

**A History of the Unification of the
Athens-Clarke County Government**

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I. Introduction

Local government costs and workloads have been increasing due to less financing and more mandates from the federal and state governments. Localities have been forced to find creative ways to lower costs while continuing to provide quality services to their citizens. One option available to local governments is city-county consolidation. Consolidation advocates state that it will help produce more efficient and effective government services and reduce bickering between governments at the local level (Durning, 1989). Twenty-nine consolidated city-county governments exist in the United States while many more cities and counties have service sharing provisions. In January of 1991, Athens-Clarke County became the second consolidated government in the state of Georgia. The Athens-Clarke County experience can provide valuable insight to other communities that are considering consolidation. This paper reviews the history of the failed consolidation attempts in Athens-Clarke County, the process that led to the successful consolidation, and the mechanics of merging the two governments. The paper concludes with a discussion of the impacts of consolidation and lessons that can be learned from the Athens-Clarke County consolidation. Much of the information in this paper was obtained through interviews with former and current elected officials, charter commission members, government staff, and other involved in the consolidation process in Athens-Clarke County.

II. History of Failed Consolidation Attempts

In 1955, the school systems of the city of Athens and Clarke County were consolidated. The first movement for consolidating the governments of Athens and Clarke County began in the mid-sixties. The voters of Athens-Clarke County passed a local constitutional amendment in 1966. The amendment authorized the Georgia General Assembly to create a charter commission to study consolidation and to draft a charter for an Athens-Clarke County consolidated government. In 1967, The General Assembly passed a local act that created the first Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission. The commission consisted of sixteen members with three appointed by the mayor, five by the City Council, and eight by the Clarke County Commission. However, no elected officials could be appointed to the charter commission (*Georgia Laws, 1967*).

A referendum was held on March 12, 1969 that required the passage of two separate counts. One count was conducted for the city of Athens and one for Clarke County (excluding Athens). The measure passed in the city with 59.8% support, but failed in the county with only 29.3% support (see Table 1, p. 43). Of the five precincts in the city, three voted for consolidation. In the county, none of the eight precincts voted for consolidation (see Table 2, p. 44). The need for urban services in the county was not yet strong enough for the county residents (outside of Athens) to support consolidation. A possible reason for the failure of the 1968 referendum was the lack of

an organized campaign to promote consolidation. Several last minute ads were run which opposed consolidation and may have impacted the referendum.

A second consolidation attempt began with the passage of another local act of the General Assembly in 1971. The 1966 local constitutional amendment authorized the 1971 local act. A sixteen-member charter commission was formed with three members appointed by the mayor, five by the City Council, and eight by the Clarke County Commission, but they could appoint no elected officials to the charter commission. The 1972 charter included provisions for an eleven-member commission (eight district representatives and three at-large representatives), an elected mayor to oversee the operations of governmental departments, and an appointed administrator to assist the mayor (*Georgia Laws, 1971; Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission, 1972*).

A referendum for consolidation was held on May 24, 1972. Again, the city residents passed consolidation while the county residents opposed it. The levels of support and opposition had changed, however. In the 1972 vote, the city voted 52% in favor of consolidation compared with 60% in the 1969 vote. However, the county vote was 42% in support of consolidation compared with about 30% support in 1969 (see Table 1, p. 43). An analysis of the precincts shows a similar pattern as the first referendum. In the city, two of the five districts voted for consolidation while in the county only one of the eight precincts supported consolidation (see Table 2, p. 44).

Some change in support may be attributable to a shift in population from the city to the county. The population in the city had only grown by about 1,000 people since the previous vote while the unincorporated county population had grown by about 3,000 (see Table 3, p. 45). The county residents may have opposed consolidation because they thought their taxes would be increased in a consolidated government or because they felt that the city government would be taking over the county.

In 1981, the General Assembly established a third charter commission based on the 1966 constitutional amendment. The charter commission again consisted of sixteen members. This time, elected officials could serve on the charter commission, but they were not allowed to chair the charter commission committees. The charter commission was divided into the following committees and subcommittees: resource guidance, government organization and structure, budget and taxation, districting, public information, public services, transition, and charter drafting. Elected officials were not allowed to serve on the districting committee. The commission held five public meetings to obtain citizen input for the charter. The charter commission enlisted the help of a governmental consulting firm to aid in the charter writing process. The structure of the proposed legislative body was a ten-member commission (eight district representatives, two at-large representatives) and a chairperson (elected at-large). The chairperson was to preside at the meetings of the commission and could vote only in the case of a tie by the commission. The charter also included an elected county executive

to supervise and direct the daily operations of the various government departments. The county executive was to appoint a county administrator to assist in the management of the government-s operations. The charter was very detailed and included a budget for the proposed consolidated government (*Georgia Laws*, 1981; Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission, 1981).

A referendum was held on February 16, 1982. Although support in the city and county had increased since the 1972 vote, the consolidation referendum failed again. While 55% of the city votes were for consolidation, only 45% of the county voters supported it (see Table 1, p. 43). Since the previous vote about ten years earlier, there had been some major changes in the distribution of population between the city and county. The population of the city had remained about the same while the population of the unincorporated county had grown by about 10,000 people (see Table 3, p. 45). An analysis of the 1982 vote by precinct highlights some interesting points. In the city, only two of the six precincts voted against consolidation. In the county, four of the seven precincts voted down consolidation (see Table 2, p. 44). Two of the county precincts expressed extremely high levels of opposition which was a major reason for the failure of the 1982 consolidation vote. One of these precincts covers Winterville, a small municipality in Clarke County (precinct 220, Table 2, p. 44). The Winterville residents may have opposed consolidation because they did not have an appointment to the charter commission. While they were involved in the public hearings, the lack of

representation on the commission may have been enough to keep them opposed to consolidation. Some other possible reasons for the failure of the 1982 referendum may have been opposition by many of the county commissioners and the lack of an active, grassroots educational campaign for consolidation.

III. Successful Unification

The successful unification grew out of the past failed attempts. Important changes had taken place over the course of the failed attempts. The county was becoming more urban as the population of the unincorporated county was beginning to increase. With more residents outside the city limits, more urban services were required. The city had a slowly decreasing population base. A large part of the property in the city is owned by the state-chartered University of Georgia and is therefore tax-exempt. Due to the decreasing population, the city had an even smaller tax base from which to draw revenues. Consolidation brought the prospect of a larger, joint tax base for providing more efficient services throughout the county.

