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Creating a “New” Olin County Metroplex

Erin Hobbs a 34 year-old lawyer, was elated to be voted chair of the Olin County 40-member Select Commission to reinvent the structure of local government in Olin County. Selected mainly due to her educational background and expertise in the area of government restructuring, she had just completed a two-year appointment as lead researcher for a federal government task force dealing with government restructuring. As a life long Olin County resident, Erin truly believed that many thoughtful and dedicated citizens could sit down and rationally determine the best way to restructure local government into a more efficient, equitable, and modern/progressive entity. As she reflected on the position she was now in, she became excited about the prospects of now having the chance of applying her federal government experience to a problem close to home and her heart.

As a member of the federal task force, she learned that consolidating local governments is not easy, especially during times of great public skepticism regarding the professionalism of local government. She knew full well, based on her earlier research in 2002 that a mere thirty-three metro areas had successfully consolidated into a single county/city/suburban government, although she had been recently made aware of some additional consolidations. She was aware of the monumental task that faced the Select Commission and knew that most referendum votes are rejected initially, but often are placed on the ballot again and eventually receive public support in subsequent attempts as the public warms up to the idea of a single metro government. Erin wanted to avoid that delay and develop a strong rational proposal that would secure public support the first time it went up for consideration. After all, she was in a position to make things happen and nothing less would meet her own expectations.

The Mission of the Commission

The mission for the Select Commission seemed straightforward enough — create a new and modern system of governance for Olin County. Authorized and funded to the level of \$200,000.00 by the state legislature, members were appointed by local elected officials representing each of the six main cities plus rural/unincorporated areas within the county. Erin and her commission were given the task of researching, developing and proposing a new form of consolidated governance that would replace the splintered and fragmented multi-city and county system that had developed in piece-meal fashion since the 1800's. Once the new proposal was developed by the Select Commission, it would be put up to the

ultimate public opinion poll — a referendum submitted to the qualified voters of Olin County in the November general election. This vote would determine whether a century of urban sprawl that resulted in the creation of new jurisdictions would be unified into a single governmental unit. As one reporter casually observed, "Will we have six apes on speed or just one baboon on Prozac?"

To Erin, the problem seemed crystal clear, multiple local governments operating within the same metropolitan area symbolized the residuals of outdated, inefficient, divisive governmental systems that had sprung up over time. Metro cities within Olin County often engaged in a feeding frenzy when it came time to compete for scarce economic resources. They were not working together to create the modern, unified metroplex that she felt was needed if sustainable economic development would be successful. Of course, she often said that the metro must be able to not only attract but also retain educated young people if Olin Country was to flourish and become a more livable community.

In sizing up the situation, she mused about the long-term impact of having six independent cities compete against each other for new economic development, rather than cooperate, collaborate and mutually support regional goals. She was also reminded of Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O Neil (D), MA, who was fond of saying that "[A]ll politics was local" Perhaps so, she thought, but maybe, just maybe, all politics needs to be played out on a regional level. The many examples of city fighting city or infighting were easy to find in Olin County. The six cities had previously refused to cooperate on the long awaited downtown entertainment district; they had vigorously fought each other in court over paying for the new "Mannigan Center" — a sports complex that was thought to play an important role in the metroplex; and, they generally had a history of doing little more than making sure that their own parochial and special interests were protected at any cost, even at the expense of the greater good. The rural areas in Olin County were fighting mad too. Rural citizens did not want to be annexed and/or included in tax/service areas and found that the countywide elected officials to be more interested in metro issues than in the plight of rural life.

