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## Merged Government: Is this an Option for Bowling Green and Warren County, KY Governments?

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**Merged Government: Is this an Option for Bowling Green and Warren County, KY  
Governments?**



**Capstone in Public Financial Management**

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Spring 2022

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## **Introduction – Executive Summary**

In recent history, the most common attempt at reorganization of government in a metropolitan area is the city-county consolidation model. With limited government resources, elected officials along with community members look to this model to make the best use of those resources. “Applied to local government, the term “consolidation” is generally understood to mean the structural merging of two or more governments into one. When a city and county consolidate, a new and different form of local government is created that has elements of both city and county government but is neither.” (Martin, 2011)

There are both benefits and problems that arise from these kinds of propositions for consolidating or merging local governments and studying the history of existing merged governments helps answer the question of whether this is a viable option for Warren County and Bowling Green, KY. Because there are many things to consider, such as the fear of change for the citizens, uncertainty of the process, each side advocating for their own political views, legal issues, and the need for a high level of cooperation and acceptance, there will be no statistically correct answer in favor of or against a city-county merger. The research approach I am utilizing is qualitative. The type of design is a case study approach using descriptive research methods. This paper is a study of the subject of merged governments, having collected data using a variety of sources, and focusing on gaining a complete understanding of the issue. The descriptive design helps the reader to understand the information that has been gathered, analyzed, and presented in the paper. The goal of this paper is to present facts about the process of merging city and county governments, the potential benefits, and problems, and to list the steps if Warren County and Bowling Green, KY decide to begin this process. This paper is not a place for me to

advocate for one side or the other of the question, but to provide facts that could help the local leadership decide.

To answer the question above, articles and resources that give the advantages and disadvantages of merged governments and what steps government leaders should take to accomplish a consolidation were investigated. I will show examples of both successful and unsuccessful merged governments, list best practices for merged governments, and what steps to take for those who are considering a merger. Finally, I will discuss these concepts as they relate to Bowling Green and Warren County, KY.

### **Background on City-County Mergers**

Some of the most well-known mergers include Exxon and Mobile, Google and Android, and Disney/Pixar and Marvel. In the corporate world, mergers combine two or more companies or entities for the purpose of reducing risk and maximizing profits. Other goals include diversification of products and expanding market share. A merger of government entities, also known as a city-county consolidation, has some similar goals.

The expectation of a successfully merged government is that it will result in cost savings, increased efficiency, economic development, and better accountability. Removing duplicated services and efforts should result in savings. Many city and county governments overlap in services provided and may even use limited resources to compete for economic developments. Having one entity instead of two removes jurisdiction and potential fragmented services based on location. It will also eliminate disputes over responsibility for service. “Efficiency in government is the result of balanced budgets, rational spending, and the elimination of waste and duplication. Streamlining government ensures that every dollar is spent where it is needed most.” (Civic Federation) Economic development is a process which encourages partnerships between

businesses and the community and identifies resources which will ensure economic growth that is sustainable, innovative, and competitive. A vital trait of any government is accountability. Local government accountability applies to both financial and political decisions. When the community is aware of spending, economic and political plans, it strengthens their ability to voice either concerns or support of those decisions.

The University of North Carolina School of Government discusses city and county consolidation in the state of North Carolina in an article found at the School of Government website. The authors point out that just because a government entity is dissolved in the creation of a new merged one, it does not negate the need for services. One example they give is of fire protection. A dedicated fire department is usually located inside city limits and volunteer departments outside the city. A discussion follows on how the merged government and consolidated department will meet the needs of the citizens, including the creation of special tax areas, “to levy taxes, in addition to those levied throughout the county, city, or town, in order to finance, provide, or maintain services, facilities, and functions in addition to or to a greater extent than those financed, provided, or maintained for the entire county, city, or town.”