Conflicts arose between the two governments over recreation services and water rates. The county parks program was oriented to environmental education with passive recreational programs while the city had a very successful active recreational program (Crider, 1993). The county contracted with the city to allow county residents (outside of Athens) to participate in the city recreation programs. There was a conflict over the

amount the county should pay the city for this service. The county officials also felt that the city was not accurately keeping records of where this money was being spent.

Eventually, the city improved its record keeping concerning the recreation fees.

There was also some conflict over the amount to be paid for water services. The county water rate was about two times higher than the city water rate. The reason for the higher rate in the county was the need to pay for the extension of water and sewer lines into the county. The water issue was very sensitive, and a group in the county sued a group in the city. These conflicts were emphasized by the media which helped turn people's attention toward another attempt at consolidation.

III. Successful Unification

A. Charter Commission

A fourth movement for consolidation began in the late 1980's. In 1988, a citizen group entitled the Quality Growth Task Force formed to examine issues related to the future of Athens and Clarke County. This group formed an ad hoc committee entitled the Government Reorganization Committee to examine the issue of consolidation. In July of 1989, the committee held a meeting at the Holiday Inn in Athens to begin building support for a resolution to create a new charter commission. More than 300 citizens attended the meeting. The following day, both the city council and the county commission approved the resolution. The resolution established a fifteen-member

commission. Five members were appointed by the citizen task force, five by the City Council, and five by the County Commission (*Athens Banner Herald*, July 11, 1989 & July 12, 1989). This was the first consolidation attempt in Athens and Clarke County that was proposed based on the amended Georgia Constitution (see Appendix A, p. 35 for a further description of the legal basis for consolidation).

There were several structural differences in the 1989 charter commission compared with the past attempts. No elected officials would be part of the fifteen-member charter commission. While some elected officials of the two governments felt that it was a mistake not to include them, they were encouraged to participate "ex-officio."⁶ A second change was the use of the word "unification" rather than consolidation in order to place the failed consolidation attempts in the past. Another change was the voting structure for the referendum. Under the amended *Georgia Constitution*, one vote would be taken, but two counts would be done. The first count would be votes from the city of Athens, and the second count would be the votes from Clarke County including Athens. Both counts had to pass in order for unification to pass. In the previous referendums for consolidation, separate counts were taken for Athens and Clarke County (excluding Athens).

The charter commission obtained the support of two University of Georgia groups, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIOG) (for technical advice) and the Institute for Community and Area Development (ICAD) (for help in structuring the

meeting process). The services of these two institutions were provided to the charter commission at no charge. The commission reached several important decisions soon after it was formed. First, no voting would be done; every decision would be reached by consensus. Secondly, they would work to obtain citizen involvement. Finally, they would raise their own financial support; no tax money would be used.

Early in the charter process, the commission decided to hold a series of nine town meetings at various locations in the county. The purpose of these meetings was to present the general proposal for unification and to obtain public input. An effort was made to get Winterville involved in the process when one of the early town hall meetings was held there. Similar to the 1982 commission, however, Winterville did not have an appointment on the charter commission. Some issues raised by citizens in the meetings included adequate representation of African-Americans, the status of current services, and protection of current employees from losing their jobs in the proposed government.

For the charter writing process, the commission formed five issue works groups based on important issues raised during the town meetings. The groups were as follows: Form of Government, Services, Budget/Transition, Districts/Representation, and Winterville. Citizens were asked to volunteer for these groups in order to provide input for the commission to write the charter. The issue work groups, which included about 130 volunteers, met once a week for about a month. The commission also

encouraged other citizens to attend the issue work group meetings and to provide their input.

The charter commission reviewed the recommendations of the various issue work groups during a two-day retreat in late 1989. During the two-day period, they developed a draft charter. The draft charter was presented to the local elected officials of the city and county and to the local legislative delegation of the Georgia General Assembly. Some changes were made to the charter during several rounds of review by the local legislative delegation. Some local elected officials opposed the charter; they did not support various provisions such as the number of districts and the division of power between the mayor and manager (*Athens Banner-Herald*, January 12, 1990). However, the charter commission did not make any major changes at this stage in the charter writing process.

Finally, the charter was presented to the local legislative delegation in early 1990 for submission to the General Assembly. In order for the charter to move on to the General Assembly, three of the four house members representing Athens-Clarke County had to sign the bill along with the Senator for the area. After some last minute compromises among the legislators (which did not involve changes to the charter), the charter was approved and sent to the General Assembly where it was approved on March 1, 1990 (*Athens Daily News*, February 27, 1990).

III. Successful Unification

B. Justice Department

In order for the new districts involved in a consolidation to be legal, the U.S. Department of Justice must give pre-clearance. The Justice Department examines new districts to determine if they are equal in population, to ensure the one man/one voter rule, and to determine whether minority representation is increased or decreased. Approval from the Justice Department does not have to occur before a referendum for consolidation is held, but Justice pre-clearance is usually obtained first. The districting plan for the proposed Athens-Clarke County unification was presented to the Justice Department in March of 1990 and was cleared in late May of 1990.

III. Successful Unification

C. Promotional Campaign

A community-based promotional campaign played an important part in the successful unification. In the past, a limited amount of promotion was done before the referendums on consolidation. As discussed previously, public meetings formed the basis for the issue work groups that were used to write the charter. Wide involvement by citizens in these work groups was encouraged. This involvement allowed citizens to provide input into the actual writing of the charter. The charter commission, with support from other involved citizens, formed Citizens for a Unified Government. The

group sought financial support from businesses and individuals throughout the county in order to promote unification. A public relations firm from Atlanta was employed to assist in the campaign, but how much impact they had is unclear. The educational campaign was a "grass roots" effort much like the campaign for writing the charter but with even more extensive involvement. The campaign included more town meetings for answering questions about unification and a speaker's bureau for addressing various groups in the community such as church and neighborhood groups. Other means for distributing information were contacting voters through printed materials and by telephone. Also, like an election campaign, standard newspaper and radio advertising and promotional signage was used. Finally, on the Saturday before the election, the group held a Unification Day. Local shopping centers were manned with volunteers to distribute information and answer questions on unification. More than 250 citizens assisted in the promotional work of Citizens for a Unified Government.

