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Don't Believe the Hype -- The Better Together Plan is Oversold.

February 28, 2019 -- There is a lot of room for improvement of local governments in the Saint Louis area. Recent national stories of abuses of power, racism, and generally unprofessional behavior have placed Saint Louis in a bad light. And there are the ordinary inefficiencies of local government bureaucracies. The report produced by the Better Together Task Force makes consolidation sound like the only answer to solve these and other problems. It isn't.

Despite a wealth of lessons from other cities, the Better Together plan relies on a superficial comparison of conditions in Saint Louis, Indianapolis, and Louisville. There is no mention of the dozen other consolidations since 1970, including the experience of Kansas City.

Other consolidations offer many valuable lessons if you bother to look. That is why the Hammond Institute commissioned [Joshua Hall](#), an expert on city-county mergers at West Virginia University, to compare the circumstances of Saint Louis City-County to others.

Hall [finds](#) that the weight of evidence shows that pre-merger expectations are generally unmet. Those affected are disappointed at best and economically harmed at worst. An examination of the evidence shows that mergers or consolidations generally do not improve economic performance or better provision local government services.

This is because there is no clear connection between fragmentation and income growth. Size of cities and cost of government services generally are not connected. Based on the experience of other cities and counties, consolidation is not an obvious remedy to such problems.

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The problems facing Saint Louis County are not the result of fragmentation, Hall argues, but how fragmentation interacts with local government funding in Missouri. Sales tax discrepancies between towns may lead to objectionable beggar-thy-neighbor policies. The proposed consolidation would not eliminate such behavior, however. Instead, consolidation may simply increase the range of competition to include surrounding counties.

Our patchwork Saint Louis map isn't unique: Pittsburgh has more municipalities than St. Louis County, and it is growing faster. Multiple municipalities allow residents to pick the city that meets their preferences for a variety of aspects, including governmental services. Pride of community and local political agency is a powerful force that consolidation would severely weaken.

Requiring a statewide vote to alter the state constitution and allow the consolidation significantly misaligns voter interest and outcomes. Under the current scheme, the plan would effectively disenfranchise many residents in choosing their fate. It is like having a national vote to decide whether Rhode Island, deemed too small to offer government services effectively, should be merged into Connecticut.

Saint Louis City struggles to market itself. Published population and crime statistics often are blamed. Consolidation will not, as some have suggested, make the marketing job easier. Crime hot spots and stagnating neighborhoods cannot be hidden by simply aggregating over a bigger population. In this era of big data, do not think that a CEO contemplating moving her company to Saint Louis will be so easily deceived.

What is lost in this debate is the fact that there already are areas of cooperation between the city and the county. A leading expert on Saint Louis City-County consolidation, Dr. Terry Jones of UMSL, has pointed this out on many occasions. Is massive restructuring the best answer if directing our energies to discovering and exploiting areas of cooperation and coordination would suffice?

The collective experience of local government reform does not support the wholesale restructuring proposed. If the goal is to improve justice, then pass legislation that requires higher minimum standards on police training or municipal courts. If the goal is to resurrect Saint Louis City, then focus on how to accomplish that. Saving the City by punishing the County is not a practical solution.

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