

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

(A CONSOLIDATED CITY/COUNTY GOVERNMENT)



CITY OF COLUMBUS 1828

COUNTY OF MUSCOGEE 1825

Consolidation January 1, 1971

*The information contained in this booklet on
the consolidation of the city and county governments of
Columbus, Georgia, was gathered and prepared by the Office
of the City Manager of the new government in 1974.*

O R G A N I Z A T I O N A L

S T R U C T U R E

Appointed by the Mayor:

The Mayor makes a nomination to the Council for an individual to fill the following positions under his/her direct supervision. Employment of the individual requires the confirmation of the Council. Removal of an individual from one of these positions also requires that the Mayor make the recommendation to the Council and the Council must concur by a majority vote before removal can take place:

CITY MANAGER

CITY ATTORNEY

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Public Safety:

The Director of Public Safety has under his immediate supervision the following departments:

POLICE DEPARTMENT

FIRE DEPARTMENT

CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTE

EMERGENCY AMBULANCE SERVICE

CITY MANAGER:

The remainder of the government operations not covered previously, fall under the supervision of the City Manager. These offices, departments, divisions of departments, etc., are as follows:

DEPARTMENT

DIVISIONS UNDER DEPARTMENT

Administration

Budget
Data Processing
Personnel
 Property Insurance
 Bonds
 Employee Benefits
Central Services
 Vehicle Maintenance
Human Services

Finance

Revenue Collection
 Business Licenses
Accounting
Treasury
Purchasing

Community Development

Inspection & Code Enforcement
Planning

Engineering

Traffic Engineer
Highway Coordinator

Public Works

Street Cleaning & Maintenance
Sanitation
Environmental Development
Cemeteries
Paving
Sewers

Parks & Recreation

*Golf Courses
Auditorium
Parks & Marina
Swimming Pools
Tennis Courts
Playgrounds & Centers
Senior Citizens*

Property Appraisers

Civil Defense

Transportation

Internal Auditor

*Coordinator of Intergovernmental
Assistance*

Affirmative Action Officer

*Government Center Operations
(Building Superintendent)*

THE NEW GOVERNMENT RECEIVES A NEW HOME

Occupying an entire city block is the structure which houses the consolidated city/county governments. The structure was officially named the GOVERNMENT CENTER.

The Government Center is located on the same grounds where the building was located, that housed the old city and county governments.

The main tower of the Government Center has 14 floors. There are two wings to the Government Center and each has 3 floors. Underground parking is available with there being three levels of parking.

The main tower was built from Revenue Certificates. The wings were from a 1967 Issue of General Obligation Bonds.

Construction of the Government Center commenced in March of 1970. The tower was completed and offices in the old courthouse were relocated into the new building. The old courthouse was then torn down and the construction of the two wings commenced. Final construction was completed in 1974.

The Government Center complex cost is estimated to be around \$11,000,000.00.

BACKGROUND

Geography and economics were the underlying reasons for a change in the governments of Columbus and Muscogee County.

The city of Columbus, located on Georgia's western border, is the center of a metropolitan area of approximately 238,500; including the military personnel and dependents at Fort Benning, Georgia; residents of Chattahoochee County, Georgia; and, of Phenix City and Russell County, Alabama, on the west bank of the Chattahoochee River.

Columbus, hemmed in on the west by Alabama and on the south and east by the military reservation, was forced to grow by frequently annexing land along its northeast perimeter as its population spilled over into Muscogee County.

Between 1950 and 1970, the population of Columbus grew from 79,611 to 154,168. During this period, the city's geographical area was expanded twice by annexation. In 1960, annexation took the city from 12.6 to 26.6 square miles. In 1969, another 42.5 square miles, containing an estimated 52,000 people, came into the city through annexation. This last move left approximately 3,500 non-military people in Muscogee County beyond the city limits.

Although much of the county land beyond the 1969 city limits is undeveloped, Muscogee is essentially metropolitan. Most citizens who live in the outlying areas work in Columbus or depend on the city for their livelihood.

Citizens were faced with two governments, providing duplicated services and the city residents were paying taxes to the county as well as the city.

