This policy brief reviews the literature on local government consolidation, provides an overview of Indiana local government structure and the 2006 Government Modernization Act, and discusses seven consolidation attempts that have occurred between 2008 and 2012 under the GMA. A key feature of this analysis is a heightened focus on consolidation planning.
Summary

This policy brief examines local government consolidation attempts that occurred in Indiana after the passage of the 2006 Government Modernization Act. We provide a brief review of the literature on the politics of local government consolidation, an overview of the local government structure in Indiana, a brief summary of the Government Modernization Act and an analysis of the seven local government consolidation attempts that occurred in Indiana between 2008 and 2012. The analysis highlights the role of consensual and conflict in consolidation outcomes, where consensual processes are more likely to either lead to consolidation or to halt the consolidation effort before referendum in favor of an alternate solution advantageous to both parties. These cases also highlight the contribution of shifting tax burdens in stimulating conflict. We confirm the conclusions of previous studies that found that a crisis climate is not a necessary precondition for local governments to consider consolidation and that economic development concerns rather than government efficiency are more likely to generate support for consolidation.

Over the past decade, Indiana has provided a fertile environment for studying local government consolidation. The Government Modernization Act (GMA), enacted by the Indiana General Assembly in 2006, gave local government units, including counties, cities, towns, and townships, broad authority to consolidate by referendum. [1] During the period 2008 to 2012, Indiana experienced seven local government consolidation attempts: two city-county, one city-township, and four town-township. The two city-county consolidation efforts were soundly rejected by voters. Two of the town-township consolidation efforts were successful, with large majorities approving these referenda. The other town-township and city-township consolidation efforts were terminated before reaching a referendum. This policy brief examines the circumstances surrounding these consolidation attempts and their outcomes. We begin with a brief review of the literature and then provide an overview of local government in Indiana followed by a synopsis of Indiana’s Government Modernization Act. The last sections of the brief compare and contrast the seven consolidation attempts that have occurred in Indiana followed by a conclusion.

Literature

Much of the academic literature about the politics of consolidation has focused on the process of city-county consolidation. Prior analyses consist of case studies of specific communities (Durning 1995; Leland and Thurmaier 2000; Savitch and Vogel 2000, 2004) with much of this literature describing successful cases rather than analyzing why the consolidation attempts succeeded or failed (Leland and Thurmaier, 2004). Recent comparative case studies examining the process of consolidation within a causal model (Leland and Thurmaier, 2004, 2005, 2006) bridge this gap. These comparative case studies show that consolidation attempts linked to economic development are more likely to be successful, while attempts linked to redistribution of taxes from suburbs to city and efficiency gains from reducing duplication and achieving economies of scale are likely to fail.

To explain successful city-county consolidation referenda, Rosenbaum and Kammerer (1974) proposed a model (R&K model) that has provided the foundation of much consolidation research. The model has three basic elements:

1. The GMA is codified in IC 36-1.5; http://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2017/ic/titles/036#36-1.5
1. A crisis climate develops. It may result from demographic shifts, changes in the quality of government services, or other factors. Citizens demand a government response to the crisis.

2. If citizens are not satisfied with the government’s response, they lose confidence in the structure of the local government and support for consolidation develops, usually bolstered by the support of civic organizations and the local media.

3. The initial support for consolidation is strengthened by accelerator events, such as a scandal or the loss of a leader. Ultimately, the effort coalesces in a consolidation referendum being on the ballot.

Leland and Thurmaier (2004) augmented the Rosenbaum and Kammerer (1974) model incorporating the work of Johnson and Feiock (1999) and Feiock and Carr (2000) to develop a causal model of the consolidation process called the City-County Consolidation (C3) model of local government consolidation, which generates testable hypotheses about consolidation success or failure. The C3 model adds the referendum campaign as the final stage of the model, accounts for the institutional framework in which the consolidation attempt occurs, considers the impact of specific types of consolidation provisions, and expands the role of civic elites in the process (Leland and Thurmaier 2004). Although, as its name implies, the C3 model is most directly applicable to city-county consolidations. It has been applied to other local government reform proposals, including town-township consolidations (Taylor, Faulk and Schaal 2017) and city-city consolidation (Honadle 2004).

