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"A man's judgment is no better than his information"

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COUNTY - CITY CONSOLIDATION

Over the past several years, the issue of county-city consolidation has been repeatedly injected into public discussion. The question of whether county and city governments should be combined into a single unit has been raised not only in Lancaster County but also in numerous other metropolitan areas across the country. As of recent years, four such areas (Baton Rouge, Nashville, Jacksonville, and Indianapolis) have acted to implement thorough-going merger plans.

Why has there been such an upsurge of interest in metropolitan consolidation and reorganization? Three basic concerns appear to lie at the heart of consolidation proposals:

- (1) A dissatisfaction with county governments and a desire to reorganize them. County structures, it is asserted, are at odds with current thinking in political and administrative organization--thinking which has long since been applied to municipal structures.
- (2) A questioning of the need for maintaining two separate tiers of local government in an urban area. Critics claim that overlapping jurisdictions fragment political decision-making and result in administrative inefficiencies.
- (3) A feeling that present municipal boundaries are too restrictive and a desire to conduct local government on a metropolitan basis. Some municipal functions, it is said, should be performed over an area larger than the municipality itself. Foremost among these are zoning, health, and airpollution control.

While these concerns have stimulated discussion, they have by no means dictated a final solution. Discussions here in Lancaster County, as well as recent legislative proposals, have mentioned two basic types of consolidation plans. The first type is complete political and administrative consolidation; that is, the merger of the two units of government into a single unit. Sometimes referred to as "metropolitan" government, it follows the pattern adopted by the four cities mentioned above. The second type of consolidation consists in the merger of county and city administrative departments while leaving the separate political status of each unit intact. Generally referred to as functional consolidation, it has already been accomplished in several functional areas in Lancaster County, and is being urged by some people for additional departments. A City Council motion of last February addressed itself to this particular question.

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Debate over these two types of consolidation has been going on for some time now and will most certainly continue. For the purpose of contributing to public discussion, this and a subsequent Bulletin will survey the advantages and disadvantages associated with these two types of consolidation proposals.

PART ONE: POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONSOLIDATION

Complete political and administrative consolidation, as implemented in four American cities and envisioned in recent Nebraska legislative proposals (LB-1137, this past session), consists in the merger of county and city units into a single metropolitan government.* All these plans have provided for the structuring of the new unit along modern organizational lines: namely, the "strong mayor - council" pattern which has been used extensively in municipal government. Consolidation plans thus contain three basic features which sharply distinguish them from the present governmental arrangement for Lincoln and Lancaster County. These features are: (1) the separation of administrative functions from policy-making functions, (2) the centralization of policy-making authority into a single body, and (3) a unified administrative structure under a single chief executive. Since each feature presents a contrast to the current system of county, city, and joint county-city units, we are in a position to evaluate its advantages and disadvantages relative to the prevailing arrangement.

1. Separation of Administrative Functions from Policy-Making Functions

The first feature of consolidation and reorganization plans is the separation of administrative and policy-making functions by placing them with different sets of officials. While such a separation of functions prevails in Lincoln city government, it presently does not in county government. Often referred to as "taking politics out of administration," this arrangement results in the appointment of all administrative officials and the popular election of policy-making officials. Appointed administrators are formally subordinate to the elected policy-makers and are given the duty of implementing the latter's decisions. The chief executive is usually popularly elected and in practice is the only official to straddle both administrative and political functions.

ADVANTAGES

(A) Promotes Professionalism. A principal advantage of separating administrative from political functions is in helping to recruit personnel best suited for the respective tasks and providing them with optimum working conditions. Administrative functions tend to be handled more effectively by persons who are not also involved in the policy-making process; and the same thing can be said of policy-making functions. They are two different tasks which require different types of skills. Administrative duties entail highly specialized knowledge of particular fields and frequently involve formal professional training. Persons who are best suited for these positions tend to be more readily attracted to government by appointment than by election. Policy-makers, on the other hand, ideally are not specialists but generalists. Such officials should be more oriented toward an overall picture of governmental activities and to the public they serve rather than toward technical details. For this reason, policy-making officials are probably best recruited through the electoral process.

*The resulting metropolitan unit is not considered a municipality. Under most plans, rural areas and incorporated areas continue to receive different levels of services and bear different tax burdens, as they did prior to consolidation. Further, rural villages have been permitted to retain their independent status.

