

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
CHAIRMAN HUEBERT  
TESTIMONY HB 2185

This testimony is in support of HB 2185. During the proposed consolidation of Topeka and Shawnee County in 2005, I worked for several months on the education campaign. As a past member of the House Local Government Committee, I worked on the issue of city/county consolidation. I believe my experiences could be of help in your deliberations.

The goal of HB 2185 is not to force consolidation on any municipalities, but to offer guidelines so that willing parties may proceed without legislative intervention or delay. In 2004 the City of Topeka and Shawnee County requested a bill to proceed with a consolidation proposal under current statutes. The bill the Legislature passed in 2005 setting out the local study and vote contained a number of provisions related to the details of the proposed merger. This included restricting the city's ability to annex property, the resolution of debt, and the use of a mail-in ballot, among other details.

During the campaign to inform the voters about the consolidation, it was confusing to them about what was actually in the plan. We couldn't seem to help them understand that the Legislature had decided some of the plan and the local commission had decided the rest. The voters didn't know what to believe. The measure failed outside the city and passed inside the city. Overall about 60% of the voters approved the measure, but the dual vote requirement was not met. It would be helpful if all but the most necessary of details were decided by the local commission closest to the people involved. I believe that is what HB 2185 accomplishes.

I supported this consolidation guideline bill last session, but struggled with the dual majority vote requirement. I supported a dual vote in Shawnee County in 2005 because of the large rural population. But it is clear that no "one-size-fits-all" requirement works for every county. In Shawnee County there is a large rural population. In some counties the percentage of people living outside of the cities is very small. It may be that you need one formula for large counties and one for small, or one for largely urban and one for more rural. At least it's a discussion you could have. I appreciate the effort to move forward on consolidation guidelines and hope that the vote mechanism disputes can be resolved.

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