Table 1. Governmental Consolidation Successes by Selected Characteristics: 1962-2002

Consolidated Local Government	Pop. 2000	Square Miles	Year Formed	Elected Offices/ Structure of Govt.
Louisville-Jefferson County, KY http://www.co.jefferson.ky.us/	693,604	385	2002	26 single member districts plus a Mayor
Kansas City-Wyandotte County, KS http://www.wycokck.org/	157,882	151	1997	8 single member districts, 2 "at large" plus Mayor
Augusta-Richmond County, GA http://augusta.co.richmond.ga.us/	199,755	324	1995	8 single member districts, 2 "super districts" plus Mayor/CEO
Lafayette-Lafayette Parish, LA http://www.lafayettegov.org/index.cfm	190,503	270	1992	9 single member districts, no Mayor
Athens-Clarke County, GA http://www.athensclarkecounty.com/	101,489	121	1990	8 single member, 2 "super districts" plus Mayor
Houma-Terrebonne Parish, LA http://www.tpcg.org/	104,503	1,255	1984	9 single member districts, elected "Parrish President"
Greater Anchorage County, AK http://www.muni.org/assembly2/index.cfm	260,283	1,697	1976	11 representatives elected from six major sections plus an elected "Chair"
Indianapolis-Marion County, IN http://www.indygov.org/	860,454	396	1969	25 single member districts, 4 "at-large" plus Mayor
Jacksonville-Duval County, FL http://jacksonvillecitycouncil.coj.net/index.htm	778,879	774	1968	14 single member, 5 super districts, plus Mayor
Nashville-Davidson County, TN http://www.nashville.gov/	569,891	502	1962	35 single member districts, 5 "at large" plus Mayor

NOTE: Data from Gov. Web sites and U.S. Census-2000. List of consolidated governments found at National Association of Counties: <http://www.naco.org/>

First Speech to the Committee

She had anxiously waited the day that she would make her first speech as chair of the Select Committee. During the last several weeks, her mind was a buzz with the many facts and trends that seemed patently obvious to any informed

policy maker. She knew that first impressions tend to be lasting ones. But more importantly, she took nothing for granted for she had learned that “what you see depends upon where you stand” on political and organizational issues. The speech that she had rehearsed so many times in her mind would have the customary introductions, beginnings, middle and wrap-up. There was no question that the facts would support consolidation, but she knew that politics could be brutally local and unforgiving. Now was the time to make her statement, and she said,

“We cannot continue to operate as we have in the past. Our young people are leaving for jobs out of state because we don’t offer them the quality of life they demand in our metro community. Our largest city is land locked by the ring of smaller suburbs and is slowly dying, our proposed downtown entertainment district has been on hold for five years now, we can’t agree how to pay for the new sports complex, our suburbs are in competition with each other to annex new rural land creating sprawl, and our local communities are divided along economic and racial lines. We are not a true community and the reason is obvious — the design of our local government is out of date! People can no longer identify city borders as they drive through the metro, but our local leaders have put up ‘political walls’ that prevent progress through cooperation. It is time that we break down these walls that divide our community and consolidate our local governments into one ‘metro family’ that cares for everyone in the greater community and that works toward common goals. We are all dependent on each other in Olin County. Those in the suburbs work in the central city skyscraper district, and those in the central city can’t live without the economic support of the suburbs. It’s time that we join together and create a single consolidated local government that will work for the common good. A single consolidated local government representing all of the people in our metro area is the answer. Let’s work together to create that reality!”

Background

Like other mid-sized metro areas 50 years ago, Olin County was once a sprawling county with independent cities dotting the countryside. Charlinn, the dominant center city, was loosely surrounded by smaller towns that mainly served the agricultural economy. Beginning in the 1950’s a process of rural depopulation resulted in more people moving closer to the metro. Roads and freeways were built enabling people to drive rather than walk or ride the bus/train to work each day. This meant that suburbs close to large central cities were now within easy commuting distance of Charlinn’s skyscraper business district.

As the suburbs began to grow both in population and in land area, the central city became landlocked and stagnant. This condition was made worse as economically well-off whites began to leave the City of Charlinn for these new suburbs, creating a condition known as “white flight.” The result was a central city that had lost much of its economic base and community diversity, but still carried

most of the responsibility for the public services and maintaining a community vitality for the growing greater metro area.

