

DURHAM REJECTS CITY/COUNTY CONSOLIDATION

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IN A REFERENDUM held on September 10, 1974, voters in Durham County rejected a proposed plan to consolidate the governments of the City of Durham and Durham County by a margin of more than 2-1.

Interest in city-county consolidation has a long history in Durham. The first major effort came in 1932, when the first consolidated charter for Durham was drafted. That charter never received enough support to reach the referendum stage. Additional efforts and studies were made during the 1940s and '50s, and the 1959 General Assembly created a special commission that drafted a second charter to consolidate the city and county governments. The referendum on this charter, held on January 28, 1961, was rejected in a county-wide vote of 14,355 to 4,115.

The vote on September 10 was the culmination of a third effort that was started in early 1969 by a committee of the Durham Chamber of Commerce. Over the following two years the committee (whose membership was expanded to represent the full community in 1970) made studies of local governmental arrangements in Durham, concluded that consolidation was desirable, and recommended the establishment of another charter commission. The city and county governing bodies endorsed the proposal to create a charter commission and the General Assembly created the Durham City-County Charter Commission in June of 1971.

The Charter Commission's composition was broadly representative of the Durham community. The chairman, E. K. Powe, an attorney and former member of the state legislature, was appointed jointly by the mayor of Durham and the chairman of the board of county commissioners. The other 41 members of the commission were appointed by 18 different agencies and groups: governing bodies, civic organizations, universities, labor and farm groups, and political parties.

After more than two years of work, the commission approved a proposed charter in February of 1974. Two months later, the 1974 General Assembly enacted the charter to become effective in 1975 if approved by the voters in the referendum that was held.

The Proposed Plan. The proposed government, to be known as "The Government of Durham and Durham County," would have had all the powers of both cities and counties in North Carolina. In a legal sense, the City of

Durham would have been abolished and the county government transformed into one with both municipal and county powers.

Both city and county governments now have the council-manager form of government, and the proposed consolidated government would have continued this form.

The chief structural change proposed was in the manner of electing members of the governing board. The five Durham county commissioners are now elected at large, and the twelve city councilmen are all elected at large (as is the mayor), although six councilmen must meet ward residence requirements. The governing body of the proposed government would have been composed of a mayor elected at large and 16 board members elected from single-member districts. The mayor would have been elected to a two-year term and members of the governing board to four-year staggered terms in nonpartisan elections.

The administrative structure would have been left largely to the discretion of the governing board. Various semi-independent boards and commissions were not altered except that a few were enlarged to insure representation from all electoral districts.

The two school systems in the county were to be unaffected, and the powers and duties of the sheriff would have continued unchanged by the charter.

The proposed plan called for the creation of two service districts. Services that would have been provided on a county-wide basis would have been supported from county-wide revenues. The area of the City of Durham would have become an urban service district, and services provided only within that district would have been financed from urban service district taxes and other revenues. In the same fashion, a service that was provided at a higher level within the urban area would have called for proportionately higher support from citizens of the urban area.

The charter also contained provisions (Chapter 9) that would have made illegal in Durham County discrimination by private individuals, firms, and corporations on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations. And in the case of employment, discrimination on the basis of age was also prohibited. In general, the proposed provisions parallel those of existing federal

legislation. Had the charter been adopted, it would have been the first broad antidiscrimination statute adopted within the state.

The Campaign. The pro-consolidation forces were directed by a special committee known as Durham Citizens for One Government under the chairmanship of Floyd Fletcher, a former member of the city council and a retired radio-television executive. The committee was organized in the spring of 1974, but concentrated its efforts in the 90 days before the vote.

Exactly seven weeks before the referendum, on July 23, an organization to oppose the charter was announced. Its chairman was Claude V. Jones, retired city attorney, and it designated itself as the Committee in Opposition to Consolidation As Proposed. The ten members of the committee listed when the announcement was made included representatives of business, civic, and professional groups and members of the Charter Commission.

Both groups used newspaper advertisements extensively and person-to-person and small-group meetings. The proponents organized a speakers bureau and supplied speakers to meetings of neighborhood and civic groups in the weeks before the referendum. The opposition committee's chairman spoke before most of the same groups and in general met almost all of the speaking engagements for the opponents. The local television stations provided news coverage of the activities of each group and arranged debates on the issue by representatives of the two organizations.

Formal endorsement of consolidation came from Durham's mayor, three of the twelve members of the city council, two of the five county commissioners, one state senator, one state representative, the local newspapers, the Junior League, the League of Women Voters, the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, and the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People. Formal opposition was announced by three of the five county commissioners, by eight of the twelve city councilmen, by a number of former local officials, and by the Farm Bureau.

Proponents stressed the need to provide a local government that was more responsible and responsive to all citizens, the greater economy that would result from consolidation, better planning for the needs of citizens and for growth that could come from one government, better planning for the environment, greater equity in extending and financing governmental services, and the end of municipal annexation without representation.

The opposition concentrated on the manner of electing the governing board members. It also claimed that consolidation of the general governments would lead to merger of the school systems. Just three years ago, the voters of the county had decisively defeated a merger of the city school system (largely black) with the county

system (largely white). Durham observers report that a fear of school merger was a factor in the opposition of many voters to governmental consolidation. Opponents also stressed the dangers in the antidiscrimination provisions; the prospect of higher taxes; the inappropriateness of the recall, initiative, and referendum provisions of the charter; and the fact that redistricting would be by a separate commission rather than by the governing board.

The Vote. An analysis of the vote suggests that all of these factors could have been important. It also suggests that despite the fact that the formal opposition characterized itself as being opposed only to the plan proposed rather than to consolidation in general, there was also general opposition to the concept of consolidation. For example, in one rural precinct the vote was 60-1 against. And in eight rural precincts an average of 97 per cent of the voters cast their ballots against consolidation. Such overwhelming opposition suggests general objection to the idea of consolidation as well as objections to specific charter provisions.

Approximately 34 per cent of the 56,800 registered voters participated in the election. Relatively speaking, voter turnout was greater in the rural precincts than in the city precincts. Outside the city, the vote was against consolidation in all 14 precincts. Inside the city, consolidation was defeated in 15 precincts and approved by a majority in 14. The vote was as follows:

	Number			Percentage	
	For	Against	Total	For	Against
Inside City	5,201	6,452	11,653	44.6	55.4
Outside City	997	6,672	7,669	13.0	87.0
County-wide	6,198	13,124	19,322	32.1	67.9

Inside the city, the strongest support for consolidation was returned in the black precincts. Seven of the eight predominantly black precincts approved consolidation. The vote in the five most solidly black precincts was 9-1 in favor of consolidation. Voter turnout was lighter in the black precincts, however, than in any of the other precincts. While blacks represent a third of the county's population, they appear to have cast not more than a fifth of the votes in the consolidation referendum.

The other precincts in the city in which consolidation was approved represent white middle-class and upper middle-class areas.

The Future. Immediately after the vote some Durham officials said that the idea of consolidation had not been killed but probably had been put to rest for several years. They expect that another attempt will not be made until after the city annexes more of the fringe area around it and, perhaps, until after the schools are merged. These two steps are seen as probably necessary before a majority of Durham voters will favor city-county consolidation.