Moving Toward Regional Governance – Incrementally: The St. Louis Case

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COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL REFORM ATTEMPTS: 1876-1990
HISTORICAL SETTING FOR REFORM

In commenting on the situation that had evolved in the St. Louis region, the Metropolitan St. Louis Survey noted *in 1957* the following "continuing problems" for the St. Louis City/County area; given the passage of almost five decades, the list reflects a prescient account of the *status up to then* and the *present day* status:

- wide disparities in the number and extent of public services provided,
- substantial variation in the ability to finance essential governmental services,
- some essential area-wide services are inadequate,
- some communities have failed to recognize their responsibility to the entire urban area,
- competition among municipalities to increase their potential tax resources impedes land use planning for the entire area,
- growth will occur in unincorporated St. Louis County and *ad hoc* annexations and incorporations will not provide an adequate solution,
- St. Louis County will have to provide an increasing amount of municipal services to unincorporated County residents.
Article VI, Section 30 of the Missouri State constitution allows for the establishment of a Board of Freeholders (later changed to Electors) to address local Government structure in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. The constitution Section 30(a)] designates five types of reform which the Board can consider. 

- The first three (added in 1924) deal with **re-entry or merger between St. Louis City and County.**
- The fourth (added in 1945) addresses the **formation of an area-wide district(s);** under this provision the Metropolitan Sewer District was approved by voters in 1954.
- The fifth option allows the Board "to formulate and adopt any other plan for the partial or complete government of all or any part of the city and the county."

This much more expansive option was added to the state constitution in 1966. This provision has always been interpreted to mean that any proposed plan must include some provision that affects both the City and the County. Any proposal must receive voter approval.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PROPOSAL</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>Separate St. Louis City from St. Louis County</td>
<td>passed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The Great Divorce”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Merge St. Louis City and County under City government</td>
<td>failed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Metropolitan Sewer District</td>
<td>passed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Create a transit district</td>
<td>failed</td>
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<td>1959</td>
<td>Create a multi-purpose district</td>
<td>failed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Greater St. Louis City-County District)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Fundamental restructuring of St. Louis County Government and establish</td>
<td>**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>two area-wide &quot;districts&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Establish a Metropolitan Economic Development and a Metropolitan Park</td>
<td>failed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Commission</td>
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** This Board was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1989.
1876: THE “GREAT DIVORCE”: SEPARATION OF THE CITY FROM THE COUNTY

When a constitutional convention was called in 1875 the relationship between the City and County was brought to the forefront.

By an overwhelming majority the convention adopted a provision that authorized the separation of the City from the County.

The new constitution was approved in late 1875.

Pursuant to this provision a Board of Freeholders was elected in early 1876 with a specific charge to prepare a scheme for the separation to be submitted for voter approval.

After considerable controversy over the vote outcome, it was declared passed on October 22, 1876.

The City was “emancipated” and in the process its area was increased from about 18 to 61 square miles, an area felt more than adequate to accommodate growth of the City.
1926: CONSOLIDATION OF THE CITY AND COUNTY UNDER CITY GOVERNMENT

After the 1876 separation it was increasingly felt that this might well have been a mistake and a merger of some sort would be appropriate. To correct this deficiency deliberations began on a constitutional amendment in 1922 which resulted in an amendment that passed easily in 1924. It had three options for “reuniting” the City and County:

- the City would extend its limits to include the entire County,
- the County would extend its limits to include the City which could then extend its limits under existing law, and
- the City could annex part of the County under the exclusive jurisdiction of the City.

Thus, de facto it was a take over, re-entry, or annexation but controlled by the City.

On June 25, 1925 a Board of Freeholders was convened. In March of 1926 a plan was introduced that:

- made the City charter the governing document for the new area,
- eliminated all County offices and placed them under City control,
- transferred all County property to the City,
- eliminated all municipalities in the County,
- put the City police department in control of the entire new area, and
- abolished all County school districts placing them under the City school board’s control.
1954: CREATION OF THE METROPOLITAN SEWER DISTRICT

The fact that water naturally seeks a lower level, in this case toward the City from the County, led to the formation of another Board of Freeholders in 1953. Beginning in the mid–1800s with a serious cholera epidemic and gaining momentum from there, it became obvious by the early 1950s that treatment of sewage in the County was having a serious impact on the City.

The County was growing, adding more people, and suffering the downside of the associated waste. With population growth it was increasingly imposing this waste problem on the City as well.

In this context the Bi–State Development Agency conducted an engineering study of sewer needs in the County. The findings indicated the following:

- there was a serious sewer problem in both the City and County,
- the health hazards were area–wide,
- the sewer problems could not be handled separately since the urbanized area of the County drained through the City, and
- piecemeal efforts failed because they covered less than an entire watershed and had inadequate resources to address the issue.
1955: METROPOLITAN TRANSIT DISTRICT

In 1949 following deliberations beginning in 1948, the Bi–State Development Agency was established to deal with transportation issues in the Missouri/Illinois bi–state region. Bi–State was “governmental wimp.” It had “empowerment” to deal with area transportation issues but no authority to tax or do much else except “make plans” but not policies.

