

City – County Merger

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In October 2006, Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato created an advisory committee to study the possibility merging the two governments. The committee, chaired by University of Pittsburgh Chancellor Mark Nordenberg, recently released its report. The city and county will probably unite in one way or another, and we all wonder how a merger will affect us personally.

The advisory committee's report contains three recommendations:

- that city and county leaders explore opportunities to work together, such as purchasing, vehicle fleet management, technical services, and other areas where duties are duplicated
- that they state their cooperation in a formal contract
- that city and county residents can vote on the prospect of combining the two governments.

There is no merger plan right now. All we have are a report and a lot of ideas. There are as many opinions as there are politicians, and they vary from wanting absolutely no merger at all to insisting upon a complete blending of all Allegheny County municipalities and school districts into one giant metropolis. But don't worry. Right now, they're just opinions.

Local officials still have to decide the details, but the most common fears are unnecessary. The Allegheny County Home Rule Charter specifically forbids the county from forcing any municipality to merge with another. The voters of each municipality – Baldwin, Brentwood, South Park, etc. – would have to approve any merger plan. School districts would also have to approve any proposed plan. Finally, suburban taxpayers would not be responsible for the city's outstanding debt.

As the authorities draft a proposal, there will be many meetings of city employees, county employees, and gatherings where they meet together to work out the details. After they draft the plan, they will most likely hold town meetings and public hearings in communities throughout the county. These are your chances to state your opinion and to ask questions. The hearings and meetings will be advertised when they are scheduled. A public hearing is more formal than a town meeting, but you can speak your mind at both. Watch the news and check your government Web sites for details. Just in case they don't plan to hold hearings and meetings, citizens can insist on them. You can find rules on the city and county Web sites.

The officials will consider the comments and information from the public as they revise their plan. Then the city and county councils both have to approve the final version of the plan. There is a public comment period at every public council meeting. The meeting schedule and rules for speaking are also on the Web sites. After that, the public will vote on the plan in a referendum.

Again, the plan will not require suburban boroughs, townships, and school districts to merge with Pittsburgh. That can only happen in a separate vote by each municipality and school board.

Really, that's all there is to it right now. Nothing's been decided yet. But keep watching the news and the Web sites. When this does start moving, I expect it to move quickly.

For More Information:

Follow the links for the rules to request a public hearing, the rules for speaking at council meetings, a summary of the report, the entire report, and the Home Rule Charters.

Allegheny County: www.county.allegheny.pa.us

City of Pittsburgh: www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us

University of Pittsburgh: www.pitt.edu

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