(University of North Carolina)

A 1969 newsletter from the University of Virginia discusses the nature of mergers and different ways community leaders can accomplish this effectively. The newsletter mentions state action and referendums and ways to accomplish mergers, it gives a history of several attempts at mergers, and discusses whether the merged governments are more efficient. Two examples of state action consolidations include the City of New Orleans and the County of Orleans, and Boston and Suffolk County. The consolidation in New Orleans took place soon after the Louisiana Territory became a part of the United States and before the government could become

organized. In 1822, Boston and Suffolk County were disagreeing over taxation and control of roads. “The Massachusetts legislature, seeking to resolve the disputes, abolished the county governing body and transferred its functions to the mayor and aldermen of Boston, which was simultaneously incorporated as a city.” (Makielski, 1969)

In his report to the New York State commission on the efficiency and competitiveness of local governments, Donald Boyd discusses city-county consolidations across the nation and points out that they “are most common in the South and the West,” and that “every city-county merger since 1900 has been in” those two regions. (Boyd, 2008) He explains that state laws, such as that of New York, can make it difficult for this type of consolidation to happen because of tax and debt limitations.

### **The Case for Merged Governments**

While the concept of consolidating governments is not new, there are not as many merged governments as one would expect. The National Association of Counties lists 42 consolidated city-counties as of October 2021. Citizens residing in Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee approved one of the earliest city-county consolidations in 1962. A metropolitan form of “government is a consolidation of two governments rather than the county taking over the city or the city taking over the county government. It is, in reality, a third form of local government with a range of options and flexibility to provide for population shifts to the suburbs.” (Nashville.gov) Nashville has been an excellent example and model for other cities. The Metropolitan Government of Nashville has a mayor and a council of 40 members. Even with its eventual success, the voters rejected the first attempt at consolidation just a few years earlier. A massive political campaign and increasing support from the African American community helped win the vote for consolidation.

“In 2012, the Abell Foundation launched a research project aimed at studying metropolitan consolidations. Distinct from an annexation where a city adds to its land area, consolidation combines some or all the government functions of two or more jurisdictions.” (Wachter, 2019) Jeff Wachter performed three case studies for this foundation to include “three of the most prominent examples of metropolitan consolidations that have occurred between 15 and 55 years ago: Louisville, Kentucky; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Nashville, Tennessee.” (Wachter, 2019) These three case studies provide an in depth look at the three consolidations and show that “consolidation did have positive effects on population growth and economic development, and each experienced the beneficial effects of becoming a larger, more prominent city within the national landscape. Taken together, the case studies have the potential to inform a renewed conversation around consolidation” in additional areas. (Wachter, 2019)

Indianapolis is a very popular example of a merged city-county government. “The city merged with Marion County in 1970, resulting in a singular government dubbed UniGov. The merger ultimately consolidated 31 city departments and 11 agencies into six new departments: administration, metropolitan development, public works, parks and recreation, public safety, and transportation.” (Baker, 2019) Those sorts of significant restructuring moves will result in savings on executive salaries and even banking services. While Baker does point out that Indianapolis is a sort of benchmark among consolidated city-county governments, this status did not come quickly. “Only after thirty years of consolidation were services such as police and fire fully consolidated.” (Leland, 2010) Indianapolis has delivered on the promise of economic development. From the time of “consolidation through 2011, employment in Marion County grew an average of 1.13 percent per year. The 1970s saw the fastest average annual jobs growth rate of 2.13 percent, while the 1980s and 1990s each experienced average annual employment



growth of approximately 1.8 percent. This annual growth resulted in a 54.63 percent increase in employment over that period, the 11th largest increase among a group of 47 peer cities. On an annual basis, the peer cities grew at approximately 0.53 percent, less than half the growth rate seen by Indianapolis.” (Wachter, 2019)

“Beyond the case study lessons on economic development and job growth, perhaps the most telling factor of the benefits and success of consolidation is the lack of any legal challenges or attempts to “undo” consolidation and revert to separate jurisdictions in the many decades that have followed.” (Wachter, 2019) One benefit of consolidation is having unity between the management of growth for the city and the county.

### **The Case Against Merged Governments**

Local governments can provide certain services more efficiently than other levels of government. The federal government level is responsible for national defense and foreign affairs. State government handles highways and higher education. That leaves sewage and sanitation services, police and fire protection, elementary and secondary education, and transportation for the local governments. Having services provided on a local level allows for autonomy and creates a sense of authority. Because of this, citizens in both a city and the county may oppose a potential merger believing that some of those things will be lost.

