

Asheville-Buncombe 1982 – Description and Outcome

[This summary is prepared in reliance upon drafts and notes made by Warren Jake Wicker at the time of the vote and found in his papers in the School of Government library.]

The proposed consolidation of the Asheville and Buncombe county governments was rejected in a referendum held on November 2, 1982. The consolidation legislation required parallel majorities, both inside and outside the city, for approval, and the results were as follows:

	For		Against	
	No.	%	No.	%
Inside Asheville	6,079	57	4,757	43
Outside Asheville	6,563	30	16,126	70
Countywide	12,642	38	20,883	62

While the proposal was rejected, the favorable vote was a greater percentage of the whole than the previous four attempts elsewhere in North Carolina and was the first time a consolidation vote has carried in the central city involved in the proposed merger.

Consolidation votes have been held twice in Durham city and county. In 1961 merger was rejected by a vote of 14,355 to 4,115; and in 1974 it was rejected 13,124 to 6,198. In a 1971 referendum, voters in Mecklenburg county rejected merger of the county and Charlotte by a vote of 39,464 to 17,313. And in a 1973 referendum, voters in New Hanover county rejected merger of the county and Wilmington by a vote of 11,722 to 4,040.

Interest in city and county merger and cooperation has been pronounced in Asheville and Buncombe county for many years. As a result of special studies and the work of the two governing boards, water and wastewater operations have been merged, as have inspections and animal control. Arrangements for another service, joint tax collection, have been completed.

A major source of friction within the county has been municipal annexation by Asheville. For several years, while cooperation studies were ongoing, the General Assembly suspended the city's authority to annex, and the city's continuing plans to annex led to this consolidation effort. In early 1981 the city announced that it intended to undertake a major annexation. When opponents called upon the county's legislative delegation to stop the city from doing so, the delegation responded by initiating the legislation that created the Asheville-Buncombe Charter Commission and led to the November 1982 vote.

Local observers attributed the vote against consolidation to several factors. Although there was no organized opposition, neither was there a strong campaign in favor of consolidation. As a result there was a widespread lack of knowledge about the proposal which, coupled with a

general reluctance to change, led to many “no” votes. Some voters were also concerned about the possible effect of consolidation upon merger of the county’s two school systems. They were afraid merger of the general purpose local governments might hasten merger of the school systems, to which there was widespread opposition. It was also thought that the proposed form of government – essentially a version of a strong mayor system – led to solid opposition by current city employees and their families.

The majority vote within the city was attributed to a realization among city voters that either consolidation or annexation was necessary for the continued economic and physical growth of the area. It was also true that those areas targeted for annexation by the city tended to support consolidation as an alternative to annexation; the further voters were from the city, however, the stronger their opposition.