III. Successful Unification

D. The Referendum

The referendum for unification was held on August 7, 1990. Based on the amended *Georgia Constitution*, the revised voting rule was used which required two counts for passage of the referendum in Clarke County (see Appendix A, p. 35 for a further description). One count was required for the city of Athens, and one count was

required for the county as a whole including Athens. The city voted 58% in support of unification. The second count for the entire county was 59% in favor of unification. This time, unification would have passed even under the old method (separate city and county votes). If the new voting rule was used in the past three attempts, all three would have failed. They all would have passed the city vote, but would have failed in the county-wide vote (including Athens). The 1969 referendum would have failed by 283 votes, the 1972 referendum by 358 votes, and the 1982 referendum by only four votes (see Table 1, p 43). It was not the voting rule that made the difference in the successful attempt; the problem in the past had been obtaining county approval. In the successful attempt, the county (excluding Athens) passed the referendum by a 60% to 40% margin. The city population remained relatively stable over the four votes, while the population in the unincorporated county more than doubled (see Table 2, p. 44). The citizens in the county may have been more supportive of unification because they wanted to receive the benefits of some city services such as a lower water bill.

In 1990, only two of the seven precincts in the city were opposed to unification. All the other precincts showed high levels of support. The county showed support in all but three of the precincts for the 1990 vote. The Winterville precinct (220-A) again showed strong opposition although it was less than the 1982 vote. The other county precincts that voted in favor of unification outweighed the opposition precincts this time (see Table 3, p. 45). After the referendum was passed, the process of actually

merging services and departments began.

IV. The Merger

By mandate of the new charter, a transition team was formed after the passage of unification to identify issues that the two governments needed to resolve in order to unify. The charter required that the transition team consist of the city administrator, the county administrator, one appointee of the mayor of the City of Athens, one appointee of the chair of the Clarke County Board of Commissioners, two appointees of the mayor of Winterville, and three members of the charter commission (Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission, 1990). The transition team did not have decision-making authority for implementing their ideas, but was charged with collecting facts and providing alternatives for how to address important issues. The committee met from September to November of 1990. To gather data needed for their report, the commission received reports from the city and county departments. The final report from the transition team covered rate equalization for water services, personnel issues, budget policy, service districts, combining functions, and other issues (Athens-Clarke County Unification Transition Team, 1990).

The transition report was a good start, but hard work lay ahead in forming a new legislative body and combining the departments of the two governments.

IV. The Merger

A. Legislature

Forming a new legislative body was difficult. The form mandated by the charter was a compromise between the ten-member city council and strong-mayor structure and the five-member county commission structure. The new form was a hybrid with a ten-member commission and a Chief Elected Officer (or the equivalent of a weak-mayor). The new commission faced some serious challenges. No one really knew how the new system would work because the traditions of operating the former two governments were gone. Most of the new commissioners had not served in elected offices. They were not accustomed to working together in an elected body, and they were unsure how the new commission should operate. The commissioners did not really trust each other. They were reluctant to relinquish control by creating standing committees because they lacked trust in the Chief Elected Officer who, by charter, possessed sole committee-appointing power. Therefore, the commission began, and has continued to operate, as a committee of the whole. The entire commission reviews everything that comes before them, which has led to more preparatory meetings and longer decision-making meetings.

Many ordinance issues were very difficult to reconcile. The commission reviewed every ordinance of the former two governments to determine how to apply it to the new government. Some intense public debate was involved on issues such as the

sign ordinance. Each of the former governments had resolved these types of ordinances, but they were reopened for public debate. It took the commission about two years to reconcile the ordinances.

Forming the new legislative body was not easy, and it took time for the new elected officials to learn their roles. After the ordinance review, they began to settle into their new positions and function more smoothly.

IV. The Merger

B. Departments

The Unified Government combined eight county departments, ten city departments, and three departments that already served both former governments into seventeen departments (see Table 4, p. 46 for a list of former city, former county, and unified departments) In discussing the consolidation of departments, the following ones will be reviewed: personnel, police, finance, and other departments.

Personnel

The Personnel Department was one of the most difficult to unify. Two dissimilar pay systems had to be combined. Several charter restrictions placed limits on how the new personnel system would operate. The charter mandated that employees from the two former governments be given jobs as similar in nature as possible to their

old ones. Positions would be removed by reassignment and attrition and not by termination. The charter also stated that full-time employees would not suffer losses in compensation or benefits due to unification. The charter further required that a plan to equalize salaries (for employees with the same functions) be in place by the end of the first year of unification. By the end of the fourth year, the equalization was to be complete.

Prior to unification, a step was taken to correct the differences in the pay periods of the two governments. The two former governments had bi-weekly payrolls which were paid on opposite Fridays. Before unification, the two payrolls were moved to the same Friday. The city also had a weekly payroll which was continued until February of 1992. When the weekly payroll was terminated, budget management classes and a credit union plan were offered to employees to help them adjust to the bi-weekly payroll. The two actual personnel systems (rules, regulations, and policies) were unified in July of 1991 when the first Unified Government budget went into effect (fiscal year 1992).

The pay plans of the former city and county were extremely different. The city system gave a pay increase to the base salary that moved employees out on the pay scale. The city also had a merit bonus system in place. The county, however, gave cost of living increases that moved employees up on the pay scale and kept most of the county employees compacted on one end. The differences in the systems resulted in a

higher entry-level pay rate for county workers compared to city workers and a higher rate a pay for tenured city workers compared to county workers (Condrey, 1994). Thus, it was determined that a new classification plan was needed to reconcile the differences in the pay systems.

In July of 1991, the new Unified Government began operations with a unified budget. Employees of both of the former governments received a 4% cost of living increase in July of 1991. The Institute of Government began work on a new classification plan in 1991, and the plan went into effect in January of 1993 with a continuing annual payroll cost of about \$1,080,000. The study was done to place the entire government on the same classification system and to establish job descriptions for all positions in the new government. This study helped correct the differences in pay among short-term employees. Short-term employees from the former city had their pay raised to or near to the level of the former city employees. However, for new hires, the city entry-level rate was used to prevent new, entry-level employees from starting with higher salaries than current employees.

In January of 1994, a pay study was implemented to help correct some large differences in pay among long-term employees. The payroll costs resulting from this study were about \$400,000 for the first half-year of the plan and about \$700,000 for each following year. The study was based on years of service in the organization rather than years in a particular pay grade. Detailed information on time in grade was

not available. Based on years of service, those that were below the pay line were brought up to the line while those that were above the line received no change in pay. In August of 1994, all employees were given a 2.5% one-time bonus. This was the first raise since the 1991 4% raise for some employees.

A final classification and compensation study was implemented in July of 1995.

Some government staff questioned the need for a second classification study after unification. The new system resulted in a large number of appeals by employees compared to a relatively small number of appeals after the 1993 classification. The annual expenses associated with this study are about \$3.2 million. In July of 1996, employees received a 2% market adjustment to their salaries and up to 2% more as a longevity increase. The Unified Government plans to implement a performance-based pay system in the near future.

