

**FAYETTEVILLE CITY COUNCIL/CUMBERLAND
COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL JOINT MEETING
FAYETTEVILLE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE
2201 HULL ROAD – HARRY F. SHAW VIRTUAL COLLEGE CENTER
APRIL 12, 2007
2:00 P.M.**

Present: Mayor Anthony G. Chavonne; Council Member Charles E. Evans (District 2) Chairman Kenneth S. Edge; Vice Chairman J. Breeden Blackwell; Commissioners Jeannette M. Council; Edward Melvin; Diane Wheatley

Absent: Council Members Keith A. Bates, Sr. (District 1); Council Members Robert A. Massey, Jr. (District 3); Darrell J. Haire (District 4); Lois A. Kirby (District 5); Paul Williams (District 6); Curtis Worthy (District 7); Juanita Gonzalez (District 8); Wesley A. Meredith (District 9)

Commissioners Billy R. King; John T. Henley, Jr.

Others Present: Dale E. Iman, City Manager

Karen M. McDonald, City Attorney

Kyle Sonnenberg, Assistant City Manager

Stanley Victrum, Assistant City Manager

Doug Hewett, Assistant City Manager

Candice H. White, City Clerk

James Martin, County Manager

Amy Cannon, Assistant County Manager

Grainger Barrett, County Attorney

Marsha Fogle, County Clerk

Members of the Press

A videoconference hosted by the University of Georgia, Vinson Institute of Government, was conducted to discuss government consolidation. Harry Hayes of the Columbus-Muscogee Board of Commissioners provided the introduction, which was followed by a review of the consolidation process that occurred in Columbus/Muscogee County, Georgia in 1970. Mr. Hayes noted two referendums were involved and a Charter Commission was developed to compose the Charter for the Columbus Consolidated Government.

Commissioner Blackwell asked whether consolidation had improved relations with Ft. Benning. Mr. Isaiah Hugley, Columbus City Manager, responded a military liaison attended all meetings throughout the consolidation process, which ensured a good working relationship with Ft. Benning. Mr. Hugley stated a Civilian Military Council was organized and continues to meet monthly to bring elected officials and military personnel together for regional updates and briefings. Mr. Hugley spoke briefly to other benefits derived from consolidation.

Commissioner Blackwell posed questions regarding the consolidation of the Police and Sheriff's Department. Mr. Hugley responded the Columbus Police Department serves 220 square miles and the Muscogee County Sheriff's Department, which includes an elected Sheriff, handles the court system and county jail, serves summons and warrants and has an investigative division and a small patrol. A Marshall's Office, which includes an elected official, serves warrants for the magistrate and municipal courts. Mr. Hugley noted law enforcement relationships and responsibilities are outlined in the Charter.

Commissioner Blackwell asked about savings that occurred as a result of consolidation and the response was that savings were substantial but had to be viewed and appreciated over the long term; actual savings could not be quantified and were complicated by the fact that the Columbus Consolidated Government grew and expanded over time.

Mayor Chavonne asked about the differences between the two referendum processes. Mayor William J. Wetherington responded the first referendum process consisted of only two committees and consolidation was approached in a rather amateur fashion. The second referendum process was totally transparent and involved a legislatively formed Charter

Commission that produced a well-written document through a series of committee meetings composed of consultants and attorneys. Public hearings were also held and the public was involved in an effort to secure their commitment.

Mayor Chavonne asked about tax implications as a result of consolidation. Mr. Hugley responded initially a general services district and an urban services district were established and they exist today. The tax system is complicated and taxes are assessed based on the level of government services received and facilities relative to the service district. Urban Services District I has a greater tax rate and the Urban Services District II on the outskirts of the county receives all of the same services but at a different level. The Urban Services District II has no public transportation because there is no demand. Taxes assessed in the Urban Services District IV, which includes Ft. Benning, are based on the level of services rendered. (Urban Services District III has since been combined with another service district.) Mr. Hugley stated power to form multiple taxing districts and assess different levels of taxes was granted by the Georgia Legislature and is a unique feature of the Charter. Mr. Hugley noted there is an elected Board of Education, which has its own taxing authority.

Mayor Chavonne asked about utility services. Mayor Wetherington responded the Columbus Consolidated Government only provides water works; gas and electric services are a public utility under franchise. A franchise fee is paid each year from a percentage of the sales from water works. Phone and cable are also set franchise fees.

Mayor Chavonne asked about the urban and rural diversity in the Columbus area. Mr. Hugley responded there are areas that could be described as suburban and there are rural areas, but not a lot of working farms.

Commissioner Blackwell opened the floor for questions from citizens.

A question was raised about zoning classifications and the response was that zoning classifications are based on the district.

A question was raised about government size and the response was that the governing body consists of ten members; eight elected by district and two elected at-large. It was noted the School Board has nine members.

A question was raised about tax rates and the response was that there are seventeen mills per 1,000 in Urban Services District 1, a little over 13 mills per 1,000 in Urban Services District 2, 11 mills per 1,000 in Urban Services District IV. The maximum is 25 mills. The property tax rates are calculated on the assessed value or 40% of the fair market value, there is a homestead exemption of \$13,000 and a \$8,000 state exemption.

Council Member Evans asked how the transit system differed after consolidation. Mr. Hugley responded Columbus Consolidated Government acquired a private company and developed a metro-system with aid from the federal government. There is a separate bus line for Ft. Benning and there are no services in rural areas due to lack of demand.

Commissioner Blackwell asked if Ft. Benning had been annexed. Mr. Hugley responded it had not; however, there had been a land swap several years ago necessitated by the need for industrial growth. It was also noted that municipal services are not provided to Ft. Benning but consolidation did help facilitate the privatization of utility services to Ft. Benning.

Mr. Dale E. Iman, City Manager, asked if there was a mechanism to adjust for social equity in the inner city area. Mr. Hugley responded citizens are assessed taxes relative to the service district in which they reside and inner city residents do not pay a lot in taxes.

Commissioner Wheatley asked if all citizens pay the school tax and the response was that all citizens pay a school tax, regardless of where they live.

Commissioner Wheatley asked about other specialty fees and the response was that integrated waste, sewer, paving and garbage fees are added to the water work fees.

Commissioner Wheatley asked about other benefits of consolidation. Responses included one government is responsible and accountable, one government has clear uncontested authority, conflicts associated with two separate governments are eliminated, resources are combined, eliminates the need to turn to high level government for decisions, eliminates high costs for services, convenient to citizens, greater efficiencies in government and financial equity, citizens

are accessed only for services received, improved quality of life and economic opportunities for citizens.

Commissioner Blackwell asked if the Columbus Consolidated Government would go back to two separate governments. The response was no because it would be a giant step backwards.

Commissioner Blackwell asked how consolidation had assisted with planning. Mr. Hugley responded Ft. Benning and the Columbus Consolidated Government work and plan together in meetings separate and apart from the Civilian Military Council. The Land Use Plan is developed from a regional standpoint with all players at the table.

Commissioner Blackwell inquired about the next step. Mr. Hugley suggested that a meeting be scheduled so a draft report can be provided. Both boards will be given two to three weeks to review the report and a follow-up meeting will be scheduled for further review and discussion. It was noted that a copy of the Charter will also be provided to both boards.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned.