

Tucson – Pima County Becoming One or Acting as One? by David Rusk¹

I have been asked whether or not the City of Tucson and Pima County should be consolidated into one government? In my opinion,

Should they? Yes.

Will they? Probably not.

Are there workable, politically feasible alternatives to formal city-county consolidation to achieve more unified, regional governance? Yes.

Let me explore all three dimensions of the question.

“Big Box” vs. “little boxes”

I have spoken and written many times about the advantages that regions that are organized around “Big Box” governments have over regions where local governance is fragmented into many “little boxes.”

“Big Box” regions are characterized by “elastic cities” that are able to expand their boundaries as urbanization grows.² Typically, an elastic city expands by annexing unincorporated land as it is being developed more intensively. Infrequently, an elastic city expands through city-county consolidation (a form of super-annexation). In “Big Box” regions, county government serves as the general government for unincorporated rural and semi-rural areas. Sometimes, “Big Box” regions also have unified, county-wide school districts (as in Florida, Maryland, and North Carolina); generally, though, they at least have a relatively small number of school systems. “Big Box” regions are found principally in the South and West. Tucson-Pima County is a “Big Box” region.

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² See my *Cities without Suburbs: a Census 2000 Update* (Woodrow Wilson Center/Johns Hopkins University Press: 2003) for a full discussion of “urban elasticity.”

By contrast, local governance in the Northeast and Middle West is organized into many “little boxes” – a myriad of cities, villages or boroughs, towns or townships, and scores of school districts. In New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, there is not a single square foot of unincorporated land, and jurisdictional boundaries have been cast in concrete for decades. All their cities are “inelastic.”

In the Age of Sprawl, such inflexible fragmentation has disastrous consequences for inelastic cities. With its annexation powers, the City of Tucson has expanded from two square miles to today’s 226 square miles. You don’t have to have a crystal ball to imagine what the City of Tucson would be like today without all its annexed land. It would be the City of South Tucson. Writ somewhat larger, inelastic cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, and St. Louis are all “South Tucson.”

But “Big Box” vs. “little boxes” has regional consequences beyond the social, economic, and fiscal health of central cities.

- The more fragmented local governance, the more segregated the regional society by race and income class.³
- The more fragmented local governance, the slower the rate of regional economic development.⁴

Why should “little boxes” regions be more segregated by race and income? In my experience, the (usually unspoken) mission of most “little boxes” town councils and “little boxes” school boards is “to keep our town (or our schools) just the way they are for people just like *us*” – whoever “us” happens to be. By contrast, “Big Box” city councils and schools boards tend to respond to broader, more diverse constituencies and adopt less exclusionary policies and practices.⁵

³ The most definitive research into this phenomenon is summarized in David Y. Miller. *The Regional Governing of Metropolitan America*. (Westview Press, 2002).

⁴ Jerry Paytas, “Does Governance Matter? The Dynamics of Metropolitan Governance and Competitiveness.” Working paper, Carnegie Mellon Center for Economic Development (2002). Available at www.smartpolicy.org/publications.smtml.

⁵ As a “Big Box” region, metro Tucson ranks among the less racially segregated regions. On a scale of 0 to 100 (with 100 = total apartheid), among the USA’s 100 largest metro areas, metro Tucson had the seventh lowest residential segregation rate (39) for African Americans (metro Detroit was highest at 85; metro Albuquerque lowest at 32); and metro Tucson had the fifth lowest rate (50) for metro areas with over 20 percent Hispanic residents. (For the 100 largest metro areas, Johnson City-Kingsport-Bristol TN-VA had the lowest rate for Hispanics (19) and metro Providence the highest (68). However, economic segregation in metro Tucson has continued to rise (to 38), the 41st highest rate in 2000.

With regard to economic development, fierce, inter-municipal competition among “little boxes” can be ruinous. More significant, in my view, is the inability of “little boxes” regions to access and leverage the full assets of their regions. For example, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s capital, is one of America’s smallest and most economically depressed central cities (48,950 residents within its 8 square miles in 2000). The *real* city of Harrisburg, however – its census-defined urbanized area – covered 208 square miles and contained 363,000 people in 2000. In effect, the *real* city of Harrisburg matched up well with the actual city of Tucson (487,000 people and 195 square miles) in 2000.