A variety of factors may account for the defeat of local government consolidation attempts. Socioeconomic differences between communities may hinder consolidation. In his analysis of transaction costs associated with the merger of Norwegian municipalities, Sorensen (2006) found that revenue disparities and differences in party preferences among municipalities are impediments to voluntary merger. In their analysis of the amalgamation of Swedish municipalities Hanes, Wikstrom and Wangmar (2012) found that income differences affected municipalities’ willingness to voluntarily merge. Bates, Lafrancois and Santerre (2011) found that income differences between Connecticut public health districts negatively influence the consolidation of these districts.

### Revolutionary vs. Evolutionary Consolidation

Both Leland and Thurmaier (2004a) and Johnson (2004) argue that local government consolidation is a revolutionary change, initiated and carried out in response to crisis or other situations for which consolidation is proposed as a solution (Leland and Thurmaier, 2005). Hughes and Lee (2002) argue, however, that local government consolidation may be the final step in an evolutionary process consisting of a progression of cooperative efforts to solve interjurisdictional problems among local governments. Although Leland and Thurmaier (2004a) acknowledge the potential influence of existing interlocal agreements to prepare local officials and citizens for discussion about political consolidation, they treat the presence of such agreements more as an environmental variable affecting agenda setting in a revolutionary consolidation process than as a part of an ongoing and evolutionary consolidation process.

In Hughes and Lee’s (2002) Evolutionary Consolidation Model (ECM), local governments within a metropolitan region solve common problems by harmonizing community expectations with the resources available to solve those problems. Beginning in the first stage, when problems are relatively minor, local governments within a region engage in occasional, informal talks about common issues. As problems intensify and resource constraints become more binding, the local governments engage in more frequent and formal discussions, resulting in interlocal agreements to share facilities, services, and/or authority in particular policy areas. In stage four, the final stage before full consolidation, local governments enter into an agreement to share power or decision making in at least one major policy area. In stage five, the local governments pursue consolidation, “the most permanent cooperative arrangement” (p. 147).

Hughes and Lee (2002) suggest that full consolidation is neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable. Their case study of the evolution of intergovernmental cooperation in the Albuquerque, New Mexico area demonstrates that consolidation proposals can be controversial and defeated even after a long history of interlocal cooperation.

### Local Government in Indiana

Local government in Indiana consists of counties, municipalities (cities and towns), townships, school districts, and special districts. Indiana cities are divided into three classes depending on population: first-class cities have 600,000 inhabitants or more; second-class cities have from 35,000 to 599,999 inhabitants; and third-class cities have fewer than 35,000 inhabitants. Other municipalities regardless of population are towns. Second and third-class cities are governed by a mayor and city council. Towns are governed by a town council (and in some cases an appointed town manager). Towns with a population of 2,000 or more may become cities through a petition of voters and a referendum. Likewise, cities may become towns through a petition of two-thirds of taxpayers to the circuit court. Indianapolis, which is consolidated with Marion County, is the only first-class city and is governed by a mayor and
city-county council. U.S. Census Bureau (2013) provides more details about local government in Indiana.

The number of municipalities has remained stable over the past several decades, increasing from 564 in 1982 to 567 in 2017 (Table 1). Towns are more numerous than cities, making up approximately 80 percent of municipalities in the state.

During 2017, there were 1,004 townships; Indiana townships are general purpose governments, each led by an elected trustee and township board, offering a limited range of services. Their primary services are overseeing volunteer fire departments and emergency medical services, providing poor relief, maintaining cemeteries, and operating parks.[2] Townships fund services through their property taxing authority. Every county is sub-divided into several townships.