Consolidation of benefits was much easier than combining the two salary systems. The new Personnel Department compared the city and county benefit packages and took the best from each one. For example, the city had a lower health insurance deductible; therefore, all employees in the Unified Government received the lower deductible. Annual benefit costs to the Unified Government did increase, but the overall rate for the new benefits plan was better than what the separate government would have paid for a similar plan due to the increased number of employees (Condrey, 1994; Selden, 1994).

The Personnel Department was difficult to unify due to the charter mandates on resolving compensation differences and the problems in trying to unify two dissimilar pay systems. It was difficult for the Unified Government to adjust salaries immediately after unification due to the recession occurring at the time. The charter limited the amount of the first unified budget to the amount of the combined budgets of the former governments plus inflation. This restriction also made it difficult to address salary concerns quickly. The charter also placed restrictions on removing employees which hampered possible cost savings. Employee morale suffered due to the length of time required to work through the differences in the two former pay plans. Some employees did not receive raises between the 1991 4% increase and the 1994 2.5% increase. Both city and county employees were accustomed to receiving some type of increase each year. Fortunately, most of the salary equalization issues have been resolved. The appeals process from the final classification and pay system was completed in June of 1996. Although some employees are not pleased with the results of the last classification plan, unification of the salary systems is now complete.

Finance

The charter mandated that the two governments operate as separate fiscal entities from January 1991 to June 30, 1991 and then begin operations as a Unified Government at the start of a new fiscal year. This provision gave the Finance

Department about six months to prepare the first budget for the Unified Government. It took some time for the new Finance Department to begin operating smoothly. They had to close out the books of the two former governments and transfer assets and liabilities to the new government. Some personnel were assigned to closeout work for the former governments.

The new Finance Department combined functions from different areas of the two former governments. It combined the accounting, internal audit, accounts payable, business licensing, budgeting, purchasing, and alcohol beverage licensing functions from the former governments. Not all of these functions were in the finance departments of the former governments. For example, the purchasing division was in the General Services Department in the county and the Mayor's Office in the city (Selden, 1994).

Difficulties encountered in the Finance Department unification included the closeout work, reclassifying jobs, and uncertainty among employees. Closeout work made it difficult for the Finance Department to come together because some employees were not really involved in the daily operations of the Unified Government for some time. Reclassifying jobs became a slight problem for Finance because they had to operate for a full year (complete budget cycle) before determining everyone's new duties and responsibilities. Uncertainty among employees was a problem throughout the government during unification. Employees were comfortable with the old systems

and not excited about making changes. People were unsure how they would fit into a new organization with different responsibilities and different leadership styles under new managers. These problems had to be approached with the understanding that it would take time for people to adapt to their new positions in the new organization.

Police Department

The two police departments were also difficult to unify. The city force (about 100 officers) and the county force (about 80 officers) had two different philosophies for service delivery. The city police were more service oriented. They did more community policing and had specialized divisions such as public housing. They responded to more incidents of violent crimes, and their patrol area was more concentrated. The county was more law-enforcement oriented; they responded as incidents occurred, but they did not have specialized patrol units. The county had fewer violent crimes, and the county police concentrated on burglaries and property crimes. Their patrol zones were more spread out. However, the two departments had a very good working relationship prior to unification.

Some problems made combining the two departments difficult. One problem was obtaining new uniforms and cars for the officers. The officers did not receive new uniforms until August of 1991 because the purchase was not approved until January and it took months to process the orders. The two departments did not actually unify until

August when they moved into their new building. In the six months before moving to the new facility, city and county officers rode with each other to learn how to work together. Uniform and car designs were chosen which were different from either of the former departments. The separate cars were kept on longer and phased out over the years. Different uniforms and cars helped keep the idea instilled in the officer-s minds that they were two separate departments. The real problem was that the two departments were hesitant about unifying. At meetings, officers from the former two departments would voluntarily sit on opposite sides of the room. Members of the two police departments (as well as other departments throughout the government) were hesitant to change, and it took time to mold the two departments into one.

Another problem during unification was the move into the new building. Prior to unification, the county government began construction of a new, state of the art police facility. It was designed to accommodate 100 officers and to include a weight room, locker rooms, and showers. Once unification passed, it became clear that the new facility would not be large enough to house the combined departments. The interior of the building was altered which resulted in a very cramped facility for the new department, and the employees were not pleased with the new facility.

A third problem during the unification of the Police Department was the salary equalization process. This was hard for all departments, and the Police Department provides some examples of what the employees went through during this process.

There was a large discrepancy in salary between the officers of the two former governments. City officers had higher salaries than county officers, and it took several pay studies for the county officers' salaries to be raised. However, the city officers were accustomed to receiving cost of living raises, and they did not receive one for several years under the Unified Government. Some officers had to make up this difference by working off-duty jobs. There was low morale in the Police Department because the pay issues were not resolved sooner. However, the pay issues were researched early in unification. Several pay studies were done, and the salary equalization process took some time. Other factors made it difficult to resolve the salary issues quickly, such as the recession and the charter provisions prohibiting the removal of employees and prohibiting the reduction of salaries or benefits.

The Police Department experienced problems during unification, but they are seeing improvements. A large number of officers have left the department since unification. Many of the current uniformed officers were not employed here during unification and are not set into the old county or city standards of operation. The senior officers were present during unification, and until they eventually move on, some will tend to identify with the old city or county ways of operating. There have been improvements in service delivery with the new department. The police force is more evenly distributed than in the past which helps improve response times. Under the former system, the county officers had to drive through the city to respond to a call

on the other side of town; now the closest officer can respond. The whole county is now covered by a service-oriented police department, making equity in service delivery available to all citizens of Athens-Clarke County.

Other Departments

This section provides a summary of the unification of some other departments. The Fire Department already provided services to the entire county. Emergency Management remained the same under unification since it was already a joint department. The new Planning and Zoning Department included some previously joint city-county planning functions (such as zoning and subdivision administration and long range planning) and some functions handled only by the city (such as historical preservation and sign ordinance enforcement). Traffic Engineering was also a joint department, and it became a division in the unified Public Works Department. Other departments only existed in one of the former governments, and they were moved under the umbrella of the new government. Examples are the Airport (under the former county), Transit (under the former city), and Corrections (former county, but offered services to the city). Other departments combined parts of various departments. The new Solid Waste Department, for example, combined the city's Solid Waste Department with the landfill responsibility of the county's Public Works Department. The city and county General Services Departments were vastly different,

and they transferred their functions to a variety of departments in the new government.

