

City, county merger could benefit both

Chamber speakers believe proposed merger beneficial

by Rebecca Nuttall
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Kathryn Klaber and Brian Jensen discussed a possible merger of the governments of the city of Pittsburgh and that of Allegheny County at a luncheon July 15.

The luncheon sponsored by the Business Institute of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania addressed a report released in April recommending this merger.

"We by no means have the answers but we do know there needs to be a set of discussions," said Klaber, executive vice president of the Pennsylvania Economy League.

Jensen, senior vice president of the Government Structure Program, led a presentation describing Pittsburgh's current economic situation and how a city-county merger could benefit the city as well as the county. Jensen included past examples of competing county and city agendas to show how a lack of cohesion has hurt progress in Pittsburgh.

The city and county governments have several areas of overlapping functions and redundant costs. A city-county merger could save an estimated \$38 million a year by eliminating duplicate services.

Jensen also explained that more fragmented municipalities in a county commonly equal less population growth. Currently, Pittsburgh is the 59th largest city in the country, but with a city-county merger it could be the ninth largest.

"We've done surveys and city-county consolidation is popular in all demographic groups," said Jensen.

After the demonstration the floor was open for discussion and several Pittsburgh business leaders addressed issues regarding the merger as well as other issues that need to be resolved.

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7/23-24/08
COURIER

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CONTINUED FROM A1

"If this were as easy as it seems it would have been done a long time ago," said Ralph Papa of Citizens Bank.

Esther Bush from the Urban League expressed a concern regarding the amount of minority representation since there is a much higher concentration of minorities in the city than in the surrounding municipalities.

"We need some more hard-core information as to why we should consider it," said Bush.

However, Jensen explained that after

doing an analysis of other city-county mergers, he was unable to detect any concrete economic trends. Instead, he said it is more important to focus on what would happen to Pittsburgh's economic development if a city-county merger doesn't take place.

"It's difficult to demonstrate what creates economic development," said Jensen. "Let's think about possibilities."

Other possibilities include unified local leadership and an increase in consumer confidence. Participants in the dialogue felt it was necessary to simplify the benefits for the public.

"From a taxpayer point of view, I would focus on the savings aspect," said Magdeline Jensen from the YMCA, referring to the estimated \$38 million in savings each year.

Mark Nordenberg, chair of the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Efficiency of City-County Government, suggested this merger, but the ultimate decision would need approval from city and county councils and the state legislature before it can be voted on.

(For more information regarding the city-county merger or for a copy of the full report, visit www.pitt.edu/news/citycountyreport.html.)