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McCabe Says Metro Government Can Work

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Annual forum inspires push to consolidate in West Virginia.

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For a few days this month, Sen. Brooks McCabe, D-Kanawha, spent time with people who not only support the idea of merging local governments, they have championed it.

No, he wasn't in West Virginia, where he couldn't even convince the House of Delegates to advance his proposal earlier this year to allow localities to investigate government consolidation.

McCabe and Cal Kent, an economist at the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University, were in Louisville, Ky., to attend the Alliance for Regional Stewardship's annual national forum, a conference on local government collaboration in the nation's newest metropolitan government.

In 2000, the Louisville-Jefferson County merger in Kentucky became the first community in 30 years to combine city and county governments.

During the 2005 regular legislative session, McCabe and Kent unsuccessfully tried to convince West Virginia legislators that the idea would help West Virginia. After attending the Louisville conference, Kent said they are ready to try again, armed with new information and a refined approach.

"We are reinvigorated about consolidation," Kent said. "This was a nationwide conference. We got an incredible amount of good information. We know what changes need to be made to our legislation to give it a better chance."

McCabe said the conference gave them the opportunity to learn more about metropolitan government and how to address the fears people have about consolidation.

"This was a very good session for us," McCabe said. "We had the House and Senate legal counsel with us, and we spent a lot of time really reviewing our legislation and making changes."

McCabe's original proposal would have allowed localities to explore merging cities, counties or cities with counties. The consolidations would have been drafted by a charter review committee, and voters would have to approve any merger.

"From my vantage point, the House and Senate have been able to come closer to an agreement and discuss appropriate changes to the draft legislation," McCabe said. "We were able to hear some cutting-edge discussions on mergers and consolidation."

In terms of addressing West Virginians' fear of change, Kent said, the first step is convincing legislators to give metropolitan government a chance.

"There is a lot of fear of the unknown," Kent said. "But there are 57 metropolitan organizations representing completed mergers and functional mergers. ... The unanimous opinion of all these people is that it worked. The biggest stumbling block (for them) was fear."

Kent and McCabe said the government merger effort needs to do a better job of pointing out to people that consolidation is economic development.

"Government becomes more efficient in operation, and it becomes more efficient with economic development," Kent said. "This is really something that attracts industry. It puts us on the map. Being an economist, I've been saying this for a long time. We just need to sell it."

McCabe said the Legislature has an interim committee studying government consolidation, and he hopes to present the members with a new and improved bill in December. But he said he is not yet ready to discuss the specific changes.

In February 2005, Kent presented a report to the Legislature on local government consolidation. He summarized the findings of the Governor's Commission on Governing in the 21st Century.

The 26 members came to the following conclusions:

- Fiscal constraints make local government reorganization necessary.
- Beyond constitutional considerations, the most basic democratic principles demand that local government reorganization initiatives must originate at the local level.
- To provide guidance and to conform to the West Virginia constitutional requirements, enabling legislation must be passed by the Legislature.
- Change can and should be incremental.
- The economies of scale to be achieved through outright local government mergers are not abstract -- they are demonstrable under prevailing conditions.
- Consolidation of urban counties can make them more attractive as business locations.
- Local government reorganization is not a threat to diversity or uniqueness of West Virginia's rural communities.

Some consolidations already are taking place or at least being considered in West Virginia. Kanawha County and the city of Charleston have merged their emergency 911 operations and may do the same with their housing authorities. Leaders in Wheeling and Ohio County and Beckley and Raleigh County have expressed interest in the idea.

The bottom line, Kent and McCabe said, is that government consolidation does not come with a "one-size-fits-all" plan. The legislation that McCabe introduced earlier this year and plans to refine and introduce again in the 2006 legislative session will allow local governments to construct the best plan for them.

"We just need to explain, explain, explain and deal with the fear people have of change," Kent said. "When you're talking about government consolidation, there is not a single model out there. Whatever local people want to consolidate, that's what's going to be allowed.

"... When you're here (in Louisville) hearing the success stories," he added, "you just get inspired all over again."

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