

Hampton Roads Consolidations - Transition Issues

The localities involved with the various consolidations that have taken place in the Hampton Roads region have had to overcome various transition issues including existing debt, differing tax structures, two sets of constitutional officers, differing government structures and separate utility operations. This handout will examine the ways in which the four consolidations listed below addressed some of these issues.

1957 - Newport News (City of Warwick, City of Newport News)

1963 - Virginia Beach (City of Virginia Beach, Princess Anne County)

1963 - Chesapeake (City of South Norfolk, Norfolk County)

1974 - Suffolk (City of Nansemond, City of Suffolk)

Existing debt and tax structure

The consolidation agreements for Newport News, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Suffolk all contained the follow language or very similar language:

"The consolidated city shall assume the payments of all existing dues, indebtedness, bonds, notes, and obligations of every character, nature, and description of all the parties hereto upon the effective date of consolidation."

In addition, the agreements for Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Suffolk all contained language allowing the establishment of special taxing districts, both for the purpose of repaying existing debt that was chargeable the area creating the indebtedness and for the purpose of providing additional or more complete services to an area of the city than were desired in the city as a whole.

The consolidation agreements did not attempt to reconcile the differences in tax structure and rates. Rather, many of these issues were not resolved, at least publicly, until the passage of the initial budget of the consolidated city.

Constitutional officers

The Newport News consolidation agreement provided that an entire slate of constitutional officers would be elected by special election.

The agreements for Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Suffolk all provided that the constitutional officers "shall be determined by agreement between those persons holding such respective offices." In the event that no agreement was reached before the effective date of consolidation, the Circuit Court of the locality would designate one officer as

principal and the other as deputy. Apparently, the courts were not called on to make such a decision. The transition was somewhat easier in Virginia Beach, where the old city and county already shared some constitutional officers.

Government structure

Each of the four consolidation agreements, and new city charters, dealt with issues related to the conflicting government structures in different ways.

Newport News settled on a seven-member city council elected at-large. Prior to consolidation, Warwick had elected its council by a ward system while Newport News had elected council members on an at-large basis. No formal attempt was made to assure that the new council would have representation from both of the former cities.

In Virginia Beach, the old city and the six magisterial districts of the county became the seven boroughs of the new city. The new city council consisted of 11 members, five from the borough of Virginia Beach and one each from the other six boroughs. The consolidation agreement further provided that this arrangement would exist for at least five years, and that thereafter the council would submit to the voters a new plan for election of councilmen.

The Chesapeake transition provisions were very similar to those in Virginia Beach. The initial council consisted of 10 members, five elected from the borough of South Norfolk and one from each of the other five boroughs. A commissioner in chancery was appointed to break tie votes. The initial council consisted of the five sitting members of the South Norfolk council and the five sitting members of the board of Norfolk County.

The initial council in Suffolk consisted of all members of the council of the City of Nansemond and all members of the council of the City of Suffolk. Thereafter, a seven-member council was to be elected, two from the Suffolk borough and one each from the remaining five boroughs.

Utilities

The consolidation agreements are silent on the issue of how utilities were to be merged. Presumably, the new city councils and their staffs worked through these issues over time. In some instances, the old city and county were already cooperating in the provision of certain services or regional agreements were already in place.

Sources:

Temple, D.G. 1972. Merger Politics: Local Government Consolidation in Tidewater Virginia. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia

Commission on Local Government

Consolidation Agreements of Newport News, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Suffolk