

VIEW POINT
CONSOLIDATION OR GERRYMANDER?
By Lance Mertz, September 1, 2004

I read the recent reporting on the Consolidation Commission with a mixture of hope and dread. Hope that the commission was avoiding some of the pitfalls I saw them drawn into during the two meetings I attended and dread that they had driven right into them. Well, we can all hope.

The people on the commission are all committed public servants, and I would call most personal friends, at least acquaintances. What I say below is no reflection on their efforts or integrity, but observations on what I see as shortcomings in the document to date, some due to compromises others due to political pressures.

By default, this document, basically a re-writing of the original proposal for consolidation made by the city, it is still has the flavor of an us vs. them document, rather than a merger of like interests. As a result, it is a consolidation more a deconstruction of the borough and an absorbing of the service areas into one municipality.

This should be a consolidation, not a gerrymandering of the current situation. What that means is that when it is done, with the exception of Saxman, will should be one municipal government inside the boundaries of the Ketchikan Gateway Borough. There will not be a government with a sub-government called the Gateway Service Area (the old City of Ketchikan). This means all assets, literally every building, vehicle, pipe, street and paperclip in the possession of the two former governments will belong to the new municipality and have its name on their title. The same goes for the debts: they are also all assumed by the new municipality.

Service areas are designated for the provision of services to specified areas, with taxes and fees collected in that area for the support of these services, but the municipality owns, manages and governs the service area. Service area boards are not governing boards, but advisory in nature only. They have no governmental power; all such powers, including taxation, budgeting and decision-making reside with the municipality. Get over it; if consolidation goes through the old city is gone, as is the borough and we are all in the same pot of stew, like it or not. Enterprise funds, such as the airport, actually do have assets assigned and dedicated to their use, because of the nature of their activities, but again, the titles are all in the name of the municipality.

My other problem with what has taken shape so far has to do with missed opportunities. Again, this is because the starting point was not a consolidation, but a take-over of sorts, with the city playing the tune.

The commission has bowed to political pressure and not included the consolidation of the fire departments and EMS services into a single, centrally managed public safety department. Functionally, for many purposes, we already have one large, cooperative fire department in the area, with departments sharing training, personnel and resources, something that is admirable, but how much better would this be if they were centrally managed? The department would provide fire and EMS protection in the three service areas, but would have centralized training, management and the efficiencies that come with that. While

they are at it the 911 system and city police should be in this department, as well as airport police and fire department. With the increase in port security the development of a such a department would only make sense, increasing coordination and maintaining unity of command in a crisis.

The second opportunity is a big step, but one that should not be missed. Establishment of the Port of Ketchikan, with the airport, the airport ferry, the ports and harbors department and the Ward Cove Industrial Park, along with other appropriate Borough and City properties should be considered. This would provide an opportunity for the development and coordination of the industrial and transportation infrastructure and other opportunities in the new municipality, on an area-wide basis. The ports of Tacoma, Seattle and Anchorage are all examples of what a port authority can do and could do in Ketchikan, given the right assets and managed as a business. This could even be voted on when the Charter is voted on.

Consolidating the city public works, sanitation, street and borough public works departments into one public works department would bring other efficiencies and allow for the sharing of equipment, expertise and personnel. Service areas employ no one; they are services area, the municipality employs all of the employees, whose time is then charged to the service areas worked in.

The last opportunity is the divestiture of KPU. The spinning off of the two utilities, Electric and Telecommunications, making them rate-payer owned public utilities would be of great benefit for the community and takes them out of the politics that now affect them so much. True, it would probably come under regulations it does not now come under, but it is time. Technology is changing very rapidly and before we know it the current KPU infrastructure will be obsolete, and may already be so; now is the time to put it into the private sector where it belongs. The ratepayers have paid for the infrastructure and development of the utilities and should be the ones that benefit from this spin-off. In this way, if they are sold the ratepayers get the money, not the government.

Making government flexible, giving the new elected leaders the powers they need to govern and trusting them is another thing the commission must do. Hamstringing them with cumbersome rules, super majorities or other restrictions is neither reasonable nor efficient. If you don't like elected leaders' decisions, vote them out or elect someone who you trust or run yourself.

Consolidation is not an easy thing to do and there are many issues involved that are imponderables. No one can see the future, but we know what the past was like and making the government as efficient and with the fewest levels of management as possible are things we can do now. The hard work does not stop the day consolidation is approved, the burden just shifts to the new government and its elected officials and they need the tools and flexibility to make the new government work.