

City-County Consolidation Rejected in New Hanover

Warren Jake Wicker

Voters in Wilmington and New Hanover County rejected the proposed consolidation of the city and county governments in a referendum held on October 6, 1987. A majority vote both by Wilmington voters and by county voters outside the city would have been necessary for approval. While city voters approved the proposed merger, it lost heavily outside the city. The proposition carried in thirteen of nineteen city precincts but lost in seventeen of eighteen outside the city. The final vote was as follows:

	For	Against	Total
Wilmington	5,013 (57%)	3,763 (43%)	8,776 (100%)
Outside Wilmington	2,038 (24%)	6,574 (76%)	8,612 (100%)
Countywide	7,051 (41%)	10,337 (59%)	17,388 (100%)

The October defeat marked the end of the fourth major effort in New Hanover to achieve city-county consolidation.

Past Efforts

In 1933 the General Assembly enacted a detailed plan for combining the city and county governing boards and for creating a single administration for Wilmington and New Hanover County. The two governments would have been continued as separate legal entities in order to maintain separate taxing levels for functions that were performed countywide or only within the city. The proposed governing board would have had seven members: five elected from residents of the city and two elected from county residents outside the city. All seven would have voted on county mat-

ters; but only the five elected from the city would have voted on city matters. A single city-county manager would have headed the administration, and a countywide police department would have been established under the city-county manager and the sheriff. The proposal called for a 10 percent reduction in both units' budgets. The countywide referendum on the plan's adoption, held on March 28, 1933, rejected the plan by a vote of 4,128 (78 percent) to 1,189 (22 percent).

The second formal effort was marked by the April 1947 act of the General Assembly authorizing the creation of a charter commission to study the possible merger of functions or governments in New Hanover County (1947 Session Laws, Chapter 768). The commission's product, if it recommended a consolidated government, was to have been submitted to a referendum. Local opposition stopped the effort, and no proposal was ever produced.

The third effort started in 1969 with a report from the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, urging consolidation of a number of city and county functions and suggesting that full consolidation be considered. The local governments responded in July 1970 by appointing a charter commission of fourteen members, supported by a citizens' review committee of forty-two persons. After more than two years of work, a charter was submitted to the voters in a referendum held on February 27, 1973. A single countywide majority was required for approval. In a moderate turnout, the vote was 4,040 (26 percent) for consolidation and 11,722 (74 percent) against. While coun-

tywide support was only 26 percent, voters inside Wilmington were more favorable—44 percent favored consolidation, compared with only 13 percent outside the city.

The Fourth Attempt

The recent three-year effort got its formal start in June 1984, when the local governments in the county established the New Hanover Governmental Units Consolidation Study Commission, a twenty-nine-member group whose chairman was Karen E. Gottovi, former chairman of the New Hanover Board of County Commissioners. The study commission spent a year examining the functions and organization of the existing governments, the desirability of consolidation, and the political feasibility of attempting to achieve consolidation. In a comprehensive report delivered to the local governing boards in June 1985, the study commission found that consolidation was desirable and recommended that a charter commission be established to draft a charter. The full study commission recommended that the consolidation include the county, Wilmington, and the three beach communities—Wrightsville Beach, Carolina Beach, and Kure Beach. Commission members from the beach communities, however, supported consolidation only for Wilmington and New Hanover.

The county and four municipal governments accepted the report, and the Wilmington and county governments, acting without the beach towns, created a Governmental Consolidation Charter Commission in December 1985.

This commission, headed by Walter L. Baker, a local engineer and civic leader, had fifteen members, none of whom had served on the Gottovi group. It finished its work in November 1986 and presented a proposed charter to the Wilmington City Council and the New Hanover Board of County Commissioners.

The charter proposed by the commission included a detailed organizational structure. The two major areas of controversy in the commission's deliberations involved questions about the composition of the governing board and the arrangements for law enforcement. The commission's proposal called for a mayor and four board members to be elected at large, countywide, and four board members to be elected by districts. On law enforcement, the commission recommended that patrol and investigative functions be placed under a single, countywide metropolitan police, removing these functions from the sheriff.

In January 1987 the board of county commissioners and the city council

created a joint committee of their members to study the charter as submitted. After several months of study and numerous revisions, the charter that went to the referendum was enacted by the General Assembly in July (1987 Session Laws, Chapter 643). This charter called for all board members and the mayor to be elected at large and left law enforcement largely under the police chief, although some change in the language of the charter was made in an attempt to meet the objections of the sheriff.

In other respects, the proposed charter followed the pattern of the 1973 charter in using service districts to match taxation with the extent and level of services. The beach communities would have continued as independent municipalities but with a right to merge with the consolidated government in the future. The proponents stressed that consolidation would result in more economical government, better planning for public facilities, improved management of growth, taxation fairly matched to services received, and the elimination

of municipal annexation without representation.

Why was the charter rejected? Commissioner Fred Retchin, the only official to work actively for the consolidation, told the *Wilmington Star-News* after the vote that fear of higher taxes, the loss of autonomy by the sheriff and the volunteer fire department, and change in general were the chief factors. Tricia Robertson of the *Star-News* speculated that apathy also could have been a factor. Only a few groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, endorsed the proposal, and campaigning for its adoption was limited and late. On the other hand, the opposition was also loosely organized and did not mount an intensive effort to defeat the charter.

After the defeat, officials would not speculate whether and when another effort at consolidation might be made. Wilmington, which had been holding annexation moves in abeyance, was expected to move for additional annexations in the near future.