In 1952 the question of who should own and operate public transit became an issue for the region. The region’s ridership was then more than four hundred thousand and more than fifteen companies provided transit services. Out of this chaotic environment came a proposal for a Board of Freeholders to deal with the current and emerging region’s transportation problems.

This Board decided to delay the issue of public ownership of transit facilities and focus on the control over fares being shifted from the state to a new “Metropolitan St. Louis Transit District.” This fledgling measure that avoided public ownership satisfied virtually no one.

As a result the proposal was defeated in both the City and County.
1959: CREATION OF THE METROPOLITAN ST. LOUIS DISTRICT

During the more than three decades since the last comprehensive look at the St. Louis area’s governmental structure attention began to shift back to the Region and its existing and emerging problems.

Two proposals, albeit conflicting, were considered. The first was a metropolitan district that would deal with seven major functional areas. The second was a complete merger of City and County into a single entity called the “municipal county.” The vote from the Board on the Plan finally emerged as ten for the District and nine for the municipal merger.

The plan proposed by the 1959 Board of Freeholders was called the “Greater St. Louis City–County District.”

Conferred on this district was the following set of functions:
- establish and maintain a system of arterial roads, expressways, and major streets;
- regulate mass transit including fares, routing and schedules, traffic lanes, and other means of encouraging use of such facilities;
- take over the Metropolitan Sewer District established in 1954;
- organize civil defense under one central administration;
- encourage establishment of industrial locations to attract new business;
- engage in comprehensive area–wide planning; and
- coordinate a centralized police communication and reporting system.
1987: BOARD OF FREEHOLDERS PLAN

St. Louis County Issues

ORGANIZATIONAL/STRUCTURAL
- All of the County incorporated.
- Cities reduced from 90 to 37.
- Clear division of responsibility between cities in the county and county government.
- St. Louis County provides no municipal-type services.
- Control over all municipal matters remains with cities except where some gross violation of the municipal/county master plan arises.
- Number of fire protection providers reduced from 42 to 4, each with a full array of fire protection and EMS services.

REVENUES/FUNDING
- A County-wide 1% earnings tax imposed on salaries, wages, and business profits to fund: part of the fire/EMS district cost, county government, and a municipal development fund.
- All sales tax revenues distributed: 25% point-of-sale 75% per capita (pool).
- A gross receipts tax of 6% on nonresidential utility usage; for municipal use only.
- The County property tax rolled back by 56 cents/$100 assessed valuation; only 14 cents for debt service remains.
- Fire property tax rates rolled back from present levels (as high as $1.00 or more) to 13 cents/$100 assessed value.
Municipalities
St. Louis County, Missouri

MUNICIPALITIES

Prepared by St. Louis County
Department of Planning
October 2002
The proposal would divide the county into the 37 municipalities shown here. Only Lambert Field would remain unincorporated. Pacific, most of which is in Franklin County, would retain its silver of land in southwest St. Louis County.

Source: St. Louis County Planning Department
City/County Area-Wide Issues

AREA-WIDE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
A joint City/County economic development district" will be established. It will be funded through a 1% tax on nonresidential utility usage in the City and County plus all taxes derived from St. Louis International Airport (Lambert Airport).

FUTURE AREA-WIDE ISSUES/ PROBLEMS
A "Metropolitan Commission" will be established with the authority to examine specific issues (e.g., solid/toxic waste disposal) that affect the City/County area. Only one such Commission may be in session at any given time. Funding will be shared equally by the City and County.
Final Freeholders Proposal

1. Spanish Lake 19. Clayton
2. Florissant 20. Richmond Heights
4. Bridgeton 22. Maplewood
5. Belleville 23. Shrewsbury
6. Bellefontaine Neighbors 24. Webster Groves
7. Ferguson 25. Glendale
10. Maryland Heights 28. Affton
11. Overland 29. Mehlville
12. Normandy 30. Fenton
14. Olivette 32. Des Peres
15. Creve Coeur 33. Manchester
16. Jennings 34. Ballwin
17. Town and Country 35. Eureka
18. Ladue 36. Ellisville
19. Chesterfield

