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Insider's View

Research makes case for city-county merger

Pittsburgh Business Times - March 24, 2006 by [Matthew Harnett](#), [Dan Lucarelli](#) and [Thomas Jarzab](#)

In spring 2005, Matt Harnett, Dan Lucarelli and Thomas Jarzab were students in Thomas Saaty's "Decision Making in a Complex Environment" class at the University of Pittsburgh's Katz Graduate School of Business. Saaty asked his students to choose a difficult problem and suggest solutions using a methodology known as analytic hierarchical process, or AHP. They chose to study the question, "Should the city of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County governments merge?"

It's been about a year since the three of us sat down to choose a topic for one of our last research projects prior to earning our MBAs. We considered a lot of options, but we chose the city-county merger because of its importance to the community in which we live, work and attended school. It is our hope that the results will have a meaningful impact on our community.

In short, our research found that yes, these two regional governments should merge.

We began by posing four alternative scenarios.

The first alternative would enact a full merger by combining all of Allegheny County's local township governments, as well as the city of Pittsburgh, into one government entity -- a consolidation of approximately 130 distinct entities.

The second alternative would incorporate the city of Pittsburgh into Allegheny County, making metro Pittsburgh the 7th-largest city in the United States, up from 54th-largest today.

The third alternative would merge services only where duplication of effort exists. The city of Pittsburgh would remain a politically separate entity but would coordinate public services with the county. The last alternative would be to maintain the status quo.

Next, we examined the economic, social, political and technological impact of each scenario, making almost a thousand comparisons to complete the study.

The result? We found that the full merge alternative is the best, three times as likely as the others to create a positive outcome. Merging services, the third alternative in our study, was a solid second choice. Maintaining the status quo had the lowest score, meaning any merger choice is better than nothing.

The overall economic and political benefits of merging outweighed the perceived hardships that could potentially result from a temporary loss of local control. While we found the result intuitively convincing, we are pleased to have market-proven methodology that lends objective credibility to the 2003 Allegheny Conference on Community Development's position favoring a merger.

In our final reflections, we feel that the results of this project, the fruits of its research and the bringing together of all of our stakeholders' ideas is not only the capstone of our individual educations at Katz, but more importantly they create a keystone to the things we hold close to our hearts.

Our region's standard for innovation, hard work and sacrifice helped create a nation in which leadership, expertise and vision constitute our collective values. And from our perspective and experience, we are convinced that our region has both the human and capital resources necessary to be nothing less than that same glory for the next generation.

We simply must believe in those dreams and have the courage and fortitude to make the decisions that will get us there.

For more information on the study or authors, visit www.ComplexDecisions.com.

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