In 1960, the City of Charlinn, as shown in **Table 2**, represented 78 percent of the total population that lived in the county. By 2010, that figure was projected to drop to just 34 percent. However, the suburbs still looked to Charlinn for leadership as the largest city in the county and were quick to repudiate the city whenever it failed to live up to their expectation in this important area. They expected Charlinn police and fire/rescue units to come to the aid of the smaller cities; they expected Charlinn to maintain the botanical gardens, art center, central park, historical museums, baseball park, and other important regional cultural attractions and amenities. They expected Charlinn to continue to serve in the future, like it had in the past, as the central focus point of the region, and they wanted Charlinn to continue the tax incentives that it had given to the core business district that enabled the young and highly educated to buy a home in the lower tax suburbs and commute into Charlinn on streets paid for by those who had remained in the City.

In fairness to the Olin County suburbs, some cost sharing had been implemented. In 1976, the suburbs agreed to contribute tax dollars based on countywide population to help provide for maintenance and security of the Charlinn International Airport. The suburbs also agreed to share in the cost of purchasing some specialized and expensive fire/rescue equipment for Charlinn that would be beneficial to the entire region. And the suburbs had recently begun to partner with Charlinn in the joint development of water and wastewater treatment facilities and had created a joint board to govern these essential activities. Also, cities had joined together to create a countywide 911 system, for emergency responses would be best implemented by an area wide, comprehensive plan.

However, in 2001, when the City of Charlinn suggested that the financial responsibility of the downtown botanical center, art center, baseball park, performing arts hall, and history museum be transferred to Olin County to more fairly spread the cost of operation over the greater metro area, the howl coming from the suburbs reached their highest frequencies. “Why should we now be forced to pay for Charlinn’s responsibilities? We didn’t decide to build them — Charlinn did. If we want a museum or ball park, we will build it ourselves!” These cries were heard at the council meetings in each of the five suburbs.

Crafting a Solution Through Rebirth of Local Government

As Commission Chair, Erin realized that in order to secure support from the majority of the 40 commission members plus the voting public, the proposal for a new consolidated government for Metro Olin County would need to be rational and practical while at the same time, inspiring and new. It should be sufficiently inspiring to convince the public that giving up their current local government in

exchange for a consolidated local government would best meet the needs of all citizens, and not be so threatening as to cause citizens to vote against a “risky” plan. This would not be easy, as research on the consolidation of cities governments indicated that the less people know about consolidation, the less likely they were to offer support. She also realized that most of the public cares little about local government most of the time.

Table 2
Population Changes in Olin County: 1960-2010 (in thousands)

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010*	Pop. increase 1960-2010*	Percent increase 1960-2010*
Government								
All Olin County	269	308	362	418	478	552	283	105%
City of Charlinn	210	204	201	194	193	191	-19	-9%
Five Suburbs	31	77	136	201	263	341	310	1001%
Unincorporated Rural Olin	28.0	27.5	23.5	23.5	22.0	19.5	-8.5	-30%

*projected assuming no annexation or consolidation

Research Suggests...

Early on in the process, Erin gave a professional and well-researched presentation to the commission that summarized the pros and cons of consolidating fragmented local government into a single/consolidated metro government. Her findings were succinctly summarized:

- With consolidation of government derives economies of scale savings and/or increased levels of services for most metro communities.
- With consolidation comes a better-focused and coordinated economic development program that is based on developing the economic base of the whole metro.
- With consolidation comes a “professional political system” as elected officials tend to be part of political parties — not simply local citizens who run unaffiliated for their city office. Most consolidated governments have a full-time mayor and part-time council members. The mayor can hire and

fire plus veto policies passed by the council. The mayor creates the budget, subject to approval by the council. The mayor is in charge of the day-to-day operation of the greater metro government, and may hire an administrator much like the President of the United States selects professional administrative and policy staff and cabinet officers.