The number of school districts has decreased dramatically since 1952. The number of school districts per county ranges from one school corporation in 21 counties to 16 school corporations in Lake County. Hicks and Faulk (2014) provide additional details on the distribution of school corporations in the state.

As in most states the number of special districts has increased dramatically since the 1950s. The decrease in special districts between 2002 and 2017 is due primarily to the reclassification of school building corporations as components of school districts rather than as separate special districts. In Indiana, the most common types of special districts are library districts (297), soil and water conservation (94), sewerage (91), solid waste management (71), housing and community development (70), and drainage and flood control (41).

### Indiana’s Government Modernization Act

The Government Modernization Act (GMA) enables the reorganization of political subdivisions, and defines a uniform process for local government consolidation. The GMA provides two paths for forming a reorganization committee charged with planning the consolidation by developing a plan of reorganization. Under one alternative, the governing bodies of the local government units considering reorganization create the reorganization committee by enacting identical resolutions. This was the path followed in in all four town-township consolidation attempts and in the single city-township attempt. In each of the town or city-township consolidation attempts, the town or city council and township boards were the parties that initiated the consolidation effort by enacting resolutions and appointing the committee members.

The other alternative allows reorganization proponents to file petitions supporting the creation of a reorganization committee. A petition signed by at least 5.0 percent of the voters in the subdivision must be filed with each political subdivision to be included in the reorganization proposal.[3] This alternative was exercised in both city-county consolidations. In the case of the Evansville-Vanderburg consolidation, the League of Women Voters of Southwestern Indiana organized the petition drive (Langhorne 2009b). In the Muncie-Delaware consolidation, a local taxpayer group, Citizens of Delaware County for Property Tax Repeal (CDCPTR), was the petition drive organizer (Werner 2010). Once the petitions were filed and verified by the county clerk, the GMA required the

### Table 1. Number of Indiana Local Governments, 1952 - 2012

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Governments

Note: † Municipalities include cities and towns.

*With the consolidation of Indianapolis and Marion County in 1970, the Census Bureau does not count Marion County as a separate county government.

** The reduction in the number of special districts after 2002 is due primarily to school building corporations being reclassified as a component of school districts rather than special districts.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN Counties</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>91*</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN Municipalities†</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN Townships</td>
<td>1,009</td>
<td>1,009</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,006</td>
<td>1,004</td>
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<tr>
<td>IN School Districts</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN Special Districts</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,125</td>
<td>752**</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN Total</td>
<td>3,049</td>
<td>3,091</td>
<td>2,792</td>
<td>2,865</td>
<td>2,898</td>
<td>3,085</td>
<td>2,709</td>
<td>2,638</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. There have been calls to eliminate townships in Indiana and transfer their functions to county government (Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform 2007, Cline 2014).

3. The number of voters is determined by the vote cast in the political subdivision for secretary of state in the most recent general election.
governing bodies of the subject political subdivisions to enact the resolutions necessary for forming a reorganization committee and then appoint members to the committee.

Once the reorganization committee completes the plan of reorganization, the participating political subdivisions’ legislative bodies may adopt the plan, adopt it with revisions, or reject it. If they adopt identical plans, the adoptions are certified, and the plan and certifications are filed with the county recorder. Following a review by the Department of Local Government Finance, the county election board places the referendum question on the ballot for the next general or municipal election covering all precincts within the reorganizing political subdivisions. If the participating political subdivisions fail to adopt a final plan of reorganization, then citizens may petition for the approval of and voting on a final plan of reorganization.\[4\]

