

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG CONSOLIDATION DEFEATED

the issues . . . the principals . . . the results

By Warren J. Wicker

On March 22, the voters of Mecklenburg County rejected 7 to 3 a proposed plan for consolidating the governments of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County that had been under study since 1967.

The proposed plan would have merged the governments of the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Had it been approved in the county-wide vote, subsequent elections would have been held in the six smaller towns (one, Mint Hill, was incorporated in March by the current North Carolina General Assembly) to determine whether any of the governments of those municipalities would also be merged into the consolidated city-county government.

This article examines both the main issues that developed in the campaigns for and against the consolidation and the principal proponents and opponents, and reports briefly on the results of the voting.

(The March issue of *Popular Government* contains an article describing the history of the consolidation efforts in Mecklenburg County and outlining the characteristics of the plan being proposed.)

The proposed Charlotte-Mecklenburg consolidation went down by a vote of 39,464 against and 17,313 for. By election day, newspaper polls and many observers were predicting its defeat, but few anticipated that it would fail by such a large margin.

The vote in Mecklenburg came in a county where functional consolidation and cooperative activity be-

tween the governments had reached extensive proportions. Consolidation had been discussed for many years, and many officials saw it as a natural step in the evolution of cooperative and joint relationships between the two governments. Moreover, the move to create the Charter Commission in 1969 had the endorsement of all the local governments, the Chamber

of Commerce (which started this effort), the local press, the League of Women Voters, and several other groups. Except in the smaller towns, outspoken opposition to the idea of consolidation was generally not evident. All these conditions suggested that consolidation might receive a favorable vote.

Experience with consolidation attempts in other metropolitan areas indicated that citizens in the smaller towns and unincorporated areas of a county usually opposed consolidation. Local officials anticipated similar opposition in Mecklenburg. They also knew that elsewhere voter approval of consolidation seemed to have a better chance when some crisis beset the existing governments. The advocates of consolidation recognized that the absence of a crisis, the likely opposition of citizens outside of Charlotte, and possible resistance to change and consolidation per se were significant factors against consolidation. They were convinced, however, that a single government serving all the community would result in better coordination of services, better planning, wiser and more economical use of the community's tax resources, and a more responsive government. The city and county governing boards had sometimes spent months or years in trying to reach agreement on a joint course of action. With a single government, the advocates said, these decisions would be made faster and action needed by the community would be taken sooner. They were confident that both the need for consolidation and its advantages would commend themselves to the voters and outweigh the considerations often cited as disadvantages. It was thus with optimism that the Charter Commission began developing the plan in 1969.

The Issues

Early in their work, after the first visits to consolidated governments and the first public hearings, members of the Charter Commission concluded that representation, taxation, and the form of government would likely be key issues in the debates over whatever plan was developed. Other issues were identified as their work continued, often with a realization that probably no answer developed would please all citizens. In commending its work to the people the Commission said,

We wish we could say this [the Charter] is a perfect document. We wish we could say it will provide a government that can solve all problems. In candor, we cannot. . . . To those citizens who wish that some things about this charter were different, we offer the observation that the choice is between this . . . plan and the seven different governments we now have.

The campaigns for and against the charter were waged largely in the final six weeks before the vote. Listed below are the major issues that appeared to

be developed in the campaign. The analysis of the voting patterns indicated that some of them were important. The relative importance of many, however, cannot be measured from the voting results.¹ The issues are identified here. Later reports will have to weigh them.

1. **Consolidation.** As noted, from the beginning, the idea of consolidation appeared to have wide general approval, and in the campaign the concept as such was not opposed. In the last week of the campaign, for example, the opposition leader, Allen A. Bailey, said, "The community does not have to say 'no' to the idea of merger of our governments in order to say 'no' to the radical changes in government proposed under this charter. [After its defeat] we could, in fact, begin immediately to draft a document which would simply merge our two governments. . . ."

The size of the vote against the charter suggests that some generalized opposition to the idea of consolidation may have been present, but it never became a major issue.

2. **Elected Representation.** Judging from campaign statements, the question of elected representation was the issue that received most attention. It involved the proposed arrangements for electing both the consolidated governing board (council) and the school board.

In the existing city and county governments, both boards are elected at large for two-years terms. Charlotte has a seven-member council and a mayor and the county has a five-member board, from which the members select one of themselves as chairman. The nine school board members are elected at large for six-year, staggered terms.

The proposed charter called for a council of 18 members, 12 elected from single-member districts (about 30,000 people in each) and six elected at large, all for staggered terms of four years. The mayor was also to be elected at large for four years. The revision in the school board called for it to continue to have nine members but with six elected from districts and three at large.