Both areas (the City of Tucson and the *real* city of Harrisburg) had about a \$17 billion property tax base in 2002. However, “Harrisburg’s” property tax base was broken up among over thirty different municipalities; the actual City of Harrisburg’s tax base was only \$1.7 billion (and Harrisburg’s bond rating was a Baa2 – two short steps above junk bond level). By contrast, the City of Tucson could access the entire \$17 billion with a bond rating of Aa2 – just two short steps below blue-chip status.⁶

Which city is better positioned to support public/private economic development initiatives for itself and for its region – Harrisburg or Tucson?

Governing Greater Albuquerque

Two years ago, the City of Albuquerque and Bernalillo County commissioned me to study possible city-county consolidation. My report, *Governing Greater Albuquerque*,⁷ examined how 37 “peer communities” of Albuquerque-Bernalillo County had organized their governments. Of the peer communities with populations between roughly 500,000 and 1,000,000, 18 are consolidated city-county governments, five are “city-less” urban counties that provide all municipal services, and 14 are cities in that population range (including Tucson). To my knowledge, this is the most complete and up-to-date review of how governance is organized in

⁶ Actually, the City of Tucson’s ability to issue general obligation bonds is limited by a rate cap on the property tax, approved by voters in the 1960s. Because this rate cap limits the revenue that can be raised to service the bond debt, it limits the amount of bonds that can be issued. In my opinion, this was a “penny-wide, pound-foolish” action taken by the voters that significantly inhibits Tucson’s ability to achieve greater success in the pursuit of attracting a highly-educated workforce, drawn to a high quality of life that, in turn, attracts desirable, higher-salaried, industries.

⁷ My report can be accessed at <http://www.cabq.gov/hot/abcucc.html> under “reports” or on my own website (www.davidrusk.com) under “document library.”

consolidated communities (at least, until the University of Arizona's Institute for Local Government issues its own report later this year).

However, there are two fundamental differences between Albuquerque-Bernalillo County and Tucson-Pima County (aside from the fact that Albuquerque is about 5,000 feet higher above sea level than Tucson and, therefore, has cold winters and less-hot summers).

First, the city of Albuquerque (448, 607) contains over 80 percent of Bernalillo County's population (556,678).⁸ By contrast, the city of Tucson (486,699) is about 58 percent of Pima County's population (843,746). Mobilizing the city vote has a higher chance of success in carrying the consolidation issue in Albuquerque than in Tucson.

Second, and more importantly, Albuquerque residents are wealthier than suburban "county" residents. In Census 2000, Albuquerque's per capita income was 13 percent higher than suburban per capita income. Again, by contrast, Tucson's residents are considerably poorer than suburban residents. In Census 2000, Tucson's per capita income was 33 percent lower than suburban per capita income.⁹

As a result, resistance to city-county consolidation among "county" voters in Albuquerque is based on the perception that an already-dominant, economically superior city wants to "destroy the 'county' life style with 'city rules' and 'city ways.'" In Pima County, the resistance of "county" voters is based on the perception that they are being asked to bail out a poorer, fiscally troubled Tucson.

Six Rules for Successful Consolidation

How could city-county consolidation be achieved for Tucson-Pima County? Here are six rules based on successful experiences elsewhere.

Rule # 1 – **Have a clearly defined legal path to consolidation.** One route is to have the legislature do it. I see no constitutional constraint in the

⁸ All population figures are as of Census 2000.

⁹ In fact, of 57 large, highly elastic central cities, only Tucson and San Jose fall below having average city incomes at 80 percent or higher of average suburban incomes. Exceeded only by Anchorage and Oklahoma City, Tucson is the USA's third most "elastic" city, having expanded its city limits from 9.5 square miles to 195 square miles by 2000. (Today, Tucson city limits contain 226 square miles.) However, Tucson has had less success at annexing newer, higher-income, subdivisions within its expanding city limits than any other highly "elastic" city.

Arizona constitution to your legislature's following the example of the Indiana legislature that simply consolidated Indianapolis and Marion County in 1970 without any local referendum. (That possibility, however, strikes me as very remote politically in Arizona.)

The second route is by local referendum. To have any chance of success, all voters in Pima County must vote as "one box." If, for example, an authorizing state statute or constitutional amendment were to require approval by a majority of voters within the city of Tucson *and* by a majority of voters within the unincorporated areas of Pima County, consolidation will never happen. "County" voters will always veto it.¹⁰

Rule #2 – Allow smaller municipalities to opt out. Successful consolidations have always involved merger of the central city government with the county government. *No smaller, independent municipality has ever merged into the larger body anywhere.*¹¹ Thus, make sure that voters in Marana, Oro Valley, South Tucson, and Sahuarita can vote for the merger of Tucson and Pima County while maintaining their own independence. (These municipalities would continue to receive county-type services from the merged government.) It makes no political sense to add these voters automatically to the ranks of die-hard opponents of consolidation.