The county department included personnel, risk management (both transferred to the unified Personnel Department), and purchasing (transferred to the unified Finance Department). Some county functions were also transferred to the unified Central Services Department. The city General Services Department included the grant services division which was moved to the new department of Human and Economic Development. The city General Services Department also included the special projects, animal services, and facilities management divisions which were all moved to the new Central Services Department (Selden, 1994).

Some departments from the former two governments were complimentary, and thus, easier to combine. For example, the city did its own curb and gutter work for sidewalks, but it contracted for street paving. The county did its own paving, but contracted its sidewalk installation. These two elements were easy to combine in the new Public Works Department. Another example of the complimentary functions was the Parks and Recreation functions of the two former governments. As discussed previously, the county parks program was oriented to environmental education with passive recreational programs, while the city had a very successful structured recreational program (Crider, 1993). In the Unified Government, the former city department became Recreation and Parks and the former county department became Arts and Environmental Education. The two departments were officially merged into

the Leisure Services Department in July of 1996. The new Leisure Services director was selected in September of 1996 which completed the final merger of former city and county departments.

Consolidating departments is the major challenge in consolidating a government. It helps if departments have been consolidated beforehand, if a function is the responsibility of only one government, or if the two departments perform complimentary functions. The difficulty in consolidating departments arises when departments in the two governments that perform the same function have significant differences in their modes of operation. Personnel was difficult to unify due to the difference in the salary structures. The Police Department was difficult to unify due to the difference in philosophy about service delivery. A useful tactic in the Athens-Clarke County unification was to align the departments of the different governments as much as possible in the interim period before unification.

V. Impacts of Unification

In order to examine the impact of unification in Athens-Clarke County, one can review the number of employees, the cost of government operations, and the provision of government services. Proponents of consolidation state that it will reduce duplication and overlap in functions which should result in a reduction in the number of positions (Durning, 1989). Currently, in the Athens-Clarke County Government, there

are 1,632 approved positions (full- and part-time). At the time of unification, there were 1,465 approved positions (See Graph 1, p. 48). The number of employees did not decrease in the Unified Government for several reasons. First, many areas did not have overlapping positions so there was not a need for reduction in these areas. Secondly, the charter of the Unified Government mandated that no employees would be terminated as a result of unification. Instead, elimination of duplication in positions would be "addressed through attrition and reassignment" (Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission, 1990, p. 36; Condrey, 1994). Thirdly, the new Unified Government had a much larger service area to cover; reduction in numbers was not an option for some departments. As the community has grown, the size of the government has increased in order to provide quality services to a larger number of residents, especially in the areas of public safety and recreation.

In order to further examine the impact of unification in Athens-Clarke County, transition costs and overall government expenditures can also be reviewed. One time transition costs amounted to \$470,353 and included such expenses as new police uniforms, a new personnel handbook, expenses for developing the Code of Ordinances for the new government, and costs to cover modification to the financial system. Other transition costs will continue over time such as the fringe benefit and salary changes discussed earlier (Selden, 1994).

Overall government expenditures can also be examined in light of unification. A

charter provision required that the initial annual Unified Government budget not exceed the combined budgets of the two former governments plus inflation. This restriction was a barrier to addressing salary concerns early in the Unified Government. An analysis of pre- and post-unification expenditures shows that expenditures have increased at a lower rate under the Unified Government compared to the two former governments (see Table 5, p. 47; Graph 2, p. 48). For the combined former governments, the percentage increase over the previous year's expenditures was in double digits for five years prior to unification. Under the Unified Government, the percentage increase in expenditures has been in double digits only one time. The first year of Unified Government operations (fiscal year 1992) yielded expenditures that were 3.3% above the prior year expenditures of the combined former governments. This increase was much lower than the 14.9% increase in expenditures from fiscal year 1990 to fiscal year 1991 for the combined city and county governments. In the five years since unification, the Unified Government has operated more efficiently than the former governments in terms of the rate of increase for expenditures.

Finally, service delivery is important to consider when reviewing the impact of unification. Some levels of service delivery have changed since unification. The Police Department provides a more consistent level of coverage over the entire county with better response times compared to the separate government system. The Planning, Building Inspections, and Public Works Departments provide better services from a

central one stop shopping@ facility. Businesses and developers no longer have to work with two separate governments when preparing to build or locate in Athens-Clarke County. Regional cooperation with other local governments is also far more efficient and effective with the Unified Government serving as the one voice for Athens-Clarke County. Leaf and limb pickup is now available to all citizens of the county. However, garbage pickup remains separate. The former city residents receive government pickup while the residents in the former unincorporated area continue to receive private garbage pickup (see Appendix B, p. 38 for a discussion of service districts in the Unified Government). One issue that frustrated some former city residents was the equalization of water rates. Many people believed that the higher county rate would be lowered to match the city rate. Instead, the city rate was raised some and the county rate was lowered some. A plan has been written (as mandated by the charter) to provide water and sewer services to the entire county. Overall, the Unified Government provides the means for a higher level of quality services for the citizens of Athens-Clarke County.

VI. Conclusions

Conclusions from the Athens-Clarke County experience can be drawn in two broad categories: the formation of the Unified Government's charter and the actual merger of the two governments. This section includes insights from the interviews of

those involved with the various consolidation attempts in Athens-Clarke County.

VI. Conclusions

A. Lessons Learned: Forming a Charter

There are some important lessons to learn concerning the movement to get the charter passed and the process of writing the charter. First, it is crucial to obtain citizen support. Unless enough citizens buy into the idea, a referendum for consolidation will not pass. Secondly, citizens should be involved in the entire process. In Athens-Clarke County, citizens were called upon to help write and promote the charter. The charter commission held numerous community meetings to obtain citizen input. Next, it is important for consolidation to be presented in the proper manner. It should not be stated that consolidation will save a certain amount of money because that cannot be known in advance. Real cost savings may not be realized for years. Fourthly, important charter provisions should be clearly explained. This charter contained a provision that required equalization of water rates. Exactly how the rates would be equalized was not explained, but many citizens believed that the unincorporated county resident's rates would be reduced to match the city rates. Instead, the city rates were raised some and county rates were reduced some to accomplish county-wide equity in water rates. Some city residents were upset with the way this was handled. They may not have voted for unification if they had known that

their water rates would increase. Fifthly, Athens-Clarke County did not have to deal with Sheriff opposition to the charter. The policing function was handled by the city and county police departments rather than by the Sheriff. Consolidation attempts fail in some counties due to opposition by the Sheriff. The Sheriff may oppose consolidation if it involves movement of the policing function to a consolidated police department. Sixthly, the charter commission did not include any elected officials. Without elected officials on the commission, the charter commission used a grass roots, citizen-led approach to the charter writing process. A lack of involvement by elected officials can lead to problems, however. Elected officials and government staff have insights into what type of charter provisions may or may not work. Even if elected officials are not on a charter commission, they should be consulted (along with government staff) throughout the entire charter writing process. Finally, it is important to have qualified consultants to facilitate the charter writing process. The support from ICAD and CVIOG was very instrumental in structuring the charter writing process. Special attention should be paid to provisions that mandate or restrict costs in the new government. These provisions can help or hinder the operations of a newly consolidated government. Government staff should be consulted when considering the potential effect of cost restriction or cost mandates on the new government.

