

New Hanover County Voters Reject City-County Consolidation

In a referendum on February 27, 1973, the voters of New Hanover County, North Carolina, rejected a proposed charter that would have consolidated the governments of City of Wilmington and New Hanover County by a 3-1 margin with a light to moderate turnout (about one-third of the registered voters), the vote was 4,040 (26%) for consolidation and 11,722 (74%) against.

While the vote was a single county-wide one, the results indicate that voters outside the City of Wilmington as a group were much more strongly against consolidation than those inside. Inside the city, 44 per cent of the voters (2,793) favored consolidation and 56% (3,576) opposed. Outside Wilmington, only 13% (1,247) voted for consolidation while 87 per cent (8,146) voted against.

Of the county's 25 precincts, only three returned margins for consolidation—all within the City of Wilmington. One of these precincts favored consolidation by a 4-1 margin. The other 11 of Wilmington's 14 precincts voted against consolidation with margins as great as 4-1.

All outside precincts reported returns against consolidation with margins varying from 2-1 to 24-1 against.

Not only did more citizens outside the city oppose consolidation, but proportionally more of them voted. Approximately 44 per cent

of the county's 82,996 citizens live outside the city. In the referendum, 60 per cent of the votes cast were from this portion of the county's population.

The Issues

The chief issues and arguments in the consolidation effort were similar to those that have arisen in consolidation attempts elsewhere in the United States. Those favoring consolidation stressed the unity of the total community, the better planning that consolidation would bring, greater efficiency in governmental operations, and better representation for all segments of the community on the proposed governing board. Those opposed stressed the likelihood of higher taxes, the loss of power and responsibility by the volunteer fire companies and the sheriff, the troubles of the city that would be spread county-wide, and the shift to two-year terms for members of the proposed governing board. (Currently, city and county board members are elected to four-year, staggered terms.)

Proponents and Opponents

A spirited campaign both for and against consolidation was waged in the weeks immediately before the referendum. Each side

advertised widely in the newspapers, and the opponents especially used billboards and handbills extensively. Informational meetings were sponsored by the League of Women Voters and other civic groups.

The pro forces were generally led by the Citizens for Consolidation, headed by W. G. Broadfoot, a business and civic leader. Opposition leadership was generally focused in the Truth About Consolidation Committee, in which several county officials and community leaders played prominent roles. Outside the committee structures, several members of the Charter Commission worked for consolidation, and members of the volunteer fire departments and the sheriff's office were strong in opposition.

Members of the city council, the chamber of commerce, and the largest local newspaper favored consolidation. Members of the board of county commissioners, the rural volunteer fire departments, the sheriff, the local black newspaper, and conservative political groups opposed consolidation.

There appeared to be no significant division along party lines. Leaders in both major parties were among the leaders of both pro and anti forces. Nor were racial alignments important. The three predominantly black precincts in the city voted against consolidation by over a 2-1 margin—

almost as strongly against as the county-wide total.

Local news stories after the referendum quoted the chairman of the Republican Party as saying that the sheriff's department and the volunteer fire departments were the most influential political bodies in the county and were major contributors to the defeat of the consolidation effort.

The Consolidation Effort

The February defeat climaxed four years of work. In early 1969 a committee of the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce studied local government in New Hanover and recommended functional consolidation for a number of city and county activities and suggested that a special commission be created to give further study to total governmental consolidation. Ten months later, in July of 1970, the city and county governing boards responded by creating the Wilmington-New Hanover Charter Commission. Between July of 1970 and June of 1972 the Charter Commission undertook extensive studies of the governments. Some 45 reports on various aspects of the governments were produced, as well as the proposed charter and the report of the Commission that commended its work to the citizens of the county.*

The chairman of the Charter Commission, Fred B. Graham, a retired banker and civic leader, was appointed jointly by the Wilmington and New Hanover County governing boards. These boards also appointed four persons jointly, and each appointed five others. The governing boards of the three beach municipalities—Carolina Beach, Kure Beach, and Wrightsville Beach—also appointed two members each. In addition, a Citizens Review Committee of 42 persons, also named by the various

governing boards, was created to aid in the studies, to comment on proposals of the Commission, and to provide a broader representation of the entire community in the study process. Timothy Wood, previously director of the joint city-county planning department, served as executive director for Commission's work. The Institute of Government of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill served as consultant for the Commission and prepared drafts of the charter under the Commission's direction.

The Plan in Brief

By early 1971, the Commission concluded that the chances of approval of its efforts would be enhanced if the plan for consolidation simply merged the two major governments in the county—Wilmington and New Hanover County—with as few changes in existing practices and policies as possible with consolidation. Thus the basic form of the proposed government was the council-manager arrangement—now used by both Wilmington and New Hanover County. Present board members are elected at large, and the proposed plan called for at-large elections of consolidated board members. As noted above, the Commission did make a change in the terms of office—from two boards with five members each elected for four-year staggered terms to a nine-member board elected for terms of two years. The proposed mayor was to be elected at large, in contrast to the current practice in which the mayor of Wilmington and the chairman of the New Hanover Board of Commissioners are elected from among the members of the respective boards.

The sheriff, the register of deeds, and the members of the board of education are now elected at large and would have continued to be so elected under the proposed plan.

The manager was to be appointed by the governing board

and would have exercised all the typical powers and responsibilities of a manager. Following current practices in the county and city governments, the tax supervisor, tax collector, attorney, clerk, and police and fire chiefs would have been appointed by the board. All other administrative personnel of the general government would have been appointed by the manager directly or, for fire and police personnel, subject to civil service regulations.

In general, the various boards and commissions (planning, airport, redevelopment, etc.) were continued with only minor conforming changes in their structures.

The use of an urban service district (Wilmington, at first) in which extra services or higher levels of services would be provided and extra taxes levied was proposed. The governing board was to be given broad discretion in deciding upon services and in allotting nontax revenues of the government. As a result, no definite shift in tax impact was projected. The Commission stressed that the plan would enable the governing board to provide for a fair and equitable system of financing services and did not mandate any specific shift in financial responsibility.

Under the proposed plan the three beach municipalities were to continue unaffected and were not to be consolidated. They were, however, to be able to merge into the consolidated government (and become urban service districts) at a later time if their citizens voted to do so.

The Future

Active interest in city-county consolidation has been present in New Hanover County for over 40 years. Leaders of the recent effort do not expect the interest to wane and several have suggested that renewed efforts toward consolidation are likely in the years ahead.

—Jake Wicker

*The Commission's report is entitled *Preparing for Tomorrow*. The final draft of *A Proposed Charter for the Consolidated Government of Wilmington and New Hanover County* is dated March 31, 1972 (as amended on June 20, 1972). A few copies of each are available through the City of Wilmington and the Institute of Government.