- Those supporting consolidation assumed that it was more efficient and more effective mechanism in the provision of services, more equitable in load (tax) sharing, and more accountable since it is the sole source of local government responsibility. Researchers had noted that fragmented local governments tend to “pass the buck” to each other, thereby frustrating citizens who need services, and thus creating a “whip saw” effect as citizens are passed back and forth to different entities. Consolidated government serves all of the people and will focus on what is best for the whole community.
- Those supporting fragmented local government (many independent cities located within the same metro area) based their support on the grounds that small local governments in direct competition with each other allow citizens to choose the government that best fits their needs. Fragmented government had created incentives for governments to lower taxes and provide only those services that attract and hold new people.
- Those supporting fragmented local government stated that a citizen based versus a party based system, tended to elect a mayor and council system, with a professional city administrator, that reported to the whole council, and thus better reflected the values of our nation — private citizens who serve in office for a time, but who are not full-time political professionals.

Let the Games Begin

The Commission did have a plan from which to begin. Clive Mannigan, former local football star, Former Mayor of Charlinn and current member of the Board of County Supervisors for Olin County, had proposed a version of a single consolidated Olin County metro government that would replace the current county and city governments. His plan created a Federal style system with a full-time mayor acting in the role of executive or CEO, as he frequently titled this position, with the power to hire and fire employees, veto any policies passed by the part-time elected council and run the day-to-day operations of metro government. He stated, “The ‘CEO’ is to be the face of local government for every citizen in Olin County. We need to have a single elected person ‘within choking distance’ of the people — a strong leader that can ‘make the trains run on time’ in the whole metro area — not just in a single city.”

The influential metro newspaper, the *Charlinn Witness*, strongly supporting Mannigan and his consolidation plan. The owner of the paper was a long-time friend of the former mayor and the two were seen together frequently at political events. Even though Supervisor Mannigan was not a member of the commission, his political connections and reputation as an effective elected official who had a history of dedication to the development of the Olin County region and who was seen as being largely responsible for getting the ball rolling to form the task force. The politically astute also knew that Mannigan wanted to cap-off his political career by becoming the first “CEO” of the new consolidated government.

The Public Responds

Erin soon created a formula for commission meetings. The commission met every two weeks to listen to presentations from experts and government leaders, receive public feedback, and gradually hammer out a plan to be put before the voters. Early on in the process, an entire evening was set aside solely to hear public comment. The range of views was broad and passionate. From a supporter of the plan for consolidation, this presentation was presented,

“We are in a governance crisis. We must consolidate and stop the insidious infighting that is a cancer on the public management of this metro region. How can we expect to keep our children in Charlinn if we cannot stop fighting against each other, and begin working together to expand opportunities through coordinated economic development and cost sharing that is equitable for all? It makes no sense to maintain city borders that were designed 100 years ago when people rode into town on horseback through the countryside! Change is long overdue. It is ridiculous to have six cities that you can't tell apart as you drive through the metro, all doing the exact same thing in total isolation. If we were starting from scratch to draw city lines, would anyone seriously propose the system we currently have? The current system is inefficient and threatens our ability to compete with other metro areas. We can save our future only by creating a single local consolidated government that is responsible to the whole community and by electing a Mayor/CEO with real powers. We need a full time responsible leader who is accountable to the public and to the checks and balances of an elected council, just like our federal government. Our current mayors are mere ornaments who cut ribbons and make pleasant speeches, but who must leave the running of her/his city to a bunch of bureaucrats because they cannot hire and fire like the tough CEO of any good business!”