Proponents claimed that the proposed plan would make government more responsive and give all citizens a feeling of being directly represented. The districts, as drawn, would have enabled both blacks and rural residents to elect three members of the council. Consolidation and the plan of representation, said the proponents, would give all citizens a voice in their government. The city's fringe-area residents are now subject to decisions of the city council on planning, zoning, annexation, utility rates, and many

1. Dr. Schley Lyons of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte undertook an intensive study of voter attitudes and behavior both before and after the referendum. When his study is complete, some indication of the importance of the various issues on voting should be available. L. M. Wright, Jr., associate director of the Charter Commission, also plans a volume that will report in detail on the work of the Commission, the development of major issues, and the conduct of the campaigns.

other matters, but have no direct influence in its selection. Under consolidation there would have been one county-wide council and all citizens equally represented on it. (Currently, most members of the elected bodies live within one fairly small geographical area of the county.)

Opponents charged that the plan would bring a return to "ward politics" and "log-rolling." They said that the council was too large and would result in government by committees. Moreover, they said, every citizen should be able to vote for all those who governed him, or, at the least, for a majority of them—something not possible under the proposed plan. They also suggested that some districts might not be able to offer well-qualified candidates and that the community should not approve a plan that prevented it from having the services of its most qualified citizens, regardless of where they live. District representatives, they said, would have a narrow view of the community's needs rather than a community-wide approach which would be of most benefit.

Besides these traditional considerations, the question of representation for blacks was a factor. Some proponents said that the community would be better off and better able to deal with current concerns if some black citizens were assured seats on the governing body. While there were few direct statements to the contrary, it appears that some opposition resulted from the feeling that no change in representation plans should be made if the result would be to increase the number of blacks on elected boards.

3. Fair Representation. One of the most controversial provisions of the proposed charter was Section 6-42, entitled "Fair representation." This section stated that in making appointments to all boards, commissions, and authorities of the consolidated government, the council "shall secure reasonable representation on each board, commission and authority of all sexes, races, income groups, geographic sections of the county and political parties." The section was also to apply to all boards and commissions of the government, whether or not appointed by the council. The charter also contained other similar and more specific provisions. The Civil Service Commission provisions, for example, required that each member reside in a different electoral district and that not all members be of the same "race or sex or political party."

Proponents saw these provisions as strengths—the means to make the government truly representative. The spirit of the provisions were right, and the word "reasonable" was adequate to provide the necessary leeway and prevent legal objections when exact provisions were not achieved in a particular case.

Opponents said that the section would open the government to endless suits and that federal judges would appoint members to the boards and commissions. They also said that the provisions would mean

that many of the able citizens now serving on these boards could not be reappointed as the Section 6-42 requirements were implemented. As with the elected bodies, the government should be able to call on its ablest citizens for service, regardless of any other considerations or characteristics.

4. Status of the Semi-Independent Boards and Commissions. While the charter did not make major changes in the status of these bodies (the Hospital Authority, Housing Authority, Auditorium-Coliseum Authority, etc.), it made all of them subject to an audit by the central government and some of them subject to the consolidated government's personnel and budgeting provisions. Membership on the Housing Authority was increased from five to 15, of whom a third were to be tenants of public housing. For the Hospital Authority, the current requirement that new appointees be made from a list submitted by the Authority was removed.

Most members of the existing boards, commissions, and authorities objected to these changes. Opponents of the charter said that they would make the boards more "political" and discourage able people from serving on them.

Proponents said that the provisions more fully integrated these agencies with the general government, enabling the government to plan and coordinate services and activities better, and helped assure that all elements of government would be more responsive to citizens.

5. Taxation. The financing plan proposed called for some services to be provided county-wide and supported on a county-wide basis. Others could be provided only in urban service districts, or any could be provided at a higher level in urban service districts. To a large degree, the council was empowered to make annual decisions (in the budget) on the services provided and in the distribution of revenues other than those to be secured from the property tax. As a result, no precise projection of the tax impact of consolidation could be made. Consolidation could have been effected with almost no change in taxes for any taxpayer, or, depending upon decisions by the council, with a net tax decrease for taxpayers within the city and a net increase for those outside the city. Bonds issued by Charlotte became county-wide obligations, and subject to county-wide support in some cases.

Proponents said these arrangements permitted fair taxation—each citizen would pay for what he received, no more and no less. Opponents charged that the debt shift was unfair and that big government would bring higher taxes. Citizens in the areas outside the city appeared especially apprehensive about increased taxes.

6. Form of Government. The proposed charter called for a change from the council-manager plan to

a council-mayor-administrator plan. The key changes involved strengthening the role of the mayor and decreasing the role of the manager.

Leaders both for and against the charter supported these provisions and they did not appear to be an issue with the general population. City and county employees, however, strongly objected to the change when it was first announced during the charter-drafting process, and their apprehension about consequences to their jobs and job assignments continued. Before the vote, one observer said that 65 per cent of the county employees and 55 per cent of the city employees would oppose the charter. No direct evidence can be drawn from the returns, but the size of the anticharter vote suggests that his observations may have understated the opposition.

7. **Planning.** The proposed charter significantly strengthened the role of planning, which proponents claimed as a major advantage. Opponents expressly objected to some of the zoning provisions and saw others as giving government too much power.

8. **Partisan Elections.** City elections are now non-partisan and county elections partisan. The charter called for partisan election for the council and non-partisan for the school board (now also nonpartisan), and opposition was minimal.