OBJECTIVES

To bring together two governments providing similar services in overlapping geographical areas into one streamlined, more efficient, economical, and responsive government.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Double Government: Double Taxation

The governing body of Muscogee County, known originally as the Board of Commissioners of Roads and Revenues, was established as an arm of the Georgia General Assembly in 1825. Its main functions were construction and maintenance of a county road system, and the levying of taxes for the upkeep of roads and operation of schools.

Columbus was incorporated in 1828. Gradually, as the city grew and its population spilled over, the county began providing a variety of municipal services in response to demand. County citizens lived on streets paved by county forces. County trash and garbage collections were on the same semi-weekly basis as the city's collections.

The county government had its own administrator, attorney, engineering department, building inspection department, police force, and fire department.

The city was governed by a board of five commissioners who elected one from their ranks as mayor. It operated similar service departments as the county and joined with it in making annual appropriations for the Muscogee County Health Department and the community general hospital.

County taxes were collected by the Muscogee County tax commissioner (a constitutional officer of the State of Georgia) while

the county had its own board of tax assessors. Taxes were levied countywide; property owners within the city paid the same 10-mill county tax as those outside.

City property owners paid the 10-mill county tax and a 17-mill city tax, based on values established by a separate city board of assessors and collected by a separate city tax office.

Under this system, city taxpayers complained of double taxation. County property owners contended they were taxed for roads and medical services used predominantly by city people.

City/county differences were echoed and amplified by the two commissions. Elected officials in the two governments disagreed over major and minor issues. They forwarded separate requests to state officials, who were never certain which government spoke for the people. They compiled separate requests for state legislation and sent them to a delegation that many times resolved the conflict by disregarding both.

Georgia law concerning city and county government is fairly representative of state laws in the United States. Power to effect change is generally at the state level, with the ultimate vehicle being a constitutional amendment. In addition, the General Assembly enacts general laws relating to an issue statewide; "population" statutes, which are general laws for certain population categories; and laws affecting one locality (which can be overturned by city ordinance).

Most major Georgia cities operate under a charter which specifies the area's boundaries, type of government and establishes the organization of the city. A charter can be amended by a city council with the approval of the people or by petition from the people. A city can pass ordinances which are the equivalent of the general laws of the state.

As in most other states, Georgia cities exist and operate within counties. Each city's land area is also within and taxed by a county.

Counties are creatures of the state constitution. They operate under the general laws of the state and rarely are incorporated. The majority of Georgia's 159 counties are run by from one to nine commissioners. Counties may pass certain local laws dealing with the services role assumed by the county.

The Columbus/Muscogee area, with two local governments asking for different laws from the legislature, was hindered by its double governments. The Columbus Chamber of Commerce, interested in a united community leadership, especially in dealing with industrial prospects or desirable legislative proposals, frequently served as the centralizing force to bring the two differing government bodies together.

EARLY ACTION TOWARD CONSOLIDATION

The move toward consolidation was a gradual process, evolving over a period of two decades.

In 1940, the health departments were merged into one countywide department. In 1950, the school systems were consolidated. In both cases, the outcome was highly successful, and the school system, in particular, was repeatedly used as an example of the community-wide benefits that could be realized through merger.

Throughout the decade of the 1950's, local leaders, reacting to the public dissatisfaction over too much bureaucracy, debated the possibility of merging city and county departments that provided similar services.

In early 1961, a former chamber president, James W. Woodruff, Jr., while serving on a Muscogee County Grand Jury, took the lead in persuading that body to recommend that the commissions explore the possibility of consolidation.

A joint city-county Consolidation Study Committee was created with the city's manager and attorney, county's clerk and attorney, and two private citizens, one from the chamber, as members.

CITIZENS COMMITTEE

From this committee came a proposal that a Citizens Committee be appointed to investigate the subject thoroughly and submit a recommendation to the two governing bodies.

Both commissions agreed, and in June 1961, a 21 member Citizens Committee on Consolidation was appointed.

From the beginning, the Committee was plagued by controversy and dissention - first over the appointment of members, then over its mission and how to go about it, and finally, over differences within the committee itself. Commissioners burdened the Committee with irrelevant matters in view of their mission, such as hazardous railroad crossings.

But, by late 1961, the Committee presented its recommendation that the city and county commissions be abolished and a new single commission, composed of six commissioners and an elected mayor be created. Although the recommendation was not unanimous, it was given to the two governing bodies who forwarded it to the legislative delegation. Enabling legislation was approved by the Georgia General Assembly in early 1962.

