

TEXAS VS TENNESSEE

Because local governments, like cities and counties, are created by state legislatures and state constitutions, the United States has fifty different systems of local government. Some states give a lot of responsibilities and powers to counties, while others do the same with their cities. Some states allow cities to be independent of counties. Other states allow the merger of city and county governments into a single entity. Tennessee is one such state.

In 1963, the Tennessee state government permitted the city of Nashville and surrounding Davidson County to merge. Called the Metropolitan Government, the consolidated government was intended to improve services, especially in areas of Davidson County outside of the city limits—essentially the rural areas of the county. These unincorporated areas wanted better police protection, fire and ambulance services, parks and recreation, and mass transit. Services to these areas would be uniform across the county. However, residents of rural areas did not necessarily want *all* of the services that Nashville provided to its residents and the accompanying higher level of taxes, nor did residents in the county want annexation into the city.ⁱ As a result, the Metropolitan Government created two different levels of service. A general services district (GSD) provides a uniform level of services throughout Davidson County at the same property tax rate regardless of location in the county. As part of the GSD, a common city-county court system and jail replaced separate city and county operations. An urban services district offers additional services to the city of Nashville and other communities that opt into the district. These include street lighting, water, refuse collection, street cleaning, and sanitation.ⁱⁱ

The Metropolitan Government is governed by the Metropolitan Council, which has forty members who are elected by a combination of single-member district plurality and at-large election systems. A Metro mayor serves as the chief executive, and a finance director oversees the budget. Decisions relating to the urban services district are made by a three-person committee whose members are part of the Metropolitan Council.ⁱⁱⁱ Davidson County is served by a single consolidated school district. The school board is directly elected, but the school budget must be approved by the Metro mayor and finance director.

However, the merger of the city of Nashville and Davidson County is only a partial consolidation because seven other cities and towns located in Davidson County that existed prior to the

merger remain independent. Communities such as Belle Meade and Goodlettsville participate in the general services district. However, the additional services of the urban services district must be provided separately or by a contract with the Metropolitan Government.^{iv}

The creation of the Metropolitan Government allowed the city of Nashville and Davidson County to harmonize the level and quality of services provided to citizens in the city and county. Zoning and planning became a function of the consolidated government, forestalling competition between the city and county and producing a common approach to economic development. Economies of scale developed in the provision of services, so that many services are provided at a lower cost to taxpayers than if the city and county provided the services separately. In addition, supporters of consolidation maintain that the result has been more local government accountability and a better national image for Nashville.^v

THINKING Critically

- ★ How many local governments, including school districts, municipal utility districts, cities, and other special purpose districts, are there in your county?
- ★ Do you think the level of services varies tremendously across your county?
- ★ What advantages might there be if the services provided by the various local governments in your county were consolidated, as in the case of Metropolitan Nashville–Davidson County in Tennessee?
- ★ Are there disadvantages to city-county consolidations?

i. Pennsylvania Economy League of Southwestern Pennsylvania, “A Comparative Analysis of City/County Consolidations,” February 7, 2007, www.allegHENYconference.org/PEL/PDFs/CityCountyConsolidationsComparativeAnalysis.pdf (accessed September 28, 2012).

ii. Ibid.

iii. Ibid., 79.

iv. Ibid.

v. Ibid.