The Commission then heard from a citizen living in rural unincorporated Olin County who was not happy about the prospect of being part of a new greater Olin metro government,

“We are about to be taken over by a man who for years has sought to control our lives — Clive Mannigan! Don't for a moment think this debate is about good government — it is not. It is about a conspiracy between the elites in this county, including our local newspaper, to consolidate power — power to prevent the good citizens of Olin County from choosing a local government

they like by moving out of one city and into another without having to leave the state. It is wrong to force farmers who happen to be located in Olin County rather than the next rural county to become part of a crime-ridden inner city, which has nothing to do with our good rural life. It is an outrage to give almost unchecked authority to a single person because that is the way it is done in business! Well, local government isn't and shouldn't be a business. Why would we want a CEO? A CEO is the kind of leader who is willing to sell his own mother if it would raise the price of his stock options. We need responsible fragmented political leadership, just as the founders of our nation envisioned. These citizen servants should be in charge of policy to be implemented by professional local administrators who will efficiently manage the public's business. Remember this, when local citizens cannot choose under which local government they will live, professional politicians like Clive Mannigan will forget about the people and pursue their own agendas like building a sports arena in their own name and there is not a single thing you can do about!"

After Erin listened for three hours to this passion filled debate, she realized that developing a rational consolidation proposal that Commission members would see as the single best plan and one that would be accepted by the public might be more difficult than she had ever imagined. As she gathered up her notes to head home, she thought, 'How can we consider the scientifically based single best way in this crazy political environment? Certainly, the process should improve once we get past this wild open forum public meeting and get down to business.' As she pondered these thoughts, she looked up to see a smiling Clive Mannigan, who said, "Good evening, Ms. Hobbs, I don't believe we have met before. My name is Clive. May we meet for lunch next week? I would like to give you the benefit of my views on this nice little consolidation project you are heading. Oh, and may I invite my friend from the paper to tag along? He can be of great help, you understand, in developing our plan."

Questions and Instructions:

1. Should local government be run like a business? In what ways is local government similar to a business? How does it differ? What message does adopting the term CEO instead of mayor send to the public?
2. Should local government be formally unified into one reflecting the community as whole or is it best to maintain a fragmented government that provides for competition for citizens? List the pros and cons of each perspective.
3. In this case, Erin Hobbs seeks a science-based rational approach to produce a single best policy. What is the role of science in the development of public policy such as this? What might be the role of *art* in crafting a new consolidated government structure for Olin County?
4. Should local government itself reflect the *checks and balances* features of a federal system? How does the current system of fragmented local governments in Olin County reflect federalism? Does the Clive Mannigan plan sufficiently provide for checks and balances?
5. In this day and age, is efficiency in government the overriding value that we must pursue even at the expense of equity? When would it be appropriate to sacrifice efficiency in the design of local government?

Timeline of Events:

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Mental Joggers:

Additional Notes and Observations:

Personal Reflections (topics or concerns that you want to address in other case analyses):

Case 9: Creating a “New” Olin County Metroplex

Name:

Case Log and Administrative Journal Entry

This case analysis and learning assessment is printed on perforated pages and may be removed from the book for evaluation purposes.

Case Analysis:

Major case concepts and theories identified:

What is the relevance of the concepts, theories, ideas, and techniques presented in the case to that of public management?

Facts — what do we know *for sure* about the case? Please list.

Who is involved in the case? (people, departments, agencies, units, etc.)
Were the problems of an “intra/interagency” nature? Be specific.

Are there any rules, laws, regulations, or SOPs identified in the case study that might limit decision-making? If so, what are they?

Are there any clues presented in the case as to the major actor’s interests, needs, motivations, and personalities? If so, please list them.

Learning Assessment:

What do the administrative theories presented in this case mean to you as an administrator?

How can this learning be put to use outside the classroom? Are there any problems you envision during the implementation phase?

Several possible courses of action were identified during the class discussion. Which action was considered to be *most practical* by the group? Which was deemed *most feasible*? Based on your personal experience, did the group reach a conclusion that was desirable, feasible, and practical? Please explain why or why not.

Did the group reach a decision that would solve the problem on a short-term or long-term basis? Please explain.

What could you have done to receive more learning value from this case?