9. **Economy in Government.** Charter backers said that a single government would produce better planning and better coordination of services, and thus effect real savings in the long run. No immediate savings were claimed. Opponents said that bigness would increase costs rather than reduce them.

10. **Community Unity.** Proponents saw consolidation—one government for one people—as a means to bring the people of the community together, and thus meet the demands of the future better. Opponents said that the representation plans would tend to divide the community.

11. **Charlotte Expansion.** Many citizens, especially those outside the city, appeared to see consolidation as a means for Charlotte to “take over” the county.

12. **Status of the Smaller Towns.** Throughout the work of the Charter Commission, people from the smaller towns indicated their fear of consolidation and sought to preserve the independence of the smaller towns. The charter did not, in fact, reduce the powers of the smaller towns except for a minor limitation on one type of annexation, but apparently the fears were not allayed. The vote outside the city was 9 to 1 against.

13. **Change.** Change itself appeared to be a value for some citizens—positive to some and negative to others. One opponent said that he had been against school consolidation and court reform and he was

surely going to vote against consolidation of the governments.

Many other features of the consolidation plan brought forth some comments from either proponents or opponents during the campaigns, but the issues just listed appear to have been, at close range, the important ones.

The Proponents

The campaign for consolidation was headed by C. C. Cameron, Chairman of the Board of First Union National Bank and a long-time supporter of consolidation. Among the individuals and groups that supported consolidation were the following:

Committee for Fair, Open, Representative Government [FOR] (the committee that headed the campaign for approval)
Mayor Belk of Charlotte and six of the seven City Councilmen
Chairman James Martin and two of the other four members of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners
Four of Mecklenburg's ten members of the General Assembly
Former Charlotte mayors Stan Brookshire and Ben E. Douglas
Executive Committee, Mecklenburg Democratic Party
Executive Board of the Democratic Women's Club of Mecklenburg County
Chairman, Mecklenburg Democratic Party
Charlotte Chamber of Commerce
Charlotte Jaycees
Mecklenburg Jaycees
Charlotte Business and Professional Women's Club
League of Women Voters of Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Presidents of all colleges and universities in the county except Davidson
Interested Citizens Association
The Charlotte Observer
The Charlotte News
Television Station WBT
Radio Station WBT
Radio Station WAYS
Radio Station WIST
National Conference of Christians and Jews
Black Ministers Conference
American Association of University Women
Mecklenburg Young Democrat Club
Charlotte Citizens for Independent Political Action

The Opponents

Allen A. Bailey, a prominent attorney and conservative Democratic leader, headed the opposition forces. Other individuals and groups that joined the campaign against consolidation included the following:

- Committee to Insure Good Government [CIGG] (the committee that headed the campaign against consolidation)
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board
- Mayors of the five active smaller towns
- One member of the General Assembly from Mecklenburg County
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Hospital Authority
- Chairman of the Charlotte Housing Authority
- Two of the five members of the Board of County Commissioners
- Former Charlotte mayor Philip Van Every
Chairman, Mecklenburg County Republican Party
- Mecklenburg Conservatives
- Concerned Parents Association
- Mecklenburg Citizens for Fair Taxation
- Mecklenburg Farm Bureau Federation
- Members of Mecklenburg volunteer fire companies

The Vote

The turn-out for the referendum was moderately heavy, as 57,000 voters (out of 130,000 registered) went to the polls. Voting was especially heavy in the portions of the county outside of Charlotte. Results are indicated in the following table.

	For	Against	Total Vote	% For	% Against
Inside					
Charlotte	14,573	19,203	33,776	43.1	56.9
Outside					
Charlotte	2,740	20,261	23,001	11.9	88.1
Total	17,313	39,464	56,777	30.5	69.5

Preliminary analysis of the voting patterns permits a few observations.

1. Residents of Charlotte gave the charter more support than those outside the city, who represent

only 32 percent of the county's population but provided more than half of the opposition to the charter. Taxation, status of the smaller towns, fear of Charlotte and other factors may have been key issues in the heavy outside vote against.

2. The charter was approved in only 15 of the county's 88 precincts. All of these either were black or had large black minorities. The total number of black votes, however, was relatively small. Blacks contribute just over 25 percent of the county's population, yet one observer estimated that fewer than 4,000 blacks voted. The representation features of the charter appeared to appeal to blacks.

3. The heaviest majorities against the charter were returned in the rural precincts. The vote in one was 1,113 to 36.

4. More affluent precincts gave the charter strong support, but not with majorities.

In short, opposition to the proposed plan was widespread.

The Future

The future of consolidation in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County at this time is uncertain. Immediately after the vote a few leaders from each side of the fight suggested that the charter should be revised and submitted to the people again soon. Others, both for and against, suggested that consolidation must have been an issue and that it might be better to concentrate on further functional consolidations for a few years and then, perhaps, try again to consolidate the governments.

Other areas of North Carolina had been much interested in the consolidation effort of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, and its approval would probably have increased interest in city-county consolidation elsewhere. The defeat of consolidation in Mecklenburg seems likely to make advocates of consolidation in other parts of the state more cautious.

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