DEFEAT

Meanwhile, strong opposition was developing to the plan, and those against consolidation began a campaign to defeat it. Consolidation was denounced as a "communist conspiracy" and a "metro-Castro" government.

A referendum was called in 1962 on consolidation of the two governmental entities. It failed in both city and countywide elections. The city vote was 6,032 to 5,563 against passage. The countywide vote (which included the second vote of Columbus residents) was 9,102 to 6,612 against consolidation. (City residents, who were naturally entitled to vote in a city election, were equally eligible to vote in an election affecting a countywide government to which they paid taxes.)

Despite this defeat of the total effort, one idea from the Citizens Committee did win acceptance. The city successfully sought legislative approval to expand its government to six commissioners and a full time elected mayor. This was submitted in the form of a state constitutional amendment and was accepted by the voters. The larger commission and first elected mayor took office in 1965.

PROGRAM ACTION

The Second Attempt

Early 1966 renewed interest in consolidation and the first in a series of slow steps toward success.

The Columbus City Commission proposed that a constitutional amendment be sought to allow voters to consolidate the two commissions into one body that would govern both city and county.

The County Commission objected and voted unanimously to ask the legislative delegation NOT to introduce the measure sought by the city. Instead, the county suggested two constitutional amendments - one

permitting a merger of city and county boards of tax assessors, the other permitting merger of city and county departments and boards.

All three constitutional amendments were introduced by the legislative delegation and in November 1966 were approved by the voters by a two-to-one margin.

However, all three amendments were permissive, not mandatory, and none was put into effect. The vote did serve, though, as an indication of the positive attitude of the voters toward some form of consolidation.

CONSOLIDATION STUDY COMMITTEE

In 1967, the Columbus City Commission again suggested that a committee be created to approach the question and, with the county government's concurrence, a Consolidation Study Committee was appointed. County leaders changed their attitude, in part, because of wide and favorable press coverage of consolidation in Nashville and Jacksonville. The new committee was instructed to make in-depth studies of consolidation attempts in other cities, but to keep its recommendations within the bounds of the three constitutional amendments that had been approved the preceding November.

Between February and August 1967, the Committee heard speakers from communities which were considering or had consolidation. It talked with state officials, attorneys and consultants. Any expenses that accrued were taken care of by members out of their own pockets.

The committee suggested that a charter commission, with power granted by the General Assembly, be created to draft a charter for a new government.

The chamber, which had gone on record backing formation of the study committee, joined in its recommendation for a charter commission and assigned staff to work for passage of the constitutional amendment authorizing creation of the commission.

THE MUSCOGEE COUNTY CHARTER COMMISSION

In November 1968, the voters approved creation of the Commission by a vote of 15,140 to 3,817.

The constitutional amendment creating this body specified that no changes could be made by it in the state courts, the Sheriff's office or the school district. Bibb City, an independent government with a population of 812, located within the county, would not be affected. In this way, legislators avoided the possibility that a negative vote in Bibb City would undercut all other efforts.

The amendment also provided that the Commission, upon completion of its work, would submit its proposed charter directly to the people of Columbus and of Muscogee County. It would not be routed through the city and county commissions where as few as three votes could spell defeat.

In early 1969, the General Assembly adopted the enabling legislation and the bill was signed into law that April.

Another important measure approved by the General Assembly in its 1969 session permitted a vote on annexation in Columbus and Muscogee County. Although consolidation was the primary goal, annexation of 42.5 square miles, containing an estimated 52,000 people, was desired by the city government as a step toward consolidation and as a necessity if the metropolitan population of Columbus was to be

reflected in the 1970 census, upon which state and federal grants would be based.

Almost immediately after both bills were signed, movement began to put them into effect.

Each government appointed seven members to the Commission whom they thought best qualified to serve, with no concerted attempt to have a cross-section of the community represented. The appointees, in turn, chose the 15th member.

The commission was composed of a college president, four attorneys, a contractor, a former city commissioner, a state government employee and seven businessmen.

Dr. Thomas Y. Whitley, President of Columbus College, was elected chairman at the first meeting, at which time the members also set a target date of April 1, 1970, for completion of the charter.

