



*Ohio Commission on
Local Government Reform
and Collaboration*

**Summary of Public Comments
January, 2010**

The Ohio State University - John Glenn Public Affairs

Summary of Public Hearing - January 29, 2010

The Commission on Local Government Reform and Collaboration met on January 29, 2010 in Worthington, Ohio. The public portion of the meeting included Ms. Pam Hall from Marion County, who related to the Commission the process of consolidating the County and City of Marion Health Departments for the purpose of improving efficiency and reducing costs for residents Marion County. This testimony aligned itself with the Commission's subcommittee on alternative service delivery models. The January hearing portion of the meeting included no additional speakers that aligned themselves with the other two subcommittees of the Commission: local government collaboration incentives; and local and state tax structures.

Service Delivery Models

Ms. Pam Hall, President of the Marion County Chamber of Commerce, related to the Commission processes that Marion County has been undertaking to consolidate services in an effort to improve efficiency and reduce the tax burden on residents of the county. She discussed the process of consolidating the county and city health departments in the greatest detail. The written testimony provided to the Commission may be found in the Detailed Summary section.

Commission members discussed several points of Ms. Hall's testimony following her presentation. Commission members' concerns included analysis of costs saved before and after the consolidation process, reasons for opposition, and any issues or costs associated with consolidating smaller government units into larger ones.

During the following dialogue, Ms. Hall noted that much opposition to the consolidation process was rooted in a desire not to change the status quo and "parochialism". Her experiences indicated that many members of local government were not interested in restructuring public services in Marion County or reducing public expenditures. She explained that while there had been no before-and-after analysis of customer satisfaction, there had been considerable input from residents of the county. She also noted that there has been no follow up research to indicate if the consolidation process reduced costs, as the health departments were only consolidated as of January 1, 2010.

Detailed Testimony

Ohio Commission on Local Government Reform and Collaboration Testimony January 29, 2010

Thank you Commission members for the opportunity to share a real life story from Marion County which I trust will provide insight into the enormous challenge before you. I so admire your individual willingness to seek improvement for local government operations and service delivery.

My name is Pam Hall; I am the President of the Marion Area Chamber of Commerce. We are a county-wide Chamber that represents approximately 600 members.

Since 2006 we have focused our energies toward a major Initiative we entitled: “Could Marion City and County be?...more efficient, more effective, more taxpayer friendly” (copy of our 2010 Key Initiative which summarizes efforts since 2006 – Attachment A). We embraced this Initiative for a very simple reason; our Chamber works to develop a county in which businesses can thrive and be successful. We believe, one way for them to do so (be successful) is for government to take less of their hard earned dollars.

So in 2006 we began by asking ourselves . . . if we were to design Marion County, Ohio today . . . starting from scratch . . . would it look like it currently does?

For your reference, we are a county of 409 square miles, with a population of 66,000 (however over 4,000 of our 66,000 are incarcerated thus receive

minimal benefit from local government services). In Marion County we have 29 different political subdivisions, ten fire services, five public school districts (for only 10,500 students) and up until the effort to consolidate our City and County Health Departments, we had two distinctly separate entities. In 2006 our city and county budgets were awash in red ink, our schools were unsuccessful in passing levies and our health departments were facing budget challenges that resulted in personnel cutbacks, as well as fee and millage increases. So we asked ourselves:

Would this be the government structure designed if we were to create a Marion County in the 21st century?

Not believing this to be:

- we initiated several meetings with our citizens and our elected officials to openly dialogue about possible consolidation of government services. In March 2006, the Chamber sponsored a work session for elected officials/community leaders with Bill Hudnut, former Congressman and four-term mayor of Indianapolis, who enjoys a national reputation for reinventing bureaucratic institutions. We were first attracted to Mr. Hudnut after I read his book: *Cities on the Rebound . . . A Vision for Urban America*. Sharing a quote from chapter 5, “Of course, government cannot be run like a business, but it can be run in more business-like fashion. Its first job is to mind the store well. Just as in business, in government the process of restructuring, reforming, redesigning, rightsizing, and “reinventing”, can cut costs, eliminate wasteful spending, avoid duplication of functions, and train employees

to become more quality conscious and customer oriented.” Business leaders caught Mr. Hudnut’s passion for visionary leadership . . . however, those in positions of governmental authority did not.

