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## Slow Motion

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### Metro government has yet to catch on in West Virginia.

Story by Walt Williams

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Two years ago, state lawmakers passed a bill that allowed the state's cities and counties to flirt with an idea that has been experimented with in a handful of other communities across the nation: merging their city-county services into a single entity to enhance the efficiency of those services and attract business investment.

Examples in cities such as Nashville, Tenn., and Louisville, Ken. showed that consolidated city-county government -- also known as "metro government" -- could work, but to date there haven't been any takers in West Virginia.

The reason? There are several, but primarily the idea has failed to hold the attention of many elected officials, taking a back seat to the other issues that now face counties and cities. It hasn't faded away, however, and in a few places in the state people are giving the notion more than a passing glance.

"I think it will happen one day -- I really do," said Butch Osborne, who was chairman of the charter committee that examined the possibility of consolidating city-county functions in Marion County. "I'm just one of those people who believes that logic prevails in the end."

Cities and counties in West Virginia, like in most places throughout the country, are separate entities with their own governments and services. Cities have their own police forces; counties have sheriff's deputies, and so on.

A few communities in the nation have experimented with merging some, although not necessarily all, the services that counties and cities provide, such as sewer districts. Most have met with success, although no two examples mirror each other.

The advantages that consolidation provide are that it potentially can make governments more efficient by eliminating much of the duplication that currently takes place and it puts communities in a much better position to attract both federal dollars and business investment -- two things most cities in West Virginia may start losing as their populations shrink and grow older.

On the other hand, critics say that some residents may get stuck with higher taxes and fees, and smaller communities absorbed into a metro government could lose their culture and political identities.

Metro government isn't for everyone. The Marion County committee, for instance, concluded it didn't make much sense for the county and its largest community, Fairmont, to consolidate because the resulting entity would have little to gain through the move. It did suggest that three communities -- Fairmont, Pleasant Valley and Whitehall -- appoint a committee to take a look at combining some of their services. So far, officials in all three cities have yet to take action on the recommendation.

Osborne was disappointed that plans to look into consolidation in Marion seem to be on hiatus for the moment. He believes the issue won't go away though, mainly because cities and counties will continue to struggle to find the money for the services they provide.

"We are still ready to participate, but it takes the initiative of the three councils (in the communities) to pass resolutions to study this, and that has yet to be done," he said.

### Counties and Cities

Cities and counties in West Virginia were given the authority to explore mergers through the Consolidated Local Government Act, which was passed in 2006 by the Legislature. The bill spelled out the steps local governments must take to explore consolidation as well as outlined what authority the new types of government would have.

Among the chief proponents of the measure was Sen. Brooks McCabe, D-Kanawha, who has argued that government consolidation is needed to move West Virginia forward -- although that consolidation will take different forms depending on where it happens.

"If we are going to compete at a national and international level (for business investment), we've got to start paying attention, and the fact is we have too much government," he said.

A main goal in consolidation is the designation of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, which are geographic areas defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget as areas with at least 50,000 people and containing one or more counties. MSAs also share a great amount of social and economic integration.

MSAs allow demographers to count beyond a city's boundaries to consider the total economic impact of a population in that area. They also are used by industry when determining where to open a new plant or operations center.

Supporters believe that combining city and county governments would establish new or expanded MSAs, and the new governments could provide better services at lower costs because the new entities are drawing on an expanded base of taxpayers. That efficiency would be attractive to businesses, which would also be drawn by the larger population bases represented in the consolidated governments.

McCabe noted that Charleston and Huntington have been losing population in recent years as people moved into the surrounding

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counties. But if the Kanawha, Putnam and Cabell counties were taking steps toward consolidation, the two MSAs containing the cities would meld into a single MSA with a labor force of more than 250,000 workers, making the area very attractive to business.

Alone, however, that work force is diluted between the two communities.

"The fact is the way we are organized we can't get up to bat much less to first base," McCabe said.

Other areas of the state would need to take their own unique steps toward consolidation, merging communities or entire counties, he said. The senator did note that city officials in Pittsburgh recently suggested they would explore consolidation with the surrounding county.

Marion County has explored the issue, and Raleigh County is just beginning to look at it, but most communities haven't taken any steps toward consolidation. In fact, some groups have actively resisted the idea.

Among them is the County Commissioners' Association of West Virginia, which opposed the Consolidated Local Government Act when it came before the Legislature. The association is adamantly opposed to any consolidation of counties, believing that there is no reason to merge any of the state's 55 counties. It isn't necessarily opposed to the idea of cities and counties merging, but Executive Director Vivian Parsons said it hasn't been proven to actually do much good.

"City government and county government are very different," she said. "Their powers and duties are very different."

One city government power that concerns the counties is annexation, which has the potential to carve out chunks of very valuable land in the areas of the county immediately surrounding cities. Parsons said metro government, as outlined in the bill, could make it easier for cities to annex county land.

The bill also limits the taxing authority of a metro government in a way that that county residents wouldn't need to worry about paying city taxes, even if both are receiving the same services. Parsons said that would make it difficult for consolidated governments to expand their tax base and would likely encourage government officials to annex county land into cities.

### Merging Governments

Consolidated government was studied in the lead-up to passage of the Consolidated Local Government Act. The Marshall University Center for Business and Economic Research prepared a 12-page report for lawmakers explaining the advantages and disadvantages of consolidated government.

"I think surprisingly enough it has created a deal of interest, particularly negative interest on the part of county officials," study co-author Calvin Kent said about the metro government effort. Most of the resistance comes from the fear that consolidating governments would erode the authority of counties, he said.

The study itself doesn't paint a particularly positive or negative picture of metro governments. Kent and co-author Kent Sowards noted that there are two ways local governments can go about consolidation. The first is full consolidation, which has a single entity performing nearly all government functions. There currently are no examples of such a consolidation in the United States, although a few communities come close.

The second way is functional consolidation, in which some but not all government services are merged. Counties and cities may coordinate the hiring and training of personnel, for example. They may have a single taxing authority. They may consolidate water, sewer and other public works services. And they may combine resources to promote economic development.

A third option listed by the authors isn't true consolidation in that local governments don't merge services, but it is the one that has so far been most popular with local officials. Under regional consolidation, local governments with a certain region agree to offer a uniform level of service.

Advocates point out that such cooperation is easiest to attain and can lead to true consolidation down the road, the authors wrote. However, critics see regional cooperation as leading to duplication of services and adding to fragmentation and confusion.

What can be gained from consolidation?

Quite a lot, according to Kent and Sowards. Metro governments can cut back on duplication of services, making government more efficient. It also can strengthen local government credit ratings, expand local government's ability to get federal and state grants, reduce problems caused by annexation, improve basic services and, perhaps as a result, improve the public's overall perspective of government.

There are several potential drawbacks as well, the authors wrote. First among them is the loss of community identity and autonomy, particularly among small towns and rural counties that may be absorbed into their larger neighbors. Residents in such communities may lose the one-on-one contact they had with elected officials before consolidation. There also has been a perception among some minority groups that consolidation dilutes their political strength.

Other drawbacks include fewer government positions and elected officials (although advocates may see that as a plus given it leads to cost savings), the potential for higher taxes and fees for urban and suburban residents and the high initial costs of consolidating government services.

The West Virginia University College of Business and Economics has studied the question in Marion County, drafting reports on the economic future of the county and the potential impacts consolidated government would have there in attracting economic development and federal grants. Researchers found a consolidation of the county with its county seat of Fairmont would do little to change the city's urban designation with federal officials, but it may lead to some economic development a few years down the road.

The bureau recently contracted with a charter committee in Raleigh County to do similar research there. Director Tom Witt said the bureau's role is to provide factual information so local government officials can make the best decision possible when deciding whether to consolidate.

"But we hope they will do that with serious consideration for the facts and data, not based on hearsay information," he said.

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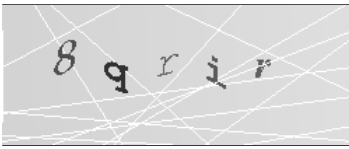
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