The website, Savannah Now, has an article that discusses many of the questions that community leaders must find answers for when considering a city-county merger. The authors talk about the characteristics and goals of mergers and the fact that there have been many that have not been as successful as hoped for. Regionalism is defined by the Oxford dictionary as the theory or practice of regional rather than central systems of administration or economic, cultural,

or political affiliation. They present this concept, along with the similar ones of “bold, collaborative, innovative, efficient, and equitable,” as being among the reasons why there are discussions of consolidating city and county governments.

One of the primary arguments against a city-county consolidation involves the loss of control and distribution of resources. When there are disparate levels of service provided, those who are accustomed to higher levels of service in the city may not be willing to have their taxes spent on increasing the level of service to those in the county. Minorities may be especially against a city-county consolidation because their numbers tend to be concentrated in the cities and a consolidation with the suburbs may dilute their voice in favor of upper middle-class citizens. The National League of Cities website has a page dedicated to consolidations. They discuss the background of city-county consolidations and describe the duties and responsibilities of both parties in the merger. They also list the purpose of consolidation and several benefits such as to produce cost savings, increase efficiency, improve resource base, enhance planning capacity, and to improve accountability. Finally, they lay out the process for consolidation and give different models for what the final product will look like. “The most common form of consolidated government is a single chief executive and a multi-district council with a few at-large seats.” (National League of Cities, 2022) Another example of a consolidation is a combination of several municipalities and a county into one larger government. Taxes can be linked to levels of service provided such as for urban and rural areas. The single form of government seems to be better in theory than in practice, though, as “often small municipalities, special districts and autonomous authorities and boards (for example, health, hospital, the school board, planning board, the port, the electric authority) continue to operate.” (National League of Cities, 2022)

Martin and Sciff (2011) present information on the differences between the goals of consolidation and the actual performance after consolidation. *City-County Consolidations: Promise Versus Performance* gives a brief overview of consolidations before explaining several arguments that proponents often use to support city-county consolidations and the resulting performance of each. Concepts discussed include efficiency, equity, and economic development and whether those goals are accomplished by consolidation.

The decision-making process for a city-county consolidated government is more difficult because there are more members of leadership. There is a lot of work that must be done to determine policies and procedures for the new government entity along with a realization of the fact that the new creation is its own entity, and neither of the former governments exists in the same way. Since neither government exists, the citizens may not feel a sense of connection. With that lost sense of connection, there may be a perception of lower level of services and a feeling of less satisfaction with services.

“Generally, the governing bodies of consolidated jurisdictions are quite large. For example, the board of Nashville/Davidson County contains 42 members. Decision-making under this arrangement can be difficult at best. These problems are exacerbated by the decentralized and dispersed authority of the additional constitutional offices.” (Smart City Memphis, 2022) An additional struggle is between policy making and the administration of those policies. Making policy decisions should be the responsibility of the elected officials who represent the citizens. Administering those policies is best done by those who are trained professionals. The governing body of representatives usually hire administrators based on qualifications. In the consolidated form of government, “these levels of decision-making are blurred. This is because there is no

separation of powers. The same persons elected to decide policy are the same persons who must administer the operations of the government.” (Smart City Memphis, 2022)

The University of Tennessee’s Institute for Public Service has created The Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS). The MTAS works to improve governance and delivery of services in the cities and towns in the state of Tennessee. In September of 2021, they issued a report on the potential consolidation of the Greater Memphis area. At the time of the report, there were “only three consolidated, or partially consolidated, governments in the state. Of the 3,069 counties in the United States, only 31, or 1% are consolidated, and a 1% success rate does not establish a trend toward consolidation. Between 1921 and 1996 there were 132 formal consolidation attempts, but only 22, or 16% were approved. If there is a trend, it is clearly against consolidation.” (Smart City Memphis)

## **Research Design**

The two main research methods when conducting research such as this are qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative approach provides an understanding of experiences, beliefs, and concepts while gaining an in-depth knowledge of a specific subject to explore problems that may have not been explored in detail or to express new ideas about the subject. This research design allows for adjustments during the process based on findings throughout the process. The quantitative approach measures variables and describes the frequencies, averages, and correlations between those variables. This approach tests hypotheses about relationships between variables and the effectiveness of new programs or products. Quantitative research design is a more fixed approach, with the variables and hypotheses clearly defined in advance of the data collection.