VI. Conclusions

B. Lessons Learned: Merging the Two Governments

There are also some important lessons to learn concerning the actual merger of the two governments. First, professional management is essential in combining departments. Someone has to take the lead in the merger and solid, professional management is invaluable when making this type of change. Systems or procedures taken from one of the former governments may be resisted by former members of the other government. Organizations with two different cultures have to be merged into one which takes time, good management skills throughout the organization, and hard work by all employees. Secondly, pre-planning for consolidation between departments of the separate governments is critically important, and senior leadership from the departments to be merged should be involved in the development of the merger plans. Merging departments around a year after consolidation approval is probably a good minimum time frame. The Athens-Clarke County Government had about nine months after official unification before they actually combined departments. More time in pre-planning may have made the transition easier, however. Thirdly, salary differentials should be addressed as soon as possible after consolidation. Employees are willing to make some sacrifices, but after an extended period of time without adequate changes, they begin to become disgruntled. Provisions concerning budgetary and personnel restrictions should be carefully considered in the charter writing process because they

can restrict how soon salary changes can be made. Fourthly, ordinance issues settled in the past by either or both of the former governments will re-emerge. The new legislature should be prepared to spend a great deal of time to work through these issues, especially for controversial ordinances. Fifthly, it is good to develop a plan for specific issues to handle in the first year or two of unification. Without specific issues written down in advance, some important ones may get lost in the shuffle of unification. Sixthly, try to merge departments before a consolidation attempt. This will help pave the way for a future consolidation. If a consolidation may be occurring soon, it is helpful to get departments and procedures parallel as much as possible. Governments may be able to modify purchasing or personnel systems to make them more parallel even before a referendum on consolidation is passed. Consolidation will be easier with less departments and fewer conflicting systems and procedures. Even if consolidation does not pass the first time, it may pass in the future. Finally, realize that true consolidation will take time. Merging two governments is an incredibly complex process. Not all the problems can be predicted because each situation is different. The key is to get the employees to buy into the changes, to be adaptable, and to be flexible. It takes time to work through the problems associated with consolidation. However, Athens-Clarke County has moved through many of the problems associated with unification and is now moving into a future of increased performance and better service delivery for the citizens of Athens-Clarke County.

VII. Appendix

A. *Legal Authorization for Consolidation in Georgia*

The *Georgia Constitution*, as amended in 1983, provides for city-county consolidation in Article 9, Section 3, Paragraph 2(a) (see p. 37). Before the 1983 amendments, the process involved a local constitutional amendment which referenced a specific locality and gave the General Assembly authority to create a charter commission. A subsequent local act was passed to authorize an individual charter commission. After the amended *Georgia Constitution* became effective on July 1, 1983, local constitutional amendments were prohibited. The only local constitutional amendments authorizing consolidation that are still in effect are ones that have been continued past July 1, 1983. The revised *Constitution* allows for city-county charter commissions to be created by local legislation. A local act can authorize a charter commission. The act normally covers the number of appointees to the commission, the method for appointment to the commission, the holding of public hearings, and the establishment of time frames for preparing a charter and holding a referendum on consolidation. The local act will also normally include some prohibitions for the charter commission, such as not allowing any change that would affect the school system or school board of the city or county, not allowing changes that would merge court systems, or not allowing changes that cause tax exemptions (such as the homestead exemption) to be decreased.

Through the local act, the General Assembly can grant the charter commission the power to create a consolidated government. However, the local legislative delegation of the General Assembly can also require that the charter commission's work is only a recommendation that requires another local law to be passed by the General Assembly. The local legislative delegation also retains the power to draft a consolidation charter on its own without creating a charter commission.

After a charter is written, it must be cleared by the U.S. Department of Justice. The Justice Department reviews the proposed districts to see if adequate representation is available for minorities. Normally, a charter will be submitted to the Justice Department before a referendum is held. A charter is not effective until it has been given pre-clearance by Justice. In a referendum, the *Georgia Constitution* requires one vote count for any city with more than 10% of the population of the county. Another count is done for the county as a whole including all municipalities. In Clarke County, Athens is the only municipality with over ten percent of the population. Therefore, two counts were required, one for the city of Athens, and one for the county as a whole including the city of Athens.

The formation of the Athens-Clarke County charter commission was unique because it was a citizen-led initiative. Charter commissions are normally created by local legislation. The Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission was not created in this manner, and it had no real legal standing until the charter was passed by the

General Assembly.

From the *Georgia Constitution*

Article 9, Section 3, Paragraph 2(a).

The General Assembly may provide by law for any matters necessary or convenient to authorize the consolidation of the governmental and corporate powers and functions vested in municipalities with the governmental and corporate powers and functions vested in a county or counties in which such municipalities are located; provided, however, that no such consolidation shall become effective unless separately approved by a majority of the qualified voters of the county or each of the counties and of the municipality or each of the municipalities located within such county or counties containing at least 10 percent of the population of the county in which located voting thereon in such manner as prescribed in such law. Such law may provide procedures and requirements for the establishment of charter commissions to draft proposed charters for the consolidated government, and the General Assembly is expressly authorized to delegate its powers to such charter commissions for such purposes so that the governmental consolidation proposed by a charter commission may become effective without the necessity of further action by the General Assembly; or such law may require that the recommendation of any such charter commission be implemented by a subsequent local law.

VII. Appendix

B. An Overview of the Charter

In order to fully understand the process of unification, a review of some of the major charter provisions is necessary. Some of the major sections in the charter covered taxing districts, the structure of the legislature, administrative structure, general provisions, and transition provisions. For taxing and service provision purposes, the county was divided into general services and urban services districts. The general services district covers the entire county area including Winterville. The urban service districts covers the former city limits of Athens and allows for higher levels of service than the general services district. The Unified Government is given the authority to establish taxes and service delivery for these service districts.

