

SUMMARY OF CONSOLIDATION;  
COLUMBUS/MUSCOGEE COUNTY GOVERNMENTS /  
COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

A new government known as Columbus, Georgia, the first consolidated city/county government in Georgia, came into being in January, 1971. It superseded the governments of the City of Columbus and Muscogee County. The new government is of the mayor-council-manager form, with the Mayor and ten council members elected on November 3, 1970.

Four of the ten council members must reside in and be elected by voters of a specific geographical area or council district. The other six council members, elected at large, may reside anywhere in the area (all of Muscogee County) of the consolidated government.

The government was established under a new charter which was prepared by the fifteen members and four advisory members of the Muscogee County Charter Commission. The Charter Commission put several thousand hours of work, over a period of one year, into the document. But before the Charter Commission came into being in 1969, the groundwork for the new government was laid in two decades or more of thought, discussion, committee work and one earlier abortive attempt at consolidation.

It is impossible today to pinpoint one moment in time and say "consolidation started here". But as early as 1940, the health departments of Columbus and Muscogee County were merged into one countywide department; and in 1950 the school systems of Columbus and Muscogee County were merged. In both instances, the outcome was highly successful, and the school system, in particular, was used repeatedly as an example of what could be accomplished through merger.

In 1956, the county which had constructed and owned many miles of water and sewer lines outside the City of Columbus, began turning these over to the Columbus Water Works and thereafter the city water works not only provided the water, but was also solely responsible for maintaining the lines and extension of lines into the county.

Through the 1950's, local leaders frequently talked of merging other departments in the county and city that provided identical or similar services.

In early 1961, a Muscogee County Grand Jury recommended that Columbus City Commission and Muscogee County Commission look deeper into the possibility of consolidation. A joint City-County Consolidation Study Committee was created with the city manager, city attorney, county clerk, county attorney and two citizens as members.

From this committee came a proposal that a citizens committee be appointed to go into the subject thoroughly and submit a recommendation to the two governing bodies. Both commissions agreed, and in June, 1961, the first Citizens Committee on Consolidation was appointed. The organizational meeting was held in July, 1961.

From the beginning, the twenty-one member Citizens Committee was plagued by controversy and dissention - - - first over the appointment of members, then over the committee's mission and how to go about it, and finally with the committee itself. City and county commissioners burdened the Citizens Committee with irrelevant problems, such as hazardous railroad crossings and a dispute over the Chattahoochee Valley Fair Association.

By the later part of 1961, the Citizens Committee was ready to recommend that Columbus City Commission and Muscogee County Commission be abolished and a single new commission, composed of six commissioners and an elected mayor, be created. Although the recommendation was not unanimous, it was presented to city and county commissioners, who forwarded it to the legislative delegation, and enabling legislation won passage in the General Assembly in early 1962.

Meanwhile, strong opposition was developing, and those against consolidation began a well-organized campaign to defeat it, including speeches, advertisements, letters, etc. Consolidation was denounced as a "Communist conspiracy" and the Chairman of Muscogee County Commission labeled it as a "metro-Castro" government.

The referendum on April 11, 1962, failed in both the city and countywide election. The city vote was 6,032 for to 5,563 against consolidation. The countywide vote (which included the voters of Columbus) was 9,102 against to 6,612 for the issue.

The defeat cooled but did not kill enthusiasm for some type of consolidation. Little was said on the subject between 1962 and 1966, but one idea from the Citizens Committee was adopted. The city successfully sought legislation to expand the government from a commission of five members (who elected one of their own as mayor) to a government of six commissioners and a full time elected mayor. The larger commission and first elected mayor took office in 1965.

In January, 1966, consolidation was brought up again when a city commissioner proposed that action be sought to allow voters to consolidate the two commissions into one body that would govern both city and county.