Because of the nature of this investigation, which includes a discussion of merged governments with examples of other city-county combined governments, a qualitative approach is more appropriate. This approach will allow consideration of the political motives, citizen responses and views, and other qualitative issues. The reliability and validity of the paper are important. Reliability shows that the information is the same and is consistent and that the data examined for each scenario measures the same concepts. For this study, reliability will mean that the circumstances in Bowling Green and Warren County are similar enough to those of the successfully merged cities for this to be a viable option. Validity shows that the information examined is pertinent to the question.

There are many questions to be answered when considering a potential city and county consolidation between Bowling Green and Warren County, KY:

1. What steps should Bowling Green and Warren County, Kentucky leadership take to pursue a city-county consolidation?
2. Does Bowling Green / Warren County fit the demographic and economic requirements to pass such a proposal?
3. What sort of revenue increases could be captured by consolidation?
4. What social issues exist that consolidation would improve or exacerbate?
5. How does the Bowling Green / Warren County area compare to other, existing, consolidated cities in the commonwealth of Kentucky?

The next sections will investigate successful mergers of the two largest population centers in Kentucky: Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government and Louisville Metro Government. The information gathered about these mergers is used to assess the potential merger strategies and hurdles that might be useful for Bowling Green/Warren County (the 3rd largest

population center in Kentucky) to consider. A discussion of the Bowling Green and Warren County demographics and economy follows.

### **Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government**

According to the Lexingtonky.gov organizational structure handbook, “In order to facilitate the operation of local government, to prevent duplication of services, and to promote efficient and economical management of the affairs of local government, the voters in any county except a county containing a city of the first class may merge all units of city and county government into an urban-county form of government.” Around 1970, the population of Lexington was at the threshold for being classified as a first-class city. With a 32% increase in population over the prior decade, there was a blurred demarcation between the city and county. “The ensuing sprawl brought along with it a haphazard extension of utilities to newly developed areas. Sewers and streetlights stretched down some roads on Lexington's fringes while circumventing others, many times doing so regardless of where the city limits lay.” (Shaw, 2010) When there are extensions of services, there are often attempts to annex the locations where those services are added. Instead of allowing countless annexes to emerge, the concept of merging the city and county governments was discussed. The major argument against this by county residents was their fear that “the merger would be nothing more than a scheme to make them subsidize urban services — sewers, lights and street cleaning — without receiving benefits in return.” (Shaw, 2010) To allay those fears, a tax system was proposed that would “charge residents only for the services they receive.” (Shaw, 2010)

The leaders of both the city of Lexington and the county of Fayette sought to gain the approval of the consolidation effort before their designation as a first-class city. After four years of planning, a petition drive, and the appointment of a merger commission, an overwhelming

majority of voters approved the charter for the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government. With more than 70% of the vote, this action created the first consolidated government in the state of Kentucky. “Lexington not only stands out as one of the relatively few communities with a population of over 100,000 to secure voter approval of a consolidation proposal, but it became the third largest community to do so between World War II and 1972. It was the second largest community to do so the first time the question was put on the ballot.” (Lyons)

The victory was largely attributed to the tax system proposed by the advocates on consolidation. As a result of this consolidation win, there were two distinct property tax districts that emerged. A general service district that covered the entire county provided services “where residents had the use of parks, libraries, courts, mass transit, airports, roads, basic police and fire protection, code enforcement and various welfare and social services, and should be supported by all local property taxpayers” (Shaw, 2010) There was also an urban service district, providing “the additional benefits of streetlights, street cleaning, garbage collection and greater police and fire protection.” (Shaw, 2010) Newly created subdivisions and businesses were able to make decisions based on a choose-your-own services option going forward. Having these options did create a few more complications than advocates had anticipated with “the various service combinations offered to residents resulting in the creation of eight tax districts.” (Shaw, 2010) Even though it seems to be very complex, the application of tax rates is done by a single employee thanks to advanced technology and the use of spreadsheets.

### **Louisville Metro**

Greenblatt (2010) provides an in-depth look at the merger of Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky. He describes the historical context of the merger along with revenue challenges and the long-standing conflicts between the agendas of leaders in the two government

units. He discusses several examples of how the two were already in the process of merging, even before it became official. Water and sewer systems, the school systems, as well as the park, zoo, and libraries already worked together as early as the 1980's. After World War II, Louisville lost jobs and much of their tax base when residents began moving to the surrounding county. To recoup some of those tax dollars, community leaders proposed a city-county merger in 1956. Though this first effort was supported by the Louisville Chamber of Commerce, it failed to pass because of lack of support by county voters.