**Consolidation Attempts Prior to the GMA**

Prior to enactment of the GMA, local government consolidation was not codified, and it took a special act of the legislature for local government consolidation to occur. Indianapolis and Marion County were consolidated in 1970 through a 1969 Act of the General Assembly. Sometimes called “Unigov,” Indianapolis-Marion County is Indiana’s sole instance of city-county consolidation. Blomquist and Parks (1993, 1995) provide information on the background and structure of the consolidated government. Segedy and Lyons (2001) and Rosentraub (2000) evaluate its various aspects. In 1974, a consolidation referendum was held in Evansville and Vanderburgh County, but was rejected by voters. In 1990, a consolidation plan was drafted by a citizens’ committee, but it was tabled by the Evansville mayor and Vanderburgh County commissioners without seeking special legislation. In 2006, another citizens’ committee drafted another consolidation plan, but legislation providing for a referendum did not pass the legislature (League of Women Voters of Southwestern Indiana Undated).\[5\] After the 1974 referendum in Evansville-Vanderburg County, there were no more consolidation referenda until after the enactment of the GMA.

Schaal, Taylor, and Faulk (2017) found that states with general legislation tend to have more consolidation referenda than states requiring special legislation. Indiana’s consolidation history provides additional support for this relationship. Since the

4. The process is similar to that for the creation of the reorganization committee, except that signatures by ten percent of voters in each political subdivision are required

5. The act to authorize the Evansville-Vanderburgh referendum was halted as the Government Modernization Act neared passage. Key legislators felt that with the passage of the GMA, there was no need for special legislation for one community (Whitson 2006).

Since the GMA was passed, more consolidation attempts have occurred for a variety of types of governments in Indiana, providing further evidence that state authorization of consolidation under general law facilitates consolidation attempts.

**Consolidation Attempts Under the GMA**

Since the GMA passed in 2006, there have been four consolidation referenda held under its provisions. Two city-county consolidation referenda were held in 2012: Muncie-Delaware County and Evansville-Vanderburgh County, both of which were unsuccessful. Two town-township referenda have been held: Town of Zionsville-Eagle Township-Union Township in 2008 and Town of Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant Township in 2010, both of which were successful, with more than 70 percent of voters voting to approve consolidation in each case. See Taylor, Faulk and Schaal (2017) for a more detailed analysis of these consolidation attempts.

The two city-county mergers on the other hand were each defeated by a margin of approximately two-to-one. The four consolidation attempts were similar in at least two key characteristics. All four were conducted using the process specified in the Government Modernization Act. Furthermore, in each case proponents were recommending the consolidation of a city or town with a geographically larger and encompassing local government unit, such as a county or township.

The consolidation attempts were also, however, significantly different in key aspects. The communities affected by the town-township consolidations tended to be more homogeneous with
respect to social and economic characteristics than the cities and counties in which consolidation was proposed. Furthermore, the town and township governments, unlike cities and counties, had relatively little overlap in functional responsibilities. In the functions in which overlap existed, most notably fire protection, the towns and townships were already functionally consolidated.

From 2010 to 2012, reorganization committees were formed for three additional municipality-township consolidations: City of Greenwood-White River Township in 2010, Town of Brownsburg-Brown Township-Lincoln Township in 2011, and Town of Avon-Washington Township in 2012 (see Figure 1, next page). Each of these consolidation attempts failed to reach the referendum stage.

These seven local government consolidation efforts occurred within a four-year period (2008-2012) and a common institutional context, governed by the GMA. These common conditions facilitate a comparison of their varying crisis climates, consolidation planning processes, and consolidation outcomes utilizing the commonly used consolidation models discussed above. Taylor, Faulk and Schaal (forthcoming) provide a more detailed analysis.

Following Leland and Thurmaier (2004a) we utilize the comparative case study method to analyze these consolidation attempts, extending their C3 Model as an analytical framework. We compare case studies of seven consolidation attempts in Indiana, which occurred from 2008 to 2012. Focusing on consolidation attempts occurring within one state and within a limited time period allows us to hold constant key variables related to the institutional context, while examining the effect of variation in other characteristics across each case.

In each case study we draw much of our data from the plans of reorganization and contemporaneous news reports about the development of the plans and conduct of the referendum campaign. These data are supplemented with economic and demographic data about the communities under study.