Rule #3 – Have strong, popular, political leaders in favor of consolidation. County Judge Beverly Briley led the pro-merger forces in Nashville-Davidson County. Newly-elected reform mayor Hans Tansler vigorously promoted a consolidation that would, in effect, abolish his office. (He was subsequently elected first mayor of the combined government.) The incumbent county executive, incumbent mayor, and former mayor Jerry Abramson all vigorously campaign for merging Louisville-Jefferson County.

¹⁰ For decades, state law required a "two-box" vote on city-county consolidation for Albuquerque-Bernalillo County. On three different occasions, 'county' voters overwhelmingly vetoed consolidation. Only a state constitutional amendment adopted in 2000 made city-county consolidation at all electorally feasible.

¹¹ Some examples: the merger of Jacksonville-Duval County did not include Baldwin and the three "beaches" – Jacksonville Beach, Atlantic Beach, and Neptune Beach. Seven smaller municipalities maintain their independence with Nashville-Davidson County. Indianapolis-Marion County's "Unigov" does not include four smaller cities and ten towns. The most recent merger combined the City of Louisville (one-third of the county's population) with unincorporated areas of Jefferson County (also, one-third of the county's population). However, the final third is composed of 92 (!) municipalities (many of them simply sub-divisions that municipalized to prevent annexation by Louisville). None of them joined the consolidated government.

And then-mayor, now-US Senator Richard Lugar maneuvered legislative approval of Indianapolis-Marion County's Unigov.

Rule #4 – Don't be trapped by "good government" utopianism. The goal is to achieve a politically viable merger plan, not to produce an ideal document that would bring smiles to public administration theorists. For example, contrary to the wisdom of pop singer Dr. John, nobody has ever successfully "shot the sheriff." Often under consolidation the sheriff may lose his duties as chief law enforcement officer to a county-wide, professional, police chief, but the sheriff remains as chief jailer or an officer of the court system. Don't add the political constituencies of a sheriff and his deputies to the ranks of the opposition.¹²

Rule # 5 – Give a core constituency a strong reason to support consolidation. That reason is often based on Rule #6. The "ag'iners" will always turn out. More neutral citizens need a solid reason to change "the devils they know" for "the devil they don't know." One good (but probably insufficient) reason for supporting consolidation here would be that, by municipalizing Pima County's unincorporated population, the merged government would recapture \$60 million annually in state aid that is lost.

Rule #6 – Have a widely perceived civic crisis. In Jacksonville-Duval County, the traditional system of city and county government was clearly "broke." A dozen city and county officials had just been jailed for corruption; all the high schools had lost their accreditation; 30,000 houses in the "county" were on septic tanks, polluting the water supply, and county government was politically, financially, and legally powerless to fix the problem. In Nashville, major businesses were threatening to leave the region rather than remain in a sprawl-weakened city. Louisville had seen consolidated Indianapolis, Nashville, and Jacksonville zoom past it to achieve literally "big league" status (NFL franchises) and could not stomach the reality of being reduced to only Kentucky's second largest city by consolidated Lexington-Fayette County in Census 2000. And in Indianapolis (also a sprawl-weakened central city), the crisis presented was the possibility of missing a window of political opportunity. As the first Republican mayor in 14 years, Richard Lugar saw the possibility of adding tens of thousands of Republican-voting suburbanites to the city's voting

¹² The Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Unification Charter Commission sought to "shoot the sheriff" by abolishing the elective offices of county sheriff, county clerk, county assessor, and county treasurer. Their supporters helped defeat the unification referendum in November 2003.

rolls, locking up Indianapolis City Hall for the Republican Party. With all the political stars magically (and temporarily) aligned – Republican majorities in the city council, county commission, local legislative delegation, both houses of the legislature, and a Republican governor – Lugar orchestrated the legislatively-enacted consolidation. (Republicans controlled City Hall for the next three decades.)

Does Tucson and Pima County have a crisis? Not one that represents a “clear and present danger.” In my eyes, certainly, the large and steadily growing income gap (33 percent) between city and suburban residents is ominous. Tucson does not yet have the city/suburban income gap that burdens Philadelphia (40 percent) or Cleveland (44 percent) or Detroit (46 percent) or Hartford (54 percent) or Newark (60 percent). But if the current trend continues – even with its annexations, the city houses more and more of the region’s modest and low-income families while wealthy families continue to move elsewhere – Tucson will become an anomaly: a severely distressed, “elastic,” Sunbelt city.

