

A Short History of the Creation of Metropolitan Government for Nashville-Davidson County

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After World War II, Davidson County, Tennessee experienced dramatic growth as people began moving out of Nashville's older urban neighborhoods into new modern houses being rapidly built in new neighborhoods known as suburbs. The county's educational system attempted to keep up with the increased school-age population by building new schools in the suburbs, but it did not have the financial resources to provide other basic services, such as fire protection, sanitary sewers, or garbage collection. This population shift also created a financial challenge for Nashville's city government as its tax base began to erode. In addition, county residents enjoyed many city services such as the use of its public libraries and parks system without paying the city taxes which funded those services.

Beyond the problems caused by rapid growth, there was some overlapping of services by the city and the county. Elected officials and community leaders in both the city and county recognized that they needed to work together to solve these problems. After 20 years of lengthy debates over the best solution, the residents of the city of Nashville and Davidson County voted to consolidate their governmental functions into a completely new form of government now known as the Metropolitan Government of Nashville-Davidson County.

In 1958, the voters of Nashville and Davidson County rejected a charter to consolidate the city and county by a referendum, in spite of the fact that the charter was supported by County Judge Beverly Briley and Nashville Mayor Ben West, as well as both Nashville newspapers.

Since metropolitan government had failed, the city of Nashville implemented alternative plans to improve its tax base. It annexed 42-square miles of suburban residential property and created a \$10 wheel tax on all cars regularly using the city streets, which included suburban residents who worked in the city. These measures outraged the 82,000 residents of the annexed areas as well as other county residents who feared that their neighborhood could be annexed as well. They called for another referendum on consolidation and a second charter commission was created to write a new charter for metropolitan government.

When the second charter was completed, the size of the Metropolitan Council had been increased from 21 members to 40 members. The new charter provided for a transition school board to implement the consolidation of the two school systems. It also attempted to address the concerns of the residents of the county who had been annexed by creating two service districts, the General Services District and the Urban Services District, to provide for a differential in tax levels. Residents of the Urban Services District had a full range of city services. The areas that comprised the General Services District, however, had a lower tax rate until services were provided. Six incorporated communities in the county - Berry Hill, Belle Meade, Oak Hill, Forest Hills, Goodlettsville, Lakewood - were allowed to retain their charters. These communities today are referred to as "satellite cities."

Led by County Judge Beverly Briley and *The Tennessean*, supporters of the new charter launched a massive political campaign for passage. Mayor Ben West and the *Nashville Banner* no longer supported consolidation since the city had attempted to achieve a similar goal by annexation; they led the opposition. The African-American community of the city was divided over the long-term benefits of consolidation for African Americans since they had steadily gained political power in the city since World War II.

On June 28, 1962, the voters of the city and the county voted in favor of the creation of a metropolitan government. Beverly Briley was elected the first Mayor in November and the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County was implemented on April 1, 1963.

Nashville became the national pioneer in metropolitan organization. Although other cities had partial consolidation, Nashville was the first city in the country to achieve true consolidation. Today, there are some 14 consolidated governments in the United States out of over 3,100 county units. Each successful consolidation has used the 1962 Nashville charter as a model.

Metropolitan 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. The Metropolitan Charter provides a mechanism for changes to be made in the document through the Charter Revision Commission. Since 1962, the Charter has been amended for several housekeeping measures, but there has not been a major, comprehensive revision of the Charter since its adoption.