The structure of the legislature is another important section of the charter. The charter established a ten-member commission. The ten part-time commissioners represent eight regular districts and two super-districts (each superdistrict is composed of four regular districts). Four-year terms were established with staggered terms that required half the new commissioners to take two-year terms when the government started. The commission was given the power to adopt and amend the budget; to approve or disapprove recommendations for appointment of the manager, attorney, and auditor; to remove the manager, attorney, or auditor with a unanimous vote of the commission; and to override the veto of the Chief Elected Officer (CEO) with seven

votes.

The CEO (recently changed to Mayor and Chair) serves in a part-time position for four-year terms (limit of two consecutive terms). The CEO is responsible for presiding over commission meetings, for appointments to committees, for setting the commission meeting agenda, for presenting the budget to the commission, and for approving or vetoing ordinances and resolutions. The CEO was given authority to vote only in the case of a tied vote by the commission.

Another important section of the charter covers the administrative branch. An appointed manager position was established. The manager is appointed to a two-year term by a majority vote of the commission. The manager's responsibilities include overseeing and coordinating the departments of the Unified Government, appointing and removing department heads, preparing the budget for submission to the CEO and Commission, updating the commission on the operation of governmental departments, and establishing administrative procedures to be followed by the departments under the manager.

The general provision section covers amending the charter. The charter can be amended by an act of the General Assembly or by a local ordinance of the commission.

Another general provision is the establishment of an overview commission. The overview commission is formed every four years to examine the status of the Unified Government. The commission is to be composed of at least twenty-one members of the

community appointed by the grand jury with two members from each district and one at-large representative to chair the commission. The commission is given six months to review the following issues: the new government's goals and objectives; effectiveness of the new government in achieving its objectives; the performance of governmental agencies in the previous year based on projected costs, activities, and costs actually incurred; a review of additional programs that may be needed; and other criteria that the commission feels are important. The first charter overview commission completed its review in February of 1996.

The charter also included a section of transition provisions. On its effective date, the charter required all services being provided by the county to be provided throughout the general services district and all services being provided by the city to be provided throughout the urban services district. A water and sewer rate study was to be conducted during the first six months of the new government, and rates were to be equalized within one year. Within four years, the new government was to do the following: have in place "a capital improvements plan to provide water and sewer services to all residents of the county, @ a Aparks and recreation program that will be available to all citizens of Athens-Clarke County,@ and a program of human and economic development to "enhance the quality of life of all citizens" and to "encourage efforts to enable, empower and involve the disadvantaged" (Athens-Clarke County Charter Commission, 1990, pp. 35-36). This last provision led to the creation of the

department of Human and Economic Development (HED) in the Unified Government.

The transition section also included provisions for the protection of existing employees, the initial budget, and the number of employees. Permanent, full-time employees of the former governments were given protection from reductions in compensation and benefits. Employees were to be reassigned to new jobs that were as similar as possible to their old ones. Within in the first year of the Unified Government-s operations, a plan to equalize salaries for employees performing the same jobs was to be started, and it was to be completed by the end of the fourth year of operations of the new government. No employee was to be terminated due to unification, and the reduction of duplicative positions was to be handled through attrition and reassignment.

The charter required that the initial unified budget not exceed the combined fiscal year 1991 budgets of the two former governments with an increase allowed for inflation. The number of the employees of the new government was to remain equal or less than the combined number of employees of the two separate governments until June 30, 1992.

VII. Appendix

C. Tables and Graphs

TABLE 1

Special Referendum Elections for Consolidation						
Date		City	%	County*	%	Total
3/12/69	For	2538	59.8%	789	29.3%	3327
	Against	1703	40.2%	1907	70.7%	3610
5/24/72	For	3263	52.4%	1707	41.9%	4970
	Against	2961	47.6%	2367	58.1%	5328
2/16/82	For	2611	55.2%	2388	45.3%	4999
	Against	2120	44.8%	2883	54.7%	5003
8/7/90	For	3618	58.0%			
	Against	2624	42.0%			
	For	3618	58.0%	4336	60.2%	7954
	Against	2624	42.0%	2862	39.8%	5486

*Includes the unincorporated area and all municipalities (Winterville and Bogart) in Clarke County except Athens

Source: Athens-Clarke County Board of Elections

Table 2
Consolidation Votes by Precinct

Date	City Precincts										County Precincts*							
	216-1	216-2	216-3	216-4	216-5	217	218	219	220	241	1347	1467	1899					
3/12/69	For	112	735	886	367	438	29	8.1%	59	16.5%	63	22.7%	104	36.2%	68	32.5%	424	42.0%
	Against	290	72.1%	289	28.2%	297	25.1%	328	47.2%	499	53.3%	214	77.3%	183	63.8%	141	67.5%	585
5/24/72	For	152	1205	722	530	654	722	62.2%	530	50.3%	654	46.2%	169	37.2%	162	48.6%	885	58.5%
	Against	618	80.3%	620	34.0%	438	37.8%	523	49.7%	763	53.8%	300	62.8%	292	63.3%	171	51.4%	627
2/16/82	For	34	103	87	89	178	87	17.8%	89	19.0%	178	37.2%	169	36.7%	162	48.6%	885	58.5%
	Against	64	65.3%	136	56.9%	401	82.2%	380	81.0%	300	62.8%	292	63.3%	171	51.4%	627	41.5%	627
8/7/90	For	337	634	492	588	607	492	67.7%	588	57.2%	607	56.5%	308	47.5%	352	55.3%	999	66.0%
	Against	438	56.5%	245	27.9%	235	32.3%	440	42.8%	467	43.3%	341	52.5%	284	44.7%	284	44.7%	515

*Does not include the city of Athens
Source: Athens-Clarke County Board of Elections

**Table 3
Population During Consolidation Votes***

Date	Total County	City of Athens	% of Total County	Unicorp. County**	% of Total County
3/12/69	63,116	42,991	68.1%	19,440	30.8%
5/24/72	67,197	43,954	65.4%	22,540	33.5%
2/16/82	76,899	43,133	56.1%	32,977	42.9%
8/7/90	87,693	45,744	52.2%	40,840	46.6%

*Estimates were used for these figures by computing the average yearly increases over a period of years and then multiplying by the number of years from the last census to the date of the referendum.

