

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Lesson from Indianapolis: The limits of a merger

By Tim Logan

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Indianapolis – When people start to talk about how St. Louis can become more competitive economically, it usually takes, oh, about 30 seconds before someone brings up the prospect of merging – in one form or another – St. Louis City and County.

That's likely one reason why the RCGA chose Indianapolis for its Annual Leadership Trip this year.

Indianapolis, after all, is about 40 years in to what may be the nation's most aggressive experiment in city/county combination.

They call it UniGov, and it was launched in 1970, when the City of Indianapolis merged with Marion County, the core of Indianapolis' nine-county metro area. And while it's not a complete county-wide merger – four other municipalities, schools, courts and fire districts remain separate – many of the functions of government for the biggest urban area in Indiana are run by a single Mayor and City Council in the City/County Building.

How has it worked?

That depends on your perspective.

Nearly everyone who talked with the RCGA about UniGov agreed that, on balance, it's been a good thing for Indianapolis. It has encouraged cooperation. It has put someone in charge. For decades, it helped the older urban core capture some of the fiscal benefits of suburban growth. And it allows Indianapolis to claim its status as the nation's 13th-biggest city, punching above its weight as the nation's 34th biggest metro area.

"It's hard to imagine where we'd be without UniGov," said Randall Shepherd, chief justice of the Indiana Supreme Court.

Yet consolidation definitely has its limits.

For political reasons – to win the vote – UniGov’s architects left some of pieces of local government out, like volunteer fire districts that prized their independence, and tiny township governments that run things like tax assessment in Indiana. Even today, there are 62 local government districts in Marion County. And that still creates inefficiency.

And Indianapolis has, in a sense, outgrown UniGov. When it was created 40 years ago, Marion County still had plenty of room for new development. Today, it’s built out, and most of the population growth now is in ring counties around Marion, beyond the reach of UniGov.

“We cannot annex,” said John Krauss, director of the Indiana University Public Policy Institute. “And because of that, growth has not been our friend.”

Yet Indianapolis is still the anchor – and the engine – of the region.

And that gives rise to one of the biggest benefits of UniGov, several of its veterans suggested. The Mayor of Indianapolis has such a central role in the region, and speaks for so many of the region’s people, that he can take the lead even on issues that are beyond his legal purview. Someone is in charge.

“We created a single, visible executive,” said Ned Lamkin, a former state lawmaker who had a role in launching UniGov. “We do have a structure where the chief executive can actually be the executive.”

Empowering that executive takes a lot of political will. And St. Louis has, over the decades, created a very different system. That was by choice, and lots of people like it things the way they are. Even if a city/county merger makes sense economically, is it something we want? What do you think?

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