/Clarke Co., Ga.	1990	3
City of Lafayette/Lafayette Parish, La.	1992	1
Des Moines/Polk Co., Iowa	Continuing	2
Augusta/Richmond Co., Ga.	1995	5
Wilmington/New Hanover Co., N.C.	Continuing	4
Knoxville/Knox Co., Tenn.	Unsuccessful	3
Kansas City/Wyandotte Co., Kan.	1997	1
Louisville/Jefferson Co., Ky.	2000	3

Source: "Case Studies of City-County Consolidation," edited by Suzanne M. Leland and Kurt Thurmaier

Note: This chart has been corrected from the version that appeared in the magazine to reflect that there have been three unsuccessful consolidation attempts in Knoxville/Knox County, Tenn., and to remove Branch and North Branch, Minnesota, from the list of city/county consolidation attempts.