Many proposed consolidations fall through because of discussions on merging school districts. When discussions of consolidation began again in earnest in the early 1980s, Louisville was already in a position for success. Because of desegregation orders in the 1970s, the school systems had already combined into one district. While there had been quite the tumultuous adjustment phase, even violence, the changes soon became accepted. In spite of this advantage, proposals for merging failed another two times, in 1982 and 1983. These failures were blamed on the sharing of too much information without advocating for benefits. "Plans to abolish local fire districts, for example, drew plenty of fire themselves." (Greenblatt, 2010) Following these failed attempts, city and county officials worked together to reduce some of the competition for resources. "Kentucky, remarkably, allows communities to impose an "occupational tax" which is essentially an income tax based on place of work on persons who work in the community." (Condon, 2019) This type of occupational tax accounts for large portions of the revenue for the municipalities that impose them. To create a sense of equity, the city and county agreed to impose an occupational tax of 1.25% of earnings. These funds were then distributed to where the worker lived, whether city or county. These efforts reduced bitterness and contention for only a



short time before leaders broadened their scope and began to focus on regional economic development.

Finally, in 2000, the proposal gained voter approval. The voters did not have as much information as in previous efforts. The proponents touted a single unit of government, “with a metro mayor taking over the responsibilities of the previous city mayor and county executive, and one metro council replacing the board of aldermen and the county's fiscal court.”

(Greenblatt, 2010) Few specifics were given on administrative functions or individual agencies.

The campaign for the consolidation “was led by an urban Democrat, popular Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson, who served from 1985 to 1998, and a suburban Republican, county judge/executive Rebecca Jackson” (Condon, 2019). Lexington’s consolidation proponents were racing against the clock to gain acceptance before their designation as a first class city, which would have prevented them from merging the governments. Louisville’s consolidation proponents advocated with the fact that the merger would put the city in “the top 25 largest cities list and becoming the largest city in Kentucky (overtaking Lexington, also a merged city-county).” (Condon, 2019) A summary of Jeff Wachter’s look at the Louisville merger after 10 years is “The cost of government has not increased and fewer employees have been able to maintain services, and the bureaucracy is easier to navigate. And most importantly, a new sense of possibility has developed in the city, as residents and business leaders look toward a brighter future.”

### **Bowling Green and Warren County, Kentucky**

Located in south central Kentucky on the Barren River, Bowling Green has the benefit of being located strategically between Louisville and Nashville on I-65. The Kentucky general assembly established Warren County in March 1797. The name was chosen to honor a hero in

the Battle of Bunker Hill, Dr. Joseph Warren. A two acre plot was donated for the building of a county courthouse and jail. The location is currently known as Fountain Square Park. The following year, “At the first county commissioners meeting, the pioneers decided that the new town would be called and known by the name of Bolin Green. This name was after the Bowling Green Square in New York City, where patriots had pulled down a statue of King George III and used the lead to make bullets during the American Revolution.” (Sweeten, 2022) The city was later designated as the county seat in 1809. Since that time, Bowling Green has become the third largest city in Kentucky, surpassing Owensboro in 2011.

Early business leaders worked diligently to secure the success of Bowling Green by supporting efforts to improve the navigation of Barren River and connecting docks to the center of town by railroads. Agriculture served as a large part of the economy with tobacco, hay, and livestock representing the main products. In 1838, the Louisville and Nashville turnpike was completed, which helped solidify the towns connection to the region. By the 1950s, Bowling Green touted a jewelry store and a wide variety of entertainment options, both reflecting the increase of wealth of many residents. Bowling Green was soon home to “several manufacturing facilities as well, including an iron foundry, woolen factory, candle factory and several flour mills.” (Sweeten, 2022)

Both the city and county have seen impressive growth over the last several decades, due to their convenient location and commitment to growth in industry. In addition to Bowling Green, Warren County is home to the communities of Smiths Grove, Oakland, Plum Springs, Woodburn, Rockfield, Rich Pond, Plano, Alvaton, and Richardsville. Warren County is currently in seventh place for growth rate by county in Kentucky. For counties with more than 100,000 residents, it places second behind Boone. Warren County also lies in the middle of the Barren

River Area Development District, which is a ten-county region with 25 cities. Warren County serves as the economic anchor of this district with many of the residents traveling to Bowling Green for work, retail, and entertainment purposes.

