

An aerial view of the Philadelphia skyline, featuring numerous skyscrapers and buildings. A large, white, stylized graphic, resembling a large letter 'K' or a similar shape, is overlaid on the image, partially obscuring the buildings. The overall color palette is blue and white.

Let Philadelphia Go

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Would breaking Philadelphia up into smaller cities improve funding for police, fire and welfare services? This progressive proposal suggests restructuring Philadelphia government by separating county and municipal functions to increase funding for these services. This article originally appeared in the *Philadelphia Daily News* on July 25, 2000.

In 1854, a group of civic leaders won a ten-year effort to consolidate the City of Philadelphia with the surrounding Philadelphia County. That consolidation, led by the extraordinary Eli K. Price, is the single greatest reform effort in the City's history.

But it's time to follow their example of daring leadership. It's time to undo their achievement, which has outlived its usefulness.

Between 1682 and 1854, Philadelphia proper (which today we call Center City) consisted only of the two square miles between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, from Vine Street to Cedar Street (now South Street). The rest of what is today Philadelphia was a set of districts, boroughs, and townships making up Philadelphia County.

By the 1850 Census, Spring Garden was the ninth largest city in the United States with nearly 60,000 residents; and Northern Liberties was the 11th largest, Kensington the 12th largest, and Southwark the 20th largest!

But by the 1860 Census, these four "top 20 cities" disappeared along with smaller boroughs such as Manayunk and Germantown and Bridesburg. They were all consolidated by act of the Pennsylvania Legislature into an expanded City of Philadelphia, which became the nation's largest city in terms of land area.

The county ceased to exist for all practical purposes.

The two principal arguments for consolidation, powerfully stated by Price and others, were (1) the need to compete in the new economy of the mid-1800s and (2) the need to prevent the riots and arson that rocked the city and districts during the 1840s.

That second reason created the urgent need to consolidate. Black and Catholic households and institutions were under vicious attack in Philadelphia. Jurisdictional lines within the county impeded local police, and volunteer firefighters were often in league with the rioters. The consolidation was thus a virtuous and difficult achievement that served the city well for over a century.

But the two reasons for consolidation have changed dramatically. Today, the new economy consists of web shops, not machine shops. And social tensions today center less on race and religion, more on grinding poverty and its disadvantages.



At first glance, consolidation is again the solution: what Philadelphia needs is once more outside its current boundaries. If it annexed the suburban counties it would capture both the new economy being built in Wayne and West Chester and the taxable resources needed to assist the State's poorest citizens.

But, excuse me, my magic wand is in the shop. And not even sending the heroic Eli Price to today's Legislature would achieve consolidation between city and suburbs.

So how would moving in the opposite direction help? What problems would be solved by recreating a Philadelphia County containing a dozen or so smaller municipalities?

For the sake of starting a very long discussion (ten years, perhaps), I'll suggest three possible advantages.

First, get the picture in your mind's eye. The area we now know as Philadelphia would become a full-blown county, like Montgomery or Bucks. For clarity, call it Franklin County. Within Franklin County, imagine about a dozen separate small cities of between 100 and 150 thousand residents: the places we now know as Center City, West Philadelphia, Kensington, and so on.

Second, imagine that with the advantages of hindsight we avoid the mistakes of other Pennsylvania counties and that we design Franklin County with all the planning powers and revenue-sharing arrangements that those counties wish they had but can't get because of entrenched local control. So Franklin County has county-wide police and fire protection and land-use planning because those are more efficient at the county level.

Ok? Now let's briefly consider just three advantages to such a change.

First, there are a set of public costs that everyone, including the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, agrees are county costs. The biggest of these county costs are associated with the courts and with various child and social welfare programs. Other counties across Pennsylvania cannot fund these costs alone and the state subsidizes them. But Philadelphia now pays over \$100 million a year in court and other costs that the Legislature refuses to pay for, even though various state courts have ruled they must do so.

But if the big bad city of Philadelphia vanished into a dozen medium-sized cities, the court costs of Franklin County would be much harder for the state Legislature to dodge.

Second, the current city is a huge inventory of under-managed public and quasi-public assets. The current city is probably unmanageable as a whole. The airports, the gas works, the park system, vacant property, the school system, the



health centers, the swimming pools, the sidewalks, the potholes, the need for literacy, tourism promotion, the Navy Yard.

It's not just money that we lack. It's also management capacity and political concentration that's missing. No administration can fully exploit the possibilities of all these challenges.

We need to shorten the distance between effort and reward. Consider just physical assets. If, for example, the Navy Yard and the Sports Complex and the Food Distribution Center were the key resources of a separate South Philadelphia, then such a city could devote its full attention to increasing the return on such assets and would do so knowing that those returns would primarily benefit it.

And there is no conceivable new city within Franklin County that would be without valuable assets. Even North Philadelphia, the poorest section of the current city, would have assets ranging from Temple University to the North Philadelphia Amtrak Station to the region's largest concentration of developable land sitting on existing infrastructure. A vigorous, independent North Philadelphia could turn blight into a resource.

Third, a well-designed Franklin County would allow us to better balance problems and solutions. It is clear that cities bear uncompensated costs for housing our poorest citizens. But no amount of harping on the fact that poor people in, say, Frankford are citizens of Pennsylvania and the United States as well as of Philadelphia will ever get more money from the suburbs and the Sunbelt.

But Center City and University City and Manayunk are well-positioned to compete in the New Economy. It's clear — from entrepreneurs seeking 24-hour lifestyles to fiber-optics firms looking for big empty buildings near railroads — that there is an increasing demand for density, for places that only exist in older cities.

I bet that those advantages are worth the wage tax, even at its current rate, for many potential affluent residents and hi-tech employers. The problem is not really that tax, but their sense of unlimited liability for the larger City's social problems. If the Old Economy and the state and federal government have abdicated those obligations, then why should venture capitalists and web startups take them on?

Franklin County would, in effect, limit that liability. The potential is a win-win. New residents and investors would know that they'd be contributing to a county with lots of poor people. But they'd also have transparency: they'd know that those contributions would be the full extent of their exposure. The new cities of Manayunk and University City and whatever we would call Center City would boom with new jobs and residents.

Revenue-sharing would transfer a substantial amount of resources from rich to poor cities within the county, and at no higher a rate than is currently done within the City. But the idea is that Franklin County as a whole, by limiting the "social policy liability" of each city, would generate enough new investment and tax resources in the bargain to actually increase assistance to the disadvantaged. We could actually achieve the much-sought-after synergy between Center City and the neighborhoods by changing them into separate cities sharing a common county.

Of course, there are dozens of open questions related to this idea. It's eminently debatable, both in general and in many details. But debate is what the times demand. To close with the words of Eli Price: Americans "always feel themselves competent to change their laws and Constitutions as may be required by the change of circumstance." I hope we still have that degree of confidence.

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