



Consolidated Government in Indianapolis and Marion County  
Some reasons and results  
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Consolidated government for Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana, was enacted by the Indiana General Assembly in 1969.

Comments and perspective below reflect my active participation as Indianapolis Senior Deputy Mayor and Executive Director of the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee during the period before and after "Unigov" was adopted.

General Commentary

Local government consolidation of any kind in the U.S. is one of the most difficult challenges facing municipal leadership.

It has both political and emotional aspects and features highly sensitive "turf" problems among political and disciplinary entities. Examples are numerous. Smaller units of government are highly suspicious even of proposals to coordinate service efforts, let alone actual consolidation of programs under metropolitan or county-wide systems. Public Health administrators feel competition and alienation from Recreation and Public Works people, and vice versa. Police and fire programs are usually empires unto themselves.

It is a tough job and cannot be seriously considered without significant commitment and leadership from the political, civic and business leadership within the community.

Almost all efforts to promote consolidation around the country have failed. The Indianapolis experience, sparked by similar undertakings in Nashville, Tennessee, and Jacksonville, Florida, did not inspire other consolidations in Indiana. This, despite the obvious success in strengthening development efforts in Indiana's capital city.

Why Did it Happen in Indianapolis?

Some of the ingredients which led to the consolidation of parts of county and city governments in Marion County include the following:

1. An effective Mayor, Richard Lugar, who was fully committed to the consolidation effort. Strong support from the majority in the City Council.
2. An effective county leader, Beurt SerVaas, then President of the County Council, who was equally committed.

3. Local legislative representatives willing to carry the ball in the General Assembly. And the legislation carried no financial commitments from the state.

4. A Governor of the same political party as the Mayor who was willing to give support to the effort.

5. Civic group support, including the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, League of Women Voters, service clubs, neighborhood associations and the political party of the Mayor.

The only outspoken local opposition came from the opposing political party, county commissioners, suburban legislators and the Black Panther organization.

6. A willingness to compromise on key parts of the proposal. As an example, smaller communities were allowed to remain, with their own governments, in addition to participating in the consolidated government.

7. Active and effective volunteer help by local lawyers who were inspired by the Mayor's leadership.

8. A promise of no tax increases, made possible by the fact that no new taxing districts were proposed. They were already in existence through previous actions by the General Assembly (i.e., Metropolitan Parks, Sanitation, Health and Hospital, Metropolitan Planning, etc.). Existing taxing authority was simply transferred to the consolidated city.

9. General media support, including many small community newspapers, and speeches by proponents to audiences around the county totalling almost 50,000 persons.

10. Luncheon meetings hosted by Mayor Lugar with many members of the General Assembly, including all of the legislative leaders in both parties.

11. The statesmanship of Dr. Otis Bowen, then Speaker of the Indiana House of Representatives, who handed down the legislation for House vote despite the preponderance of telephone contacts opposing the proposal which resulted from local Democratic efforts to scuttle the bill in addition to suburban Republican opposition. (Dr. Bowen later served two terms as Governor of Indiana and is now U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.)

12. Avoidance of a public referendum. While a plebiscite on the issue might have been successful, we argued effectively that referenda in Indiana are not binding on legislators and that local governments, under the state constitution, were creatures of the state. Later legislation provided more home rule but, in 1970, all such action had to be taken by the legislature.

Results

What are the major accomplishments of the Indianapolis reform effort?

Structurally, they include the following:

1. Elimination of the county commissioners as a frequently disruptive administrative element in local government.
2. Consolidation of all road-building and maintenance into a single department (Transportation).
3. Consolidation of all planning, zoning and housing functions into a single department (Development).
4. Creation of a single business administration for most city-county functions. (Department of Administration).
5. Creation of a local legislative body responsible for policy and budgeting for all city-county units including county officials still outside the Unigov structure.
6. Improvement of the ability of the Mayor to administer governmental functions through a strong "cabinet" relationship.

Psychologically, the action has created the perception and reality of a strong, united community, led by a Mayor who can literally speak for that community in all competitive relationships.

Does it cost less? No, and we never said it would.

Is it more efficient? Probably!

Is it more effective? Immeasurably!