- we researched consolidation efforts and models from other cities and states.
- we researched what our very own community had considered in previous decades. For example, a newspaper article from 1972 entitled: “Unigovernment Study Backed” read “Mr. Robbins said he still believes the potentials of unigovernment should be studied to develop a workable system, but the change likely could not be accomplished anytime soon. It was noted the system in Indianapolis was developed and put in operation in about nine months. We have to do something to get cooperation between the local government units here.” At the time I found that article, 35 years had passed and we were still discussing the very same issues!
- we asked in a Community Needs Assessment : “Do you think combining health departments would be beneficial? 67.7% of the respondents indicated: “Yes”.
- our local newspaper ran an online poll asking “Should the County and City Health Departments be consolidated? 71.1% of respondents indicated “Yes”.
- we partnered with our League of Women Voters who supported our efforts and were instrumental in the following months’ activities.
- our local Farm Bureau expressed support of our efforts.
- a retired dentist shared a report from 1981 prepared by a committed group of volunteers who spent one year analyzing whether it would be advantageous for our City and County Health Departments to combine. Quoting from their final report “We feel this report

and its recommendations offer an opportunity for mutual action by the City and County Health Boards for the eventual improvement and increased operating efficiency in the delivery of public health service in Marion County. We request your implementation of the recommendations contained in this report.” Their efforts and recommendation were ignored.

- we learned that in the early ‘90’s possible consolidation of our Health Departments was discussed.
- in 2003 the City Health Commissioner encouraged consolidation.
- we learned through research that in Ohio 59 of our 88 counties have combined Health Departments, all of which had been formed by the decision/action of government.
- yet, when presented with this history and community opinion, our elected officials (specifically the District Advisory Council (DAC)..which in Ohio is the governing body for County Health Departments; DAC’s consist of the chairs of each of a County’s Township Trustees) over all these years chose not to proceed with gaining efficiencies via combining the two departments.

Armed with this history, data, and public opinion . . . plus still hoping for change, the Chamber committed over \$15,000 to fund a study specific to one area of government that we felt had the greatest potential for consolidation efforts . . . that being our city and county health departments. This study was completed during the latter part of 2007 with a final report delivered early in 2008. The consultants concluded that a combined health district would improve the delivery and overall quality of services and programs both quantitatively and qualitatively with an estimated reduction of annual operating costs of at least \$254,000. It is important to mention that not only did our community have two separate Health Departments, we actually had four different physical locations which led to total confusion from a customer service perspective.

We presented our research and consultant's report to the DAC; unfortunately they refused to consider consolidation.

What next? Give up on our core belief that government has no monies of its own, but rather government monies are generated only from working people employed by viable business entities? Give up on asking: "Could Marion City and County be?...more efficient, more effective, more taxpayer friendly".

The Chamber simply couldn't quit, so in May 2008 the Board of Directors and the Marion County League of Women Voters embarked on a grass roots effort to place before our voters the issue of whether our departments should be united into a single general health district.

We then:

1. learned the Ohio Revised Code had a provision for combining Health Departments by a vote of the people, however, no one in Ohio had ever done it before! We quickly became experts in ORC 3709.071
2. designed petition language and received approval of that language from the Ohio Director of Health and our County Commissioners
3. set out to collect petition signatures from 3% of the qualified electors residing in the City and 3% residing in the County (1,214 total signatures)
4. actually collected 2,100 signatures
5. received approval of ballot language from the Secretary of State
6. were invited, then un-invited to speak (just hours prior to the event) to a meeting of the Marion County Township Association. I was told the reason our speech was canceled was because the Association's Constitution reads as follows: "The purpose of this Association shall be: to resist any effort at further centralization of government powers by depriving the township of any rights, duties, or privileges which it may now possess". (copy of the Constitution provided - Attachment B)
7. developed and funded a county-wide education campaign

8. experienced, just three weeks prior to the Nov. 2008 election, an aggressive campaign led by the AFL/CIO opposing our effort
9. celebrated on the evening of Nov 4, 2008 when our taxpayers voted that "the Health District of the City of Marion and the General Health District of Marion County be united into a single general health district". 55% of our City voters voted in support; 60% of our County voters supported.

Mission accomplished?? Not quite.

Remaining challenges were (and still are) many. For example, ORC indicates: "If a majority of the electors voting on the proposal in each of the health districts affected vote in favor thereof, the union of such districts into a single general health district shall be established on the second succeeding January 1." That proved to be a long time for employees to be unsettled, for union issues to escalate, for debates over physical location to arise and for those who were charged with making this combination happen (who were the VERY SAME people who for many years chose NOT to bring the two entities together) to work against the success of the merger.