In July, the Commission employed Public Research and Management, Inc., of Atlanta, as consultant at a fee of \$18,000.00. City and county commissions agreed to finance this and other expenses up to \$26,500 or more, if necessary.

The Commission met frequently through the summer and, by the first week of September, had agreed on a mayor-council-city manager form of government.

Public input and criticism was sought at every meeting and each step was reported in the press.

The first of four public hearings was held in October, with 200 persons attending. At this meeting, a black community leader remarked that although blacks made up a third of Columbus' population, not one was on the Commission. Since the constitutional amendment and enabling legislation had provided specifically for appointment of 15

members, city and county commissions were unable to completely correct what was acknowledged to be an unfortunate omission. However, the two bodies appointed four black advisory non-voting members, who were asked to participate fully in every phase of the charter drafting.

These appointees - a state legislator, an optometrist, an insurance company executive and a retired USO director - represented solid community leadership, and were influential in charter acceptance by black voters.

CREATING A NEW GOVERNMENT

The Charter Commission never lost sight of its ultimate goal of delivering a new government to the people, despite numerous problems.

The Commission was concerned with handling the transition from the old to the new government. It wanted a council of eight to twelve members, but was concerned that unless it was large enough to accommodate all incumbents who might wish to serve in the new government, opposition would arise as a matter of job preservation. Eventually, three of the twelve incumbents indicated they would not seek office again and the commission settled on a ten member council.

It also debated whether to carry over those commissioners whose terms would not have expired at the end of 1970. Their negative decision was made easier by the declaration by the mayor and four commissioners that they would gladly sacrifice the last two years of their terms of office to help assure acceptance of the charter.

Of special interest to the commission was the issue of at-large versus district posts on the council, and how to create districts so as to assure maximum opportunity for at least one black candidate to win election in the new government.

The Commission decided it would not be wise to create a council having a majority of district posts, because of the possibility of ward politics becoming dominant.

The result was a council of six at-large posts and four district posts with the districts having close to equal population. District boundaries, which can be redefined as the population changes, were established with the approval of the Justice Department.

A particularly difficult problem the Commission was unable to solve was a procedure for amending the charter quickly, especially in the event of any challenge during the transition period. Ultimately, it included three methods for amending the document, all requiring time. The legislature, as before, would be able to amend it; the other two required a referendum.

Attendance at the four public hearings was promoted widely by the news media, the chamber and the commission, which emphasized its open-door policy and wish for citizen participation.

The final public hearing was held on March 19, at which the virtually completed document was presented. The Judge of Muscogee County Ordinary Court received the completed charter on April 1, and called for a referendum on May 27, 1970.

CHARTER STEERING COMMITTEE

During the summer of 1969, Charles Crowder, then Executive Director of the Columbus Chamber, began attending all meetings of the commission, at the request of the chairman and began preparations for the chamber's role of winning acceptance for the charter.

The Chamber formed a volunteer Charter Steering Committee to promote voter acceptance, headed by a former chamber president and, avoiding past errors, made up a 24 well-known black and white residents.

Since tax funds could not be used to promote the charter, the Steering Committee, with the help of the chamber, raised \$12,000 from the business and professional community for its work. When this money was gone, the chamber provided an additional \$7,000 from its regular budget to finance the efforts.

For two months, the Chamber's public affairs director and a secretary worked full time with the Committee to assure an affirmative vote. An office was opened in the downtown district with the public affairs director as coordinator. The complete voters list was analyzed by computer to assist in determining citizens' attitudes. Several thousand brochures were mailed and distributed through banks and businesses.

Public endorsement of consolidation and the charter was obtained by the Steering Committee from the City Commissioners, from all but one of the County Commissioners, from all area state legislators, and community leadership groups.

Programs on consolidation were arranged for clubs and organizations by the Steering Committee's speakers bureau. The Committee also secured endorsements from a cross section of citizens for a special newspaper supplement, and sponsored television specials on consolidations.

MEDIA SUPPORT

Columbus' news media, which had given the work of the Charter Commission saturation coverage during the year spent drafting the charter, gave consolidation increased attention in the weeks prior to the referendum.

Both television stations presented special panel and question-and-answer programs, and radio stations carried news reports and public service spots.

The newspapers ran analytical articles on the issue and in the final two months gave front page space daily to consolidation questions and answers. It was supported editorially by both newspapers and by television and radio stations.