Existing Municipalities
1. Ballwin
2. Bella Vista
3. Bel-Ridge
4. Bellefontaine
5. Belton
6. Bel-Ridge
7. Berkley
8. Black Jack
9. Brockhollow Hills
10. Bridgeton
11. Brentwood
12. Bridgeton
13. Broadview Terrace
14. Calvary
15. Camp
16. Chester
17. Clayton
18. Collinsville
19. Cold Valley
20. Country Club Hills
21. Country Life Acres
22. Creekwood
23. Crystal Lake Park
24. Delmar
25. Des Peres
26. Edmondson
27. Ellisville
28. Fernhill
29. Ferguson
30. Forest Hills
31. Florissant
32. Foxfire Park
33. Fenton
34. Foxfield
35. Glen Echo Park
36. Glen Echo Park
37. Green Pages
38. Greenwood
39. Hardy Hills
40. Harvard Park
41. Heidelberg
42. Huntleigh
43. Jefferson
44. Kirkwood
45. Ladue
46. Lakeside
47. Manchester
48. Manchester
49. Manchester
50. Maplewood
51. Maryland Heights
52. Maryland Heights
53. Maplewood
54. Normandy
55. Northwinds
56. Norwood
57. Norwood
58. Olive
t
59. Overland
60. Pacific
61. Pégoly
62. Pégoly
63. Pasadena Park

Source: St. Louis County Planning Department

Tom Jurgensen/Post-Dispatch

Only Lambert Field would remain unincorporated. Pacific, most of which is in Franklin County, would retain its silver of land in southwest St. Louis County.
1990: BOARD OF ELECTORS PLAN
This board was called into existence in 1990 by a Missouri Supreme Court order after the 1987 Board of Freeholders was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. The proposals presented to the voters by this Board affect both St. Louis City and St. Louis County.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Establish a Metropolitan Economic Development Commission "...to finance programs which will create, attract, retain, expand, develop, improve, and enhance employment opportunities within the City and County."
This Commission would be financed by a 2% gross receipts tax on nonresidential utility customers (water, gas, electric, telephone).

REGIONAL PARKS
Establish a Metropolitan Park Commission "...to govern, administer, repair, maintain, conserve, sustain, protect, and improve any and all Commission Parks."
De facto, only the 1,300 acre Forest Park in St. Louis City would be affected unless expanded authority and funding was approved by voters.
This Commission would be financed by a tax of up to 6 cents per $100 assessed valuation on property in the City and County with up to 2 cents for operations and up to 4 cents for repairs and capital improvements.
Incremental Regionalism in St. Louis: 1954-2006
Many Policy Areas

- Sanitary and Solid Waste
- Education
- Cultural Institutions and the Arts
- Public Safety
- Transportation
- Tourism and Sports Venues
- Parks and Open Space
- Health Care for the Indigent
- Economic Development
Sanitary Waste and Solid Waste

Metropolitan Sewer District (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1954)

St. Louis-Jefferson Solid Waste Management District
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, Jefferson County, St. Charles County) (1991)

Education

St. Louis Community College District (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1961)

Southwestern Illinois College (Madison County and St. Clair County) (1985)

Metropolitan Public Universities: Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (1965) and University of Missouri-St. Louis (1963)

Cooperating School Districts (entire metropolitan area) (1964)
Cultural Institutions and the Arts
Zoo-Museum District (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1971, 1983, 1987)

Regional Arts Commission (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1984)

Public Safety
Major Case Squad
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, Franklin County, Jefferson County, St. Charles County, Warren County, Bond County, Madison County, Monroe County, St. Clair County) (1965)

Regional Justice Information System
(City of St. Louis and St. Louis County—contracts with Franklin County, Jefferson County, St. Charles County, Madison County, Monroe County, St. Clair County) (1975)
Transportation

*Bi-State Development Agency/Metro*
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, St. Clair County) (1950, 1960’s)

*Lambert Airport*
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, St. Charles County) (1980’s, 1990’s)

*East West Gateway Council of Governments*
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, Franklin County, Jefferson County, St. Charles County, Madison County, Monroe County, St. Clair County) (1965)

Tourism and Sports Venues

*Convention and Visitors Commission* (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1984)

*Edward D Jones Dome* (1990)

*Busch Stadium III* (2006)
Parks and Open Space
Great Rivers Greenway (City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, St. Charles County) (2000)

Metro East Park and Recreation District (Madison County, St. Clair County) (2000)

Health Care for the Indigent
Regional Medical Center (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1985-1997)

St. Louis ConnectCare (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (1997)

Regional Health Commission (City of St. Louis and St. Louis County) (2001)

Economic Development
Greater St. Louis Economic Development Council
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, St. Charles County, Southwestern Illinois) (1994)

Greater St. Louis Regional Empowerment Zone
(City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, St. Clair County) (1998)
A FINAL REFLECTION

Our account of St. Louis’s twentieth century experience with regionalism contains two lessons: 1) think small ball (issue-by-issue incremental reform) rather than large ball (comprehensive governmental consolidation); and 2) acknowledge and celebrate the incremental accomplishments to provide momentum for future ones (we can do it and it is the “St. Louis” way).

Over the years, much has been proposed and discussed, and many attempts have proven successful, but there is still weight to what remains.

St. Louis has long been a textbook example of governmental structure problems. Might it become a textbook example of what can be done to correct them more narrowly and incrementally rather than globally and all at once?