The largest industries in the area today are manufacturing and service. Bowling Green and Warren County are home to eight of the top 10 largest employers in south central Kentucky as well as eight of the top 10 largest manufacturing facilities, according to the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce council on Economic Development.

The website for the city of Bowling Green lists 13 individual departments, with many having multiple divisions. Warren County lists 14 departments, with at least two having multiple divisions. On the city of Bowling Green website, there is also a list of City-County Departments that include the contractor licensing board, drug task force, emergency management, and planning commission. These four departments are already merged to some extent, and many of the other departments between the two governments clearly overlap. Both governments have a clerk's office, fire and police departments, and leadership divisions. Bowling Green has an Office of the City Manager while Warren County has the Judge Executive. The graphic below lists the departments for both Bowling Green and Warren County. The rows that are highlighted in green represent the departments that are listed on the Bowling Green, KY city website as "City-County Departments." Rows that are highlighted in blue reflect departments that have similar, potentially redundant, or overlapping services.

Departments	Bowling Green	Warren County
Office of the City Manager	X	
Judge Executive		X
Clerk's Office	X	X
Internal Auditor	X	
Public Information Officer	X	
Finance	X	
Fire	X	X
Human Resources & Risk Management	X	
Information Technology	X	
Law (Legal)	X	
Neighborhood & Community Services	X	
Parks & Recreation	X	X
Police / Sheriff	X	X
Public Works	X	X
Contractors Licensing Board	X	X
Drug Task Force	X	X
Emergency Management	X	X
Planning Commission	X	X
Fiscal Court		X
Stormwater Management		X
Road Department		X
Jailer		X
Coroner		X
Highlighted areas reflect similar / overlapping departments		
Highlighted areas reflect City-County Merged Departments		

I emailed leadership of the four City-County departments several questions about the consolidation. At the time of this writing, I have heard back from two departments. Holly Warren, the Office Manager for the Bowling Green-Warren County Contractors Licensing Board (CLB) responded with information about the department. Ben Peterson is the Executive Director of the City County Planning Commission (CCPC). He gave the history of the commission, benefits, leadership details, and his opinion on whether consolidation is an option for Bowling Green and Warren County to consider.

The CLB was started in 1991 under a joint ordinance with the purpose of helping to protect the welfare and safety of both Bowling Green and Warren County citizens against unscrupulous contractors. They also regulate construction activity with the goal of protecting property owners. Any new regulations for this department must be passed in both the city and county governments to be approved. Even with the onus of approval from both the City Commission and Warren Fiscal Court, the department receives funding from neither, as they are self-funded.

The CCPC has been a joint venture between Bowling Green and Warren County since 1958. The four smaller incorporated cities of Smiths Grove, Oakland, Plum Springs, and Woodburn joined at various later dates. The main benefits of this consolidation include uniformity and efficiency. Having a unified development code throughout the county is an efficiency, there is one code book and one set of rules to administer. Another efficiency is the fact that any one staff member can reference one book with one answer for all political boundaries. Often, in cities and counties that are not joint or merged, there are staff assigned to each major jurisdiction. Having a consolidated department also makes it easier on the public side. There is only one office to call, and the public does not have to figure out whether to call the city or the county they live in to know what rules apply.

Leadership for the CCPC is outlined in an inter-local agreement approved and signed by Warren County and the cities of Bowling Green, Smiths Grove, Oakland, Plum Springs and Woodburn. There are 12 members of the planning commission with appointees consisting of the following: 4 appointees by the Warren County Judge Executive and affirmed by the Fiscal Court, 4 appointees by the Mayor of Bowling Green affirmed by the City Commission, and 1 each from the mayor of the 4 small cities affirmed by their commissions. These 12 members have authority

over all the office operations including hiring and firing of staff, personnel budget, etc. They employ the Executive Director to run and manage the office. Their other duties include making recommendations on land use decisions to the legislative bodies, zoning text amendments and are responsible for the Comprehensive Plan. Besides what is collected from application and construction fees, the balance of the budget is received approximately 50% from the county and 50% from Bowling Green.