On May 3, the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer published, as a public service, the full text of the charter in a special supplement, in order that every citizen would have access to the entire document before voting.

FINAL PASSAGE

The combination of close to unanimous support from elected officials and the business and civic leadership created a bandwagon surge for passage.

Mayor J. R. Allen, who was later to win election as the mayor of the consolidated government, was a vigorous champion of consolidation. He campaigned tirelessly, urging citizens to exchange their "two-headed monster" for a modern government.

No effective campaign was organized against consolidation, but to offset the possibility of defeat due to apathetic voters not going

FUNCTIONS

Some 44 functions and services of the old governments have been consolidated into nine departments: legal; administrative; finance; elections; public safety; public works; engineering; community development; and parks and recreation.

In the first eleven months of existence, there was little evidence of change in the functions of government. Services essentially were the same although there has been reorganization of the service departments.

All permanent city and county employees automatically became permanent employees of the new government's merit system. They did not have to take any examinations and were guaranteed all previous employee rights and retirement benefits. As far as possible, the new government has tried to assign employees to positions similar to those they held under the county or city government. Personnel will be reduced gradually through retirements and resignations.

Reorganization of law enforcement agencies actually started prior to consolidation when the former county government placed its police force under the Muscogee County sheriff, who was not affected by consolidation. County commissioners were opposed to consolidating all police forces into one agency but the sheriff subsequently suggested that all police patrol units be under the new police department. The sheriff's department still retains a criminal investigative unit that is totally separate from the Columbus Police Department.

Yet to be funded is a division of environmental improvement. Three council members appointed as a committee to draft the first year budget recommended that this division be established with the part-time services of personnel from the Department of Community Development.

The most apparent change for citizens has been a single tax bill for the ad valorem levy due the government and the school district.

In former years, property owners within the city received two bills - one for the early part of the year from the city, and a second in the fall for county and school taxes.

To lessen the burden of one large payment, citizens were given the option of paying 40 percent of the total bill by August 15, and the remaining 60 percent during a second collection period from October 1 through November 15.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Numerous reasons are given for the success of consolidation:

- Muscogee was a relatively small county, with only two municipalities. There were not many diverse centers of political interest with which to deal.
- The political climate was favorable. Some form of consolidation or merger had been discussed over a period of twenty years. Failure in 1962 revealed the necessity of avoiding haste, of painstaking study, and of seeking unanimity at each step toward consolidation. The successful mergers of the health departments and the school districts showed what could be achieved.
- The competition between governments for the decreasing tax dollar was a definite factor in keeping the issue before government leaders.
- Many preliminary votes provided a test of voter attitudes before the final referendum. Citizens had

time to explore both sides of the issues and each success helped set the stage for a positive attitude toward consolidation.

- The Charter Commission did its work entirely in the open. All meetings were held in the public meeting chamber of the county government and were reported in detail by the news media. Citizens were urged to contribute ideas, which were incorporated into the text, and they came to look upon the charter as their creation.
- The public hearings, held at four scattered high schools, were used to bring the people and the charter together. Almost all strong opposition was defused before the charter was completed. Controversial points were brought up early and fully discussed. Critics were invited to express opposition openly and to recommend alternatives - resulting in several changes in the draft.
- The Commission approached its task with a spirit of give and take. Members debated and fought over key points but did not lose sight of their ultimate goal - to draft a charter that would be accepted by the voters. Although the ideal was sought, members agreed it would be better to have an imperfect charter that could be amended, rather than a flawless document rejected by the people.
- Elected officials supported the charter. Opposition from some commissioners was overcome with the decision to set the council size at 10 members, which was close to a guarantee to incumbents that they would not have to compete with each other.

- City and County personnel supported it. All employees were assured of positions in the new government at no reduction in salary or loss of benefits.
- The method of voting was decisive. One election was held in the city; the other was countywide, including Columbus voters. The countywide registration was 52,788 - of these, 51,354 who resided in Columbus were also eligible to vote in the city election. Had there been separate elections, for the city and those outside the city, consolidation would have been defeated by those outside.
- The news media conveyed to the public the importance of changing their governments and put the consolidation story in perspective by presenting volumes of factual information.
- The Charter Steering Committee waged an effective campaign, expending tremendous energy and painstaking care in presenting the charter to civic groups and organizations.