Columbus City Commission approved the idea, but Muscogee County Commissioners voted unanimously to ask the legislative delegation NOT to introduce legislation along these lines. Instead, the county favored the idea of seeking legislative permission to merge city and county boards of tax assessors, and to merge city and county departments and agencies.

The local legislators approved both the city and county's positive requests and in November, 1966, the voters of Muscogee County voted two to one in passing all three constitutional amendments. The three constitutional amendments were permissive, not mandatory, and in fact, none were ever used.

Instead, in 1967, the Columbus City Commission suggested that yet another committee be created to study the idea of consolidation, and with the county's concurrence, a new Consolidation Study Committee was created - - but instructed to keep its recommendations within the bounds of the three constitutional amendments that had been approved the preceding November.

The new Consolidation Study Committee was organized in February, 1967. Between February and August, it heard speakers from Athens and Clarke County (which were considering consolidation), and from Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee (which had already consolidated). They talked with state officials, lawyers and consultants.

The idea won acceptance, and in early 1968, the General Assembly once again approved a bill proposed by Muscogee Delegation that a constitutional amendment be enacted, this one authorizing creation of a charter commission. In November, 1969, voters of Muscogee County approved this constitutional amendment by 15,140 to 3,817.

In early 1969, the General Assembly once again acceded to requests from Muscogee County and actual enabling legislation for a Muscogee County Charter Commission was passed, setting its goals, its limitations (no changes could be made in the state courts, the sheriff's department, or the school district. Bibb City would not be affected). This was signed into law in April, 1969.

The organizational meeting of the Muscogee County Charter Commission was held on May 21, 1969, with seven members appointed by City Commission and seven by Muscogee County Commission. These fourteen chose a fifteenth member.

Dr. Thomas Y. Whitley, President of Columbus College, was named Chairman of the Charter Commission at its first meeting. Also, a committee was appointed at that time to review works of previous study groups.

By June 4, a tentative timetable had been drawn up, and in July, Public Research and Management, Inc. of Atlanta was employed as the consultant firm at a fee of \$18,000.

The group began meeting frequently through the summer, and by the first week in September, had decided to follow the mayor-council-city manager form of government.

The first of four public meetings was held on October 9, but before that, a synopsis of the recommendations as they stood at the time was published in the local newspapers. Two hundred persons attended the first public meeting and expressed their own views. One of the results was the addition of four black advisory members to the all white, fifteen member Charter Commission.

By November, 1969, the commission was struggling with a problem that proved to be one of its most difficult: how to handle the transition from the old to a new government. The charter group was undecided on whether new council

members should be elected by district or at large, and whether to carry over into the new government those commission members whose terms would not expire until the end of 1970.

By December, other problems were accumulating. A particularly thorny one was how to provide for amending the charter, especially in event some challenge should arise during the crucial period of transition or just as the new government was taking over. Ultimately, the Charter Commission would include three methods of amending the charter.

A third public hearing was held on March 5, 1970, and the virtually completed document was presented at the fourth and final public hearing on March 19.

Although these four public hearings were given special prominence, all meetings of the Charter Commission were open to the public, and full participation of all citizens in working toward an ideal charter was sought.

The completed charter was presented to the Judge of Muscogee County Ordinary Court on April 1, 1970, and later that month, the Ordinary called for a referendum on May 27.

Meanwhile, a Charter Steering Committee, a volunteer group of public-spirited citizens, undertook the job of presenting the charter to the public with the goal of obtaining a favorable vote. Funds to promote the charter were provided by the Columbus Chamber of Commerce.

This group sought and obtained the endorsement of consolidation from the Chamber of Commerce, the Columbus Jaycees, the Junior League, the Columbus Real Estate Board and other civic groups. The news media in Columbus, which had given the work of the Charter Commission saturation type coverage during their year spent in drafting the charter, increased the space and time given to consolidation prior to the referendum.