When asked about the possibility of a Bowling Green and Warren County consolidation, Mr. Pearson responded with,

“Yes! I think it’s time for several reasons. Staffing shortages, pay discrepancies, and the challenge of doing more with less has taken its toll especially with COVID, inflation and the “great resignation”. My opinion is that we do not necessarily save money as in cheaper government, but we gain efficiencies that allow staff to do more with less.”

### **BGWC Options**

Warren County encompasses more square miles than either Jefferson or Fayette counties with 548 square miles. The population is much less, though, with only 132,896. When Lexington grew to over 100,000 and was on the verge of being designated a first class city, they advocated for the consolidated government before that happened. The rules changed in 2015 and that rule no longer applies. “Prior to 2015, Kentucky cities were divided into one of six classes, which were based on population size tiers ranging from less than 1,000 to more than 100,000. As of January 1, 2015, the arbitrary classification system with six classifications changed to two classes: first class (Louisville) and home rule cities (all other cities). Lexington is a home rule city but maintains all responsibilities and privileges under its urban county statutes. Louisville

will continue to exercise the powers of the first class city by virtue of being a consolidated local government.” (Kentucky League of Cities)

	Square Miles	Population	Per Sq Mile
<b>Louisville Metro</b>	399	1,395,634	3,497.8
<b>Lexington Fayette Urban</b>	285	322,570	1,131.8
<b>Bowling Green / Warren County</b>	548	132,896	242.5



The consolidation between the city Lexington and Fayette County, KY stands out as one of the most successful campaigns for mergers in the history of city-county mergers. For this reason, I would recommend the leadership of Bowling Green and Warren County, KY follow the path the leaders of Lexington and Fayette County took by creating a Merger Commission to research options. This task force would have the charge of reporting on the potential benefits of a government consolidation.

## Recommendations

There are several things for the task force to consider, including the following tasks to be completed:

1. Gauging interest. This will help the commission prepare talking points. Community interest is the first and most important item on the list. Determining whether the citizens and leadership are receptive and supportive of consolidation will be an integral part of a successful campaign.
2. Identify any partnerships that already exist between the local governments. As listed in the city and county information above, there are at least four shared services already, which shows that the entities can work together. “Communities have put an increasing emphasis on partnerships to combine resources, increase efficiency, and improve service delivery. Moving forward, some of these efforts may lead to interest in consolidation. Local governments that have complementary services may be able to improve programming or reduce costs by consolidating through coordinating programs.” (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning)  
Both Bowling Green and Warren County have Parks and Recreation departments that could easily consolidate to reduce leadership roles and increase services.
3. Determine similarities in tax base, services, and potential for growth. Because of the location of Bowling Green and Warren County, the interstate corridor, and the concerted efforts to pursue growth over the past several years, there is a good likelihood that they would “gain efficiencies and resources by consolidating. Such consolidations also may increase a community's capacity by creating opportunities to hire staff dedicated to specific concerns, such as community development, economic development, or planning.” (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning)
4. Overcoming obstacles. These potential obstacles include those who seem to be opposed to increased development or progress. Mike Buchanon, Warren County Judge Executive



since 1993, has been described as “‘too strong an environmentalist’ for pushing riverfront and illegal dump cleanup, clearing sinkholes, and sponsoring countywide garbage pickup and recycling,” (Gaines) and yet has also faced opposition from environmentalist groups who were against the trimodal transpark project in northern Warren County. A valid argument against progress and development is the belief that the rural lifestyle so many enjoy will become a thing of the past. Another is that taxes will increase without added benefits or levels of service. These issues must be addressed in a charter proposition.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, lessons learned from successful mergers can be used by Bowling Green and Warren County leaders to determine whether a city and county consolidation should be considered. In most cases, perception is reality. If a community thinks a consolidation will be beneficial, they will be convinced that it should proceed. If the community thinks a consolidation is unnecessary, they will be convinced that it should not be pursued. Even though “efficiency gains in government often are not achieved, economic development benefits are realized.” (Leland, 2010) The potential economic benefits are something that cannot be dismissed lightly. As local government resources become more constrained, it will be necessary to explore ways to make the best use of them. A city-county consolidation may be just what is needed to best utilize those limited resources.

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