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City-county merger under consideration A bill would create a committee that would come up with a consolidation plan.

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February 26, 2011 **Section:** News

LINCOLN - Several state lawmakers, as well as Gov. Dave Heineman, have said that with this year's budget woes, it's time to reinvent government. After a committee of state senators heard three proposals Friday to do just that, the committee's chairman predicted that the reinvention could actually happen.

"If we're ever going to do something bold, now is the time," said Sen. Bill Avery of Lincoln, chairman of the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.

Avery and other senators drew an analogy between now and when Nebraska's unique, one-house Unicameral government was founded.

It happened during the Great Depression when citizens were looking for ways to cut taxpayer expenses. The same circumstances exist today, said **Omaha** Sen. Brad Ashford.

For at least the third time during his 12-year legislative career, Ashford has offered a measure that could lead to consolidation of the **City of Omaha** and **Douglas County** governments.

Legislative Bill 344 would only establish a nine-member committee to create a plan for consolidation. But, Ashford said, metro **Omaha** residents are clamoring for greater efficiency in government, and that could push such a proposal to a vote of the people.

His bill also would make it easier for a **merger** to happen. It would remove a clause from a 2001 **merger** law that allows voters who live in truly rural areas of **Douglas County** - those outside **Omaha** and outside sanitary and improvement districts - to veto any **merger** plan.

Ashford said the rural clause unfairly allows about 10,000 residents of rural **Douglas County** to overrule the wishes of the 410,000 or so who live in the **city** and in housing subdivisions.

Douglas County Surveyor Tom Doyle raised another concern about the rural veto. Under Ashford's bill, rural voters would be lumped in with Sanitary Improvement District voters. If a majority of those groups voted against a **merger**, it would fail, regardless how **city** voters cast their ballots.

Doyle said that was unfair because SID residents would not become part of any merged **city-county** government. Yet 50,000 SID residents could block a **merger**, said Doyle, calling it "representation without taxation."

Ashford said "unigovs" have been highly successful in communities such as Jacksonville, Fla.; Louisville, Ky.; and Indianapolis. The biggest benefit, he said, was an increase in economic development due to the simplicity of dealing with only one governing entity.

A lobbyist representing **Omaha** Mayor Jim Suttle testified in favor of the bill.

Earlier on Friday, former **Omaha** Mayor Mike Boyle, now a member of the **Douglas County** Board, told the committee while testifying on a different bill that he favors a **city-county merger**.

But Boyle told the committee it would be politically difficult to accomplish.

Some functions - 911 dispatching, purchasing and parks - have been successfully merged, Boyle said. Other areas - such as dual crime labs for **Omaha** and the **county** - should be consolidated, he said.

The Government Committee took testimony on two other proposals.

A proposed constitutional amendment, Legislative Resolution 2, would allow **counties** to adopt a "**county manager**" form of government. Such professionally trained managers would replace some elected **county** officeholders, bringing efficiency and greater accountability, said the amendment's sponsor, Scottsbluff Sen. John Harms.

LB 597, introduced by **Omaha** Sen. Rich Pahls, would require all **counties** with less than 25,000 people to consolidate elected **county** offices, reducing the number of offices from 11 to five. Eighty of the state's 93 **counties** have fewer than 25,000 residents.

Pahls said some of the state's smallest **counties** already have

consolidated offices such as **county** clerk, register of deeds, assessor and election commissioner.

Larry Dix of the Nebraska Association of **County** Officials testified against Pahls' bill. Dix said his organization is studying how to streamline **county** government for the future.

The committee took no action on the three bills, but Avery, the committee chairman, said he wanted to advance at least one of the ideas to debate by the full Legislature.

He said his preference was the **Omaha-Douglas County merger** bill.

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