(B) Centralized Control Difficult to Maintain. Even when governmental units are structured to provide for centralized administrative control, they usually do not achieve it to the degree intended. This is because appointed administrators tend to escape effective control by elected officials for the same reason that they come to acquire policy-making power. Since appointed administrators possess highly specialized skills, the chief executive and his staff must constantly rely on them for information and advice, and must defer to their judgment in many technical matters. Thus, it is difficult for an executive to maintain control over personnel whom he must rely upon for so much. Further, lacking the administrator's specialized knowledge, a chief executive is not in a position to fully evaluate his subordinates' work. These limitations on a chief executive's power are in contrast to the situations which prevail in most other types of organizations, especially in business enterprises. In the latter, chief executives usually attain their positions by rising through the ranks of the organization and developing a familiarity with the activities and the people they supervise. This is rarely the case with political chief executives who gain their positions by popular election. The political chief executive is almost always an outsider to the organization he is chosen to lead and, on taking office, must impose himself upon it from the top down. Thus it is an extremely difficult task for a political executive to direct the activities of subordinates who are more familiar with the organization and its activities than he is.

Conclusion.

We have surveyed above some of the principal advantages and disadvantages which thorough-going consolidation might bring to Lincoln and Lancaster County. Experience with consolidated and reorganized structures in other areas has shown that they can bring about many improvements, especially in the areas of operational efficiency and the quality of public services. However, these structures have generally been found to be more difficult to control and coordinate than originally anticipated. We can conclude that structural rearrangements are conducive to obtaining improvements sought, but in themselves neither guarantee these improvements nor foreclose chances for unexpected problems to arise.

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3. Unification of Administrative Structure.

The third feature of consolidation proposals is the integration of all administrative agencies into a unified structure headed by an elected chief executive. Given authority to appoint all agency heads, the chief executive's job is to direct the operation of the administrative branch as a whole. At present, all city agencies fall under such a structure, but county departments and county-city agencies do not.

ADVANTAGES

(A) Visibility and Public Accountability. The existence of a single chief executive makes it far easier for the public to know who is responsible for overseeing governmental operations and who is to blame if things are not being run satisfactorily. A chief executive cannot avoid being in the public spotlight, whereas independently elected administrators, as in county government, receive much less attention.

(B) Centralized Coordination. Only when all administrative agencies submit to a single superior is it likely that they will work together in the best interests of the administrative structure as a whole. When departments or agencies are headed by elected officials or when they do not fall under the command of a common executive officer, there is a tendency for each of them to go its separate way. Without a coordinating mechanism, the acts of each agency are marked by a jealousy to protect its jurisdiction against encroachment by other agencies. By contrast, the integration of all agencies into a single administrative structure means that they must submit to external direction. In this way the actions of the various administrative "parts" can be effectively coordinated with one another to work in the best interests of the administrative branch as a whole.

(C) Functional Specialization. With an effective coordinating mechanism, it is possible to organize individual agencies on a much more specialized basis. This means that similar tasks presently handled by county, city, and county-city agencies could be consolidated into single functional units. Further, such supportive functions as purchasing, maintenance, and personnel, could be consolidated into separate units to serve the entire structure. Such an arrangement of functions would considerably reduce duplication of effort and allow personnel to concentrate on their area of expertise, thus leading to higher quality services at lower cost.

(D) Formal Budgetary Process. One of the most significant benefits of political and administrative consolidation would be a unified budget for the county and city. A formal budgetary process would encourage the assignment of resources to a more explicit set of priorities each year and would permit the projection of financial commitments into the future. Further, the centralization of budget responsibilities under a chief executive would permit a much more thorough review of continuing programs and operations. Budget requests originating at the agency level have a tendency to perpetuate existing operational arrangements. Evaluation of these requests by budget specialists helps to bring them in line with overall priorities.

DISADVANTAGES

(A) Diminished Rural Influence. A consolidated administrative structure, where urban and rural services would be handled by the same agencies, might deprive rural residents of any ability to influence the way services are provided to them. Since consolidated agencies would draw most of their personnel from the city and would have most of their concerns in the city, it is questionable whether they could satisfactorily "shift gears" when serving the rural areas. It is also doubtful that rural residents could make their complaints and demands heard as effectively in urban-oriented agencies as they presently can in agencies primarily serving rural needs.