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## Description of consolidation process and outcome

In 1994 through 1996 Charlotte and Mecklenburg county undertook a consolidation effort that produced two draft charters but that was cut short when the city council voted against referring the matter to the county's voters.

The effort began in the summer of 1994 when the county and then the city adopted resolutions that set out "Consolidation Principles" and a "Procedure and Schedule for City/County Consolidation." The Principles were an effort by the two governing boards to agree in advance on the fundamental political decisions inherent in any consolidation, leaving the two citizen groups later created to deal with less fundamental matters. Most importantly, the Principles mandated the size and composition of the consolidated governing board, the number of electoral districts and how many of them should have a majority of minority residents, the use of partisan elections, and the role of the mayor. Near the end of the summer the two boards adopted further resolutions establishing the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Charter Drafting Committee, and charged it with drafting a proposed charter for a consolidated city-county government, to be completed by the following summer.

During the ensuing months the Drafting Committee completed its work, but it deviated from the Consolidation Principles in one crucial instance, a deviation that presaged a debate that continued throughout the consolidation effort. The Principles called for an eleven-member governing board, with eight members elected by and from districts and three elected at large. Instead of adhering to this direction, the Drafting Committee initially proposed a governing board that continued to have eleven members, but with six districts, instead of eight, and therefore with five at-large members. When the Drafting Committee's proposed charter went before the two governing boards, the county commissioners voted to send it back to the Committee, to consider an 18-member governing board, with a larger number of district members. The Drafting Committee did reconsider and ultimately voted for such an eighteen-member board – 12 members representing six electoral districts, and 6 members elected at large.

Another issue that became important during the study and drafting process was whether consolidation would save money. The city's and county's budget staff reviewed the two governments' budgets, which together totaled \$1.4 billion, and estimated that merging the governments would allow cost savings of roughly \$ 4 million – less than one-third of one percent of the total. That report weakened support for consolidation among the members of the Drafting Committee, and even though it produced a proposed charter, the Committee in fact voted 6-4 to recommend against consolidation of the governments. When the county commissioners asked the Drafting Committee to revisit the composition of the governing board, it also asked it to include in the charter a mandate for greater savings. In response, the Drafting Committee proposed charter language that would have directed the new government to reduce expenditures by \$4 million a year for each of the first five years of consolidation, for a cumulative total of \$20 million.

Once the Charter Drafting Committee made its final report, the Procedure and Schedule adopted in the summer of 1994 called upon the two governing boards to create a Charter Commission, whose role was to hold public hearings on the Drafting Committee's proposed charter and then make any changes it thought advisable. The Charter Commission, a 25-member body, was duly created and appointed in the fall of 1995, and worked through May of 1996, issuing its own Amended Preliminary Charter in June 1996. The Charter Commission made a number of minor changes in the Drafting Committee's proposal, but the only one of significance was to the size and composition of the consolidated governing board. The Charter Commission reverted to the Drafting Committee's original proposal – an eleven-member governing board with six members elected by and from districts and five members elected at large.

The governing board structure remained the fundamental issue, at least in public, when the Charter Commission's proposed charter was reviewed by the two existing governing boards. The board of county commissioners considered a number of alternative governing board structures and ultimately voted 5-4 to approve the charter and send it to the voters with a proposed governing board of thirteen members, creating eight districts rather than six. This proposal could not gain the approval of a majority of council members, though, nor could any other proposal gain that approval. Ultimately the city council voted 7-4 to end the consolidation effort and not have a referendum.

When local observers reflected on why consolidation did not proceed to a vote in this effort, they emphasized the following points:

- The black community was concerned that any consolidation proposal would weaken minority representation on the governing board and thereby reduce the influence of minorities on local government in Mecklenburg county.
- Several current elected officials were thought to be concerned that there was no clear place for them in the consolidated government. After all, there were 21 current city or county elected officials, and all the consolidated governing board proposals involved fewer officials than 21. It would have been inevitable that some current board members would have had to face each other in a consolidated government election.
- Several consolidation opponents argued that a merged government would simply have been too large to be successfully managed by a group of part-time elected officials. Either the elected officials would have had to become full time, or the government's professional staff would have assumed a larger role in policy-making for the government.
- Opponents also argued that there was no proven need for consolidation, and that the promised \$20 million in savings was a chimera. They pointed out that the draft language included an escape clause, through which the new governing board could avoid the mandated reductions, and they argued that in some ways consolidation could actually increase government costs, as, for example, when the new government equalized compensation and benefit systems among city and county employees.

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