

Institute for Public Policy
and Economic Analysis

**An Analysis of Regional
Government and Reforms**

By:
Kevin Pirch, Ph.D.

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Kevin Pirch, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of Government

Eastern Washington University

kpirch@ewu.edu

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With this latest monograph from the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis, I welcome you to Eastern Washington University. I hope this research will inform your knowledge of the Inland Northwest. Efforts like this Institute monograph series are manifestations of this University's commitment to serve the region. I applaud the initiative of Eastern's Board of Trustees to launch this Institute.

Teaching remains our core mission at Eastern Washington University. Increasingly, teaching and research are interwoven. Our faculty members stay professionally current when publishing in peer-reviewed journals. These achievements, in turn, allow them to better convey the evolving knowledge base of our academic disciplines.

Our students receive an enhanced education if their classroom experience is informed by the content and enthusiasm of their professor's research. Increasingly, we ask students to conduct research projects of their own. Whether conducting their own projects or assisting professors, our students acquire a richer learning experience through research.

Research for academic journals is not the only area our faculty members target, however. Our University also asks its faculty to engage the communities and region from which we draw our students. This research provides a greater sense of place and a commitment by our faculty to it. It also translates academic methods and findings into a broader, and ultimately more relevant, arena: the lives of the residents of the Inland Northwest.

The overarching goal of the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis is to serve the region by translating knowledge. It does this through a variety of activities, including this series, annual economic forecasts, contract research and the Community Indicators Initiative. I invite you to explore its web site (www.ewu.edu/policyinstitute) to learn more.

I have tremendous optimism that by collaborating with EWU's faculty, staff and partners, I will continue to ensure our institution will be anchored into the daily course of life throughout the Inland Northwest. During these difficult economic times, our collective future depends on an educated and informed citizenry. Helping our region reach higher levels of knowledge is something this University can and will do.

My office and that of the Institute director welcome all comments on how we might better serve.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rodolfo Arévalo". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Rodolfo Arévalo, PhD
President

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Executive Summary

In the United States of America there is ample opportunity for innovation and changes to local government and solutions to regional issues. Since almost the inception of the nation, people have been innovating the structure their governments. Among the most common ways of doing this are to consolidate city and county governments, create ad hoc solutions, such as interlocal agreements or special districts, or, by to create another layer of government which focuses on regional issues. This study is a review of the literature that assesses these approaches.

City and county consolidations are often considered a typical response to issues of regionalism; however, consolidations are rare occurrences in the United States, with only 34 successful attempts at consolidation out of 163 attempts since 1900. Many of these consolidations have occurred in the South, particularly in the State of Georgia. Regardless of where in the nation the consolidation occurs, most successful consolidations follow a three stage process.

First, a crisis, or a perceived crisis, emerges which the current government structure is not capable of addressing. This could be a financial crisis, a shock to the community's primary industry, a scandal in government, or a change in the population in the community. Next, a "power deflator" occurs when the public comes to believe that the government is either unwilling or incapable of addressing the problem. This power deflator and the inability for the government to respond to it create an environment which is ripe for changing the governmental structure in a community. During this time, the mass media and community

leaders tend to rally around the idea that a consolidated city-county government would solve the problems of which occurred in the first stage. Finally, an event occurs which accelerates the process, causing the public to believe the problem must be addressed immediately, with a change of governmental structure as part of the fix to the problem. This third stage then confirms what the public has believed to occur in the first two stages – that there is a problem occurring in the community, that the government is unwilling to address the problem, and that this problem has real repercussions to the region.

These consolidations tend to not be all encompassing events where all of the municipalities are folded into a single government. Rather, on many occasions, previously incorporated municipalities are allowed to remain independent of the consolidated government, although they may continue to use county services such as the court system, sanitation systems, and ministerial functions. Despite the differences in the structure of the combined city-county government, there are some traits which most consolidated governments tend to possess.

Most of these consolidated governments tend to be relatively small geographically, densely populated, and, as a result, mostly urban communities. For example, the consolidated Marion County, Indiana has about 880,000 people living in the county with a population density of 2,172 people per square mile. Consolidated Louisville-Jefferson County, Kentucky, has 714,000 people in the county and a density of 1,800 people per square mile. Other, less populated areas which have consolidated also tend to be compact areas which are relatively densely populated. This

includes Athens-Clarke County, Georgia which has a population density of 840 people per square mile and Augusta – Richmond County, Georgia which has a population density of 616 people per square mile.

Yet, the advantages to the community from city-county consolidation are debatable. Some studies of consolidation in Jacksonville, Florida showed that voter turnout declined after consolidation, socioeconomic issues remained, and political power continued to reside in the urban fringe at the expense of the urban core. Other studies, however, found that consolidated government in Jacksonville was more responsive to the needs of the community compared to the pre-consolidated governments.

These mixed findings are relatively consistent with studies from other communities, with some examinations finding people were more satisfied with services in pre-consolidated governments, while other studies finding the community was not less dissatisfied with services provided by consolidated governments. For example, study of consolidated Athens/Clarke County, Georgia found consolidation did not relieve the tension between developers and neighborhood groups, a primary reason for consolidation; however, it did allow for the creation of some programs and services, such as a Department of Human and Economic Development. Simply put, one researcher stated: “Taken as a whole, this body of research does not lead to strong conclusions regarding the value of city-county consolidation.” (During 1995 p 275).

Another form of regionalism is to take an ad hoc approach, encouraging various cities and the county to enter into either formal or

informal agreements (interlocal) to share services or provide services to one another. This might include contracting out public safety services, sharing facilities, group purchasing, other activities. Beyond interlocal agreements, governments can cede power to a special purpose district which could extend beyond traditional municipal boundaries and would then be the sole provider of these services to the residents of the community. These special purpose districts tend to be created to provide relatively non-controversial services to residents and are intended to be governed by specialists in the field who can handle the technical difficulties of these services.

Examples around the nation include agreements in North Carolina between the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. There, a series of interlocal agreements allows the city and the county to share and trade services. The county controls the parks and recreation, building inspection, election and tax administration, while the city provides police services, solid waste, transit, animal control, planning and zoning and a few other services. Another example is found in the Kansas City region where communities have come together to share the responsibility of plowing roads, purchase vehicles as a group for lower costs, and share a computer system for bidding and purchasing.

The literature also examines the difference between *governance* and government and *informal* agreements. While government focuses on the institutions which are responsible for creating and enforcing public policy, governance focuses more on the elected officials and how they interact with one another. In this regard, how government actors interact with one another is seen as important

as the institutions which are created; consequently, some regional issues could be solved through creating a trusting relationship between elected officials from different communities. From a political standpoint, these are more likely to be enacted than something more dramatic, such as city-county consolidation; however, because they tend to be legal contracts, which do not need public debate or approval, there is a chance these agreements could not reflect what the public wants.

Finally, although a rare form, a few metropolitan areas have created another layer of government which overlaps counties and city governments. These regional governments are tasked focusing on issues which cross city and county boundaries such as transportation, planning, and environmental issues while the cities and towns focus on more local issues. Forms of this government exist in the Oregon portion of metropolitan Portland and in the Twin Cities or Minnesota.