That fact, in itself, will be a crisis for all of Pima County. No region is truly healthy with a crippled city at its core. But, to my eyes, the rest of Pima County is creating its own crisis – chaotic, characterless, urban sprawl where most new commercial development (and much new residential development) fails to reflect the area’s marvelous natural endowment and Southwestern architectural heritage. Is what makes Tucson unique “going, gone,” in the anxious words of a recent city report? The challenge this superb report sets for the city applies equally to the rest of eastern Pima County: “A quality built environment contributes to overall economic, environmental, and social well-being.”¹³

Professor Richard Florida ranked Tucson third (behind Albuquerque and Albany) in his “creativity index” among regions of 500,000 to 1,000,000 people. Are you building upon that to create a high-tech, higher-income future for the region or will you continue to be a Mecca not for striving, highly-educated, wealth-creating, young professionals, but rather for retirees seeking to live out their golden years in well deserved, but wealth-consuming ease?

Turning the slow erosion of your quality-of-life (city and suburban alike) into a popular demand for effective regional governance will be a challenging test for greater Tucson’s leadership.

¹³ City of Tucson. *Five Trends Tucson*. (February, 2004), page 21.

Three Paths to Regional Governance

Summing up, in my view, there are three paths to more regional governance.

First, **city-county consolidation**. Though desirable, in my judgment, politically it would be a very, very, very long shot for Tucson-Pima County.

Second, **annexation**. The county government should adopt a new attitude towards municipal annexation. In the long run, Pima County's interests are not served by having the city of Tucson slowly become another city of South Tucson. Several decades ago Pima County government embarked upon a policy of becoming a major provider of municipal services, encouraging and facilitating the growth of unincorporated areas. Several of the nation's most progressive urban counties – Portland's Multnomah County, Memphis's Shelby County, Charlotte's Mecklenburg County, to name several – have formal policies to facilitate annexation of the entire county by their various municipalities and get county government out of the business of providing municipal services.

In light of Arizona's stringent annexation laws, most of the 290,000 residents of unincorporated eastern Pima County will remain under the county government's responsibility. (The past is, so-to-speak, so much wastewater over the dam.) However, the county government should actively discourage the growth of further unincorporated development. Like Multnomah, Shelby, and Mecklenburg counties, Pima County should develop a formal plan by which Tucson, Marana, Oro Valley, and Sahuarita would annex the rest of the future urbanizing areas.¹⁴ For many reasons the county should condition zoning approvals and extension of wastewater services for future development on annexation to the plan-designated municipality.¹⁵ Moreover, it should encourage voters and property owners of existing, unincorporated communities to act favorably on petitions for municipal annexation.

Third, **a close city-county partnership**. Frankly, city and county officials and business and civic leaders ought to make a sustained study of

¹⁴ Though it would be an initial burden to the City of Tucson, it strikes me that the residents of South Tucson would be well served by merging into the City of Tucson.

¹⁵ Not the least of the reasons for channeling future development into municipalities is the fact that past development in unincorporated areas costs every man, woman, and child over \$70 per year in state aid foregone by Pima County residents.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg County. The two governments are practically merged in all but legal form. They occupy a joint Government Center building. There is a long list of services that one or the other provides county-wide. For example, the city provides police protection county-wide. The county maintains all parks and runs all recreation programs. The county provides all building inspection services, while the city runs animal control. (The mayor told me that the city got the short end of *that* last deal.)

Along with its five small suburban municipalities, the city and county have a formal agreement as to how all of Mecklenburg county will ultimately be annexed as it develops. No annexation wars there.

Google up “City of Charlotte” or “Mecklenburg County” on the Internet. What do you automatically get? A home page called “Char-Meck,” a joint website maintained by the city and county governments. This is certainly potent evidence of the highest degree of city-county collaboration.

Most importantly, the two governments not only have a single planning department but jointly appoint a single planning commission to guide and control the area’s development.

This last point emphasizes the real goal of city-county collaboration. It is not just to save a few tax dollars here and there through eliminating wasteful duplication and providing more efficient public services.

The real goal is to lay out a vision of a community’s greatness and chart a clear path for achieving it.

As headquarters of Bank of America and Wachovia, Charlotte has now become the nation’s second largest financial center. Charlotte, Nashville, Jacksonville, Indianapolis have all re-created themselves as literally “big league” cities.

The challenge to greater Tucson is to raise the works of Man to the level of quality of the great gifts of Nature with which this region is endowed.

That is the real goal of better regional governance.