**Does not include Athens, Winterville, or Bogart

Source: Georgia County Guide, various years (for raw population figures)

Table 4: City, County, and Unified Government Departments After Unification*

Former City Departments	Unified Government Departments
Building Inspection	Airport
Finance	Arts and Environmental Education
General Services	Building Inspection
MIS	Central Services
Personnel	Corrections
Police	Emergency Management
Public Works	Finance
Recreation	Fire
Solid Waste	Human and Economic Development
Transit	Personnel
	Planning and Zoning
Former County Departments	Police
Airport	Public Utilities
Corrections	Public Works
Finance	Recreation and Parks
Fire	Solid Waste
General Services	Transit
Parks	
Police	
Public Works	
Former Joint Departments	
Emergency Management	
Planning Commission	
Traffic Engineering	

*Since Unification, Emergency Management has been moved into the Fire Department and Recreation and Parks and Environmental Education have been combined into Leisure Services

Source: Selden, 1994

**Table 5
Comparison of Pre- and Post- Unification
Expenditures*: Percent Change from
Prior Year**

Fiscal Year**	Expenditures	Percent Change
1987	\$36,286,306	12.57%
1988	\$41,894,985	15.46%
1989	\$46,260,177	10.42%
1990	\$51,777,792	11.93%
1991	\$59,496,497	14.91%
1992	\$61,462,237	3.30%
1993	\$64,680,551	5.24%
1994	\$73,128,424	13.06%
1995	\$78,614,456	7.50%
1996	\$85,302,367	8.51%

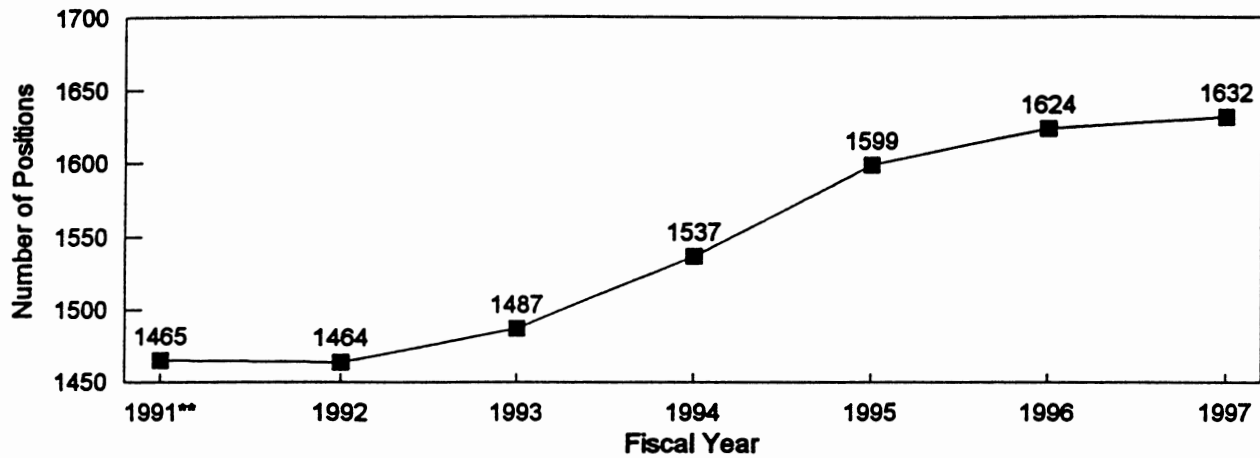
*Expenditures include the General Fund, Special Revenue Fund, Debt Service Fund, and Enterprise Funds; Capital Expenditures are not included; Expenditures have been adjusted for inflation using the state and local price index, base year 1992, from the U.S. Department of Commerce: Survey of Current Businesses

**Fiscal year 1987 to 1991 expenditures are the combined expenditures of the former city and county governments; FY 1992 was the first Unified Budget

**Sources: Athens-Clarke County Finance Department;
U.S. Department of Commerce**

Graph 1

Athens-Clarke County
Authorized Positions, FY 91-97*

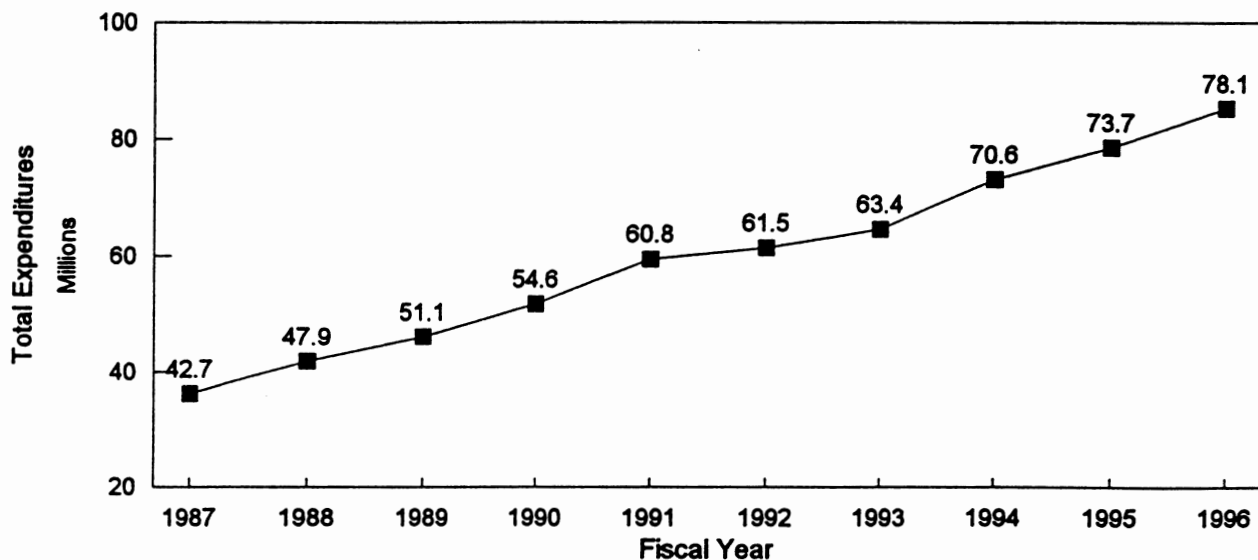


*Includes Full-Time and Part-Time positions
**FY 91 was the last FY before budget unification

Source: Athens-Clarke County Personnel Department

Graph 2

Expenditures* Before & After Unification



FY 1992 was the first Unified Budget

*Expenditures include General Fund, Special Revenue Fund, Debt Service Fund, and Enterprise Funds; Capital Expenditures are not included; Expenditures have been adjusted for inflation using the state and local price index, base year 1992, from the U.S. Department of Commerce: Survey of Current Businesses

Sources: Athens-Clarke County Finance Department; U.S. Department of Commerce

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