Both television stations scheduled a number of special programs, and the radio stations kept it before the public with their news coverage of local events and with special news spots. Local newspapers ran analytical articles on consolidation, and between mid April and May 27, gave front page space daily to questions and answers or facts about consolidation. Consolidation was supported editorially by both newspapers and by all television and radio stations that take editorial stands.

On May 3, the full text of the charter was published in the Sunday LEDGER-ENQUIRER, in a special supplement, in order that every voter and citizen in Muscogee County could read the charter in its entirety and study it before voting.

The vote on May 27, was overwhelmingly for consolidation. In the countywide election (including the City of Columbus and Bibb City) the vote was 12,500 for to 2,989 against.

## DATES IN HISTORY OF CONSOLIDATION

- 1940 - Columbus and Muscogee County Health Departments are merged.
- 1950 - Columbus City Schools and Muscogee County Schools merged.
- 1956 - Muscogee County begins turning over water and sewer lines outside the city of Columbus to Columbus Water Works.
- 1950's - Elected officials from time to time discuss the possibility of merging city and county departments and boards that duplicate each other.
- 1961 - A Muscogee County Grand Jury recommends that Columbus and Muscogee County Commissions look into the feasibility of consolidation.
- June 1961 - The first Citizens Committee on Consolidation, consisting of 21 members, is appointed.
- December 1961 - The Citizens Committee on Consolidation recommends that Columbus and Muscogee County Commissions be abolished through legislation that would establish a single new commission. Recommendation is not unanimous.
- January 1962 - General Assembly adopts enabling legislation in line with the Citizens Committee recommendation. Opposition begins developing.
- April 1962 - Voters reject consolidation in a referendum.
- January 1966 - City Commission suggests legislation that would allow consolidation of the two commissions, to govern both the City of Columbus and Muscogee County, if voters approve.
- January 1966 - General Assembly passes three constitutional amendments, one proposed by the City and two by the County. They would: 1) Permit merger of the city and county commissions into one body governing both the city and county. 2) Permit consolidation of city and county tax assessing boards, and; 3) Permit mergers of city and county boards and departments providing similar services.
- November 1966 - Voters of Muscogee County approve all three constitutional amendments by wide margin.
- 1967 - City Commission suggests another committee be appointed to consider consolidation, and with concurrence of County Commission, a Consolidation Study Committee is appointed, but asked to deal only with the three constitutional amendments.

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- August 1967 - The Consolidation Study Committee reports it feels an advisory board is too weak to deal with consolidation, and proposes that a Charter Commission, authorized by the General Assembly, be created to draft a charter for a new government of Columbus and Muscogee County.
- January 1968 - General Assembly approves a constitutional amendment authorizing creation of a charter commission to draft a charter for a new government in Columbus and Muscogee County.
- November 1968 - Voters of Muscogee County give overwhelming approval to this constitutional amendment.
- January 1969 - General Assembly approves enabling legislation for a Muscogee County Charter Commission.
- May 1969 - Organizational meeting of the Muscogee County Charter Commission is held. The 14 appointed members elect a 15th member. Dr. Thomas Y. Whitley, President of Columbus College, is chosen as Chairman.
- June 1969 - Charter Commission sets a timetable for its work.
- July 1969 - Public Research and Management Inc. is employed as consultant to the Charter Commission.
- October 1969 - First public hearing held to explain work of Charter Commission to date. As a result of criticism that the Charter Commission has no black representation, four advisory members, all Negroes, are added to the commission. Charter Commission begins meeting semi-weekly.
- January 1970 - Second public hearing held. Commission begins meeting more and more frequently as deadline nears.
- March 1970 - Third and fourth public hearings held. Charter draft is virtually complete.
- April 1, 1970 - Completed charter is turned over to the Ordinary of Muscogee County. A volunteer Charter Steering Committee begins promoting the Charter.
- May 27, 1970 - Voters of Muscogee County (including those in city of Columbus) and voters within the city of Columbus approve consolidation.
- January 1, 1971 - New government goes into effect.

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