In total our Chamber spent \$39,000 to impact change . . . to encourage local government to be more efficient and more effective. Our combined health department has a new board . . . however elected officials chose to appoint the same members who worked against combining the departments. We now have three different physical locations, as opposed to four (ORC did not permit that we include in ballot language a requirement to provide services from a single location). Rumor has it a lawsuit may be filed because the matter of how Union employees should be treated in a combination required by the voters is not addressed in the ORC.

I could spend another 15 minutes sharing with you more challenges and barriers we encountered during this process, but I'm sure you've captured the gist of our journey seeking local government reform and collaboration.

Earlier I commented that our community discussed and evaluated government efficiency in 1972, 1982,

1990, 1993 and 2003. But, just last week I happened upon a local newspaper article from January 1923 that summarized a meeting of our Chamber of Commerce members on the topic of efficient government! The news article began: “Declaring that the present plan of county and township government is not an application of up-to-date business principles inasmuch as it is not elastic and simple enough and that it creates supernumerary offices, W.J. Shepard, professor of political science, Ohio State University suggested that it would be advantageous to any county to merge all township governments into one centralized county government.” Later in the article Professor Shepard said: “The present system was adopted when Ohio first became a state. That was the ox-cart era. Today we are living in the automobile and aeroplane era with a system of government identical with that of the system of the ox-cart era.”

One has to ponder....was Professor Shepard ahead of his time in 1923 or are we way behind the times in 2010?

I encourage this Commission to serve as the visionary leaders our great state so desperately needs . . . leaders who are not reluctant to fight parochialism, leaders who respect the wallets of our taxpayers, leaders who believe government can and should be reformed in order to improve local government operations and service delivery.

Thank you for your time and your willingness to listen.

Could Marion City and County be?

● **more efficient**

● **more effective
taxpayer friendly**

● **more**

2006 – We questioned and listened

We asked:

if we were to create Marion City and/or County today, would we design a government structure with 29 political subdivisions? With 10 fire services? With separate city and county health departments? With 5 school districts?

We heard:

those citizens who participated in the EnVISIONing the 21st Century process. Many suggested creative ways to consolidate government and public service should be explored.

results of the Marion County Needs Assessment in which respondents felt it beneficial to consolidate fire districts and health departments.

2007 – We moved to action

We spoke:

with Marion City, County and Township officials to seek their concurrence with a plan to gain efficiencies, enhance productivity and/or realize financial savings through consolidation of public services.

We financed:

a study to identify potential reduction in cost through eliminating redundant service deliveries and/or identification of improvement in service quality. Departments studied were the City Parks and Recreation and the City and County Health Departments.

We obtained results:

from the Maximus, Inc. report: “The County and City Health Departments should consolidate operations into a single, ‘Combined Health District.’”; “A combined District, operating from a central location, will improve the delivery and overall quality of its services and programs not only quantitatively – through reducing costs – but also qualitatively.”

2008 – We advocated for change

We decided:

Upon receiving resistance to encouragement to combine the Health Departments, we decided to pursue a ballot initiative and where the first in our State to utilize the Ohio Revised Code process to combine health departments by a vote of the people.

We partnered:

with the League of Women Voters, obtained over 2,100 petition signatures, received approval from the State Director of Health, received Board of Election certification, mounted an educational campaign for voters, faced an active VOTE NO effort.

We obtained results:

On November 4, 2008 Marion City and County voters chose to support savings for taxpayers and more efficient government by voting to combine the City and County Health Departments.

2009 – Unprecedented Times

We focused:

on providing more educational and networking opportunities. Over 150 different events were offered; a Business & Bagels series was initiated; a Networking at Noon event held.

We opposed:

resolution by Marion City Council for support of “Card Check” legislation; federal legislation for same and expansion of Prevailing Wage guidelines.

We advocated:

that a portion of Marion County’s WIA funds be used to support business service activities.

We continued:

our mantra for consolidation of government services with encouragement for study of county-wide fire district efficiencies.

2010 – Economic Challenges **Remain**

Our membership, our community, nor our state have yet to rebound from economic hardship. Nearly one in five Marion County residents live in poverty. The Chamber will continue to offer multiple venues for networking and business related education. We will aggressively oppose legislation that impedes business sustainability.

We believe elevating the appreciation for, and perceived value of, education within our community is a priority. To that end, we will partner with educators, students, parents and community organizations to enhance student performance and achievement.

Our focus on efficient and effective government will continue. Marion County's experience with a ballot initiative to combine Health Departments has gained state-wide attention. We will further share our experiences to spread the message that Marion County is a place where business can expect efficiencies in government services.