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All-inclusive city-county merger not likely Other cities' experiences offer hints about where Ashford's plan could lead.

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STAFF WRITERS **Date:** September 2, 2010 **Section:** News

If city and county governments in Douglas County wind up merging, as one state senator proposes, the final outcome still might not be a single entity that provides all public services. Nationally, other communities that have merged their governments have kept separate **police** protection for some areas, for example, or they have retained independent fire districts rather than combining all fire services. In some cases, a number of smaller cities in the county have remained untouched by key aspects of the merger.

"Every merger comes with concessions," said Chad Carlton, spokesman for Louisville (Ky.) Mayor Jerry Abramson. "If there's an example of a pure system out there, we haven't seen it."

As was first reported in The World-Herald, State Sen. Brad Ashford of **Omaha** said Wednesday he is drafting a bill that would require a countywide vote on a merger in Douglas County within three years.

Voicing frustration over rising taxes and government inefficiencies, Ashford said it's redundant to have both a City Council and a County Board in Douglas County. He said the "status quo" of rising expenses and unsustainable **pension** costs must change.

"The economic situation is such that we have to do something differently," Ashford said, drawing an analogy between now and the 1930s, when Nebraska went to a unicameral Legislature to cut costs. "It's time to wipe the slate clean and find a new way of governance."

Ashford, the senior member of the **Omaha** delegation, is trying to give new life to an idea that has never gotten across the starting line locally. And his proposal comes as others, both in and out of county

government, have talked recently about the possibility of merging law enforcement services.

The vast majority of Douglas County residents - 89 percent - live inside the City of **Omaha**'s boundaries, according to the latest Census Bureau estimates.

City-county mergers are not common nationally, although there are notable exceptions. Louisville, Ky., merged with Jefferson County in 2003. Indianapolis, Nashville, Tenn., and Lexington, Ky., also have merged city-county governments.

The National League of Cities says the most common form of consolidated government is a single chief executive, or mayor, with a multi-district council.

In Louisville, Abramson has been mayor for 21 years, serving both before and after the merger. The 26 members of the Louisville Metro Council are elected by district to serve four-year terms.

In Indianapolis, which merged with Marion County in 1970, there is a mayor and a 29-member City-County Council.

Not all local government functions are necessarily included in such mergers. Indianapolis did not annex four cities and towns into the new consolidated city; those areas elect their own officials.

Marion County still exists as a separate entity, as required by the Indiana state constitution, and maintains an array of county government offices. There also are nine townships, each with an elected assessor, trustee, constable and seven-member advisory board.

Meanwhile, Indianapolis **police** and fire protection did not change substantially. Volunteer fire **departments** provide protection outside the original city's boundaries, and **police** coverage in those areas comes from the county sheriff, town marshals and **police** in the smaller, "excluded" cities.

In Louisville, there are 19 fire protection districts, one of which covers the original Louisville city core. Merging fire districts had been a controversial idea that had doomed earlier merger proposals, Carlton said, so leaving them out of the merger helped win voter approval.

Similarly, he said, the final compromise called for leaving out several small cities such as Jeffersontown, which kept their own **police** forces and public works staff.

But except for those cities, a single **police** force covers the entire

county. The merger brought the city and county **police departments** together, although a separate county sheriff remains in charge of secondary law enforcement duties such as serving warrants.

Meanwhile, county government provides all rescue squads and is separate from the 19 fire protection districts.

To pay for their shared services, all residents of Jefferson County pay property taxes. But a higher tax rate applies to people in the original Louisville area, which is called an "urban services district." The additional tax revenue is used to pay for fire protection, garbage pickup and other services in the core city.

Ashford said his plan would create a committee of **Omaha** and Douglas County residents who would come up with a proposed structure of the merged government. Voters would decide whether to adopt it.

Ashford says the structure will determine how much money could be saved by a merger. If that committee can't come up with a structure, he added, the Legislature would do it.

According to the National League of Cities, voters have rejected the majority of city-county consolidations proposed over the past 40 years. Locally, the idea has surfaced repeatedly, including in recent years, but efforts have not gone far.

In 1997, then-Mayor Hal Daub unsuccessfully pushed for a merger.

In 1998, Nebraska voters passed a constitutional amendment allowing mergers of cities and counties. Lawmakers later passed a tough requirement to approve such mergers: that voters not only within the affected cities must approve mergers, but so, in a separate vote, must the county's voters who live outside such cities or housing subdivisions.

In 2005, a local proposal to create a 14-member "megaboard" composed of City Council and County Board members was killed.

In 2007, then-Mayor Mike Fahey testified in support of a legislative bill to merge **Omaha** and Douglas County governments, but the bill eventually died.

Ashford said today's economic climate, plus the clamor for spending cuts and opposition to tax increases in **Omaha**, makes the time ripe to reconsider a merger.

"I think we're at the tipping point of public concern. Now the public is demanding change, big change," he said.

Four other state senators interviewed generally agreed it is time to revisit the merger idea but said they'd have to be shown that efficiencies would result.

"I'm not going to jump on that bandwagon just because someone wants a merger. I want to see what the benefits will be," said Sen. Brenda Council, a former **Omaha** City Council member.

Past studies, she said, haven't shown clear cost savings.

Sens. Steve Lathrop, Scott Lautenbaugh and John Nelson voiced similar views.

"With the problems going on in City Hall, it makes a lot of sense to look at merging some functions," said Lathrop.

Ashford said it was "just common sense" that a single governing board for the county would lead to more efficiency and less redundancy.

Obstacles to merger would have to be removed, he said, citing the requirement that gives rural voters what amounts to veto power over any merger idea.

The issues confronting rural residents and residents of smaller towns such as Valley and Waterloo must be considered, he said, but added it didn't make sense to give a small number of rural voters the power to dictate whether a merger goes forward.

The Legislature might need to provide incentives to encourage a merger, he added, such as the power to levy a higher sales tax, an authority that Mayor Jim Suttle has sought.

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