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6. We identified these consolidation attempts through the media and word of mouth. If there have been other attempts, please contact the authors so that they can be included in future analysis. We are aware that the Town of Middletown and Fall Creek Township in Henry County have recently begun the consolidation process and that West Clark Community Schools is holding a referendum to split the school district into two districts in May 2020.

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Acronyms

C3: City-County Consolidation
ECM: Evolutionary Consolidation Model
GMA: Government Modernization Act
LCC: Theory of Local Constitutional Change
Figure 1. Indiana Local Government Consolidation Attempts, 2008-2012
Guiding Questions

Crisis Climates in Indiana Consolidation Attempts

Drawing on the R&K model, the original C3 model suggested that consolidation attempts arise from a crisis climate creating a demand for change (Leland and Thurmaier 2004a). Leland and Thurmaier (2004a) further suggest that when the local government response to the crisis is ineffective, power deflation occurs and local governments will consider consolidation. In a subsequent assessment of the C3 model, Leland and Thurmaier (2005) determine that civic problems are frequently present in communities that ultimately consolidate, but that they do not always rise to crisis level. They conclude that neither a crisis climate nor power deflation are necessary preconditions for a successful consolidation attempt. In the Theory of Local Constitutional Change (LCC) model, Johnson (2004) suggests that consolidation may also be an attempt to create new institutional arrangements in response to current needs rather than a result of power deflation.

Question 1: What role did crisis climate and power deflation play in the Indiana consolidation attempts?

Six of the seven Indiana cases exhibited one of two types of crisis climates, either fiscal or annexation and development related. The seventh had no discernable specific crisis (see Table 2). Although some of the Indiana consolidation attempts were characterized by power deflation, other cases appear to fit the Johnson (2004) LCC model in which consolidation was considered as an approach to meeting community needs in the face of changing conditions.

Fiscal Crises

In 2008, the Indiana General Assembly enacted property tax caps that were phased in beginning in 2009 and fully implemented in 2010, reducing property tax revenue for nearly every local government unit in the state. Indiana local government revenues were also affected by an economic recession that occurred from late-2007 through mid-2009. The revenue reductions were uneven, however, with impacts ranging from minimal to severe.\(^7\) In two of the consolidation attempts, fiscal crises arising from implementation of the

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Table 2. Summary

Source: Author calculations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muncie-Delaware County</th>
<th>Evansville-Vanderburgh County</th>
<th>Yorktown-Mount Pleasant Township</th>
<th>Zionsville-Eagle and Union Townships</th>
<th>Greenwood-White River Township</th>
<th>Avon-Washington Township</th>
<th>Brownsburg-Brown and Lincoln Townships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Climate</td>
<td>Yes (fiscal)</td>
<td>Yes (fiscal)</td>
<td>Yes (annexation)</td>
<td>Yes (annexation border development issues)</td>
<td>Yes (annexation and growth in nearby area)</td>
<td>Yes (fiscal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Deflation</td>
<td>Yes (tax caps)</td>
<td>Yes (tax caps)</td>
<td>No (proactive response to crisis climate)</td>
<td>No (proactive response to crisis climate)</td>
<td>No (proactive response to crisis climate)</td>
<td>Yes (reliance on emergency loans)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reorganization Plan Development</td>
<td>Not contentious during this stage, but conflict arose during the referendum</td>
<td>Contentious (due to tax increases in nonurban area and public safety coverage)</td>
<td>Not contentious (minimal fiscal impacts)</td>
<td>Contentious (due to tax increases in nonurban area and public safety coverage)</td>
<td>Not contentious (minimal fiscal impacts)</td>
<td>Not contentious (minimal fiscal impacts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Referendum (failed) City and County Councils passed rules requiring supermajority for passage.</td>
<td>Referendum (failed)</td>
<td>Referendum (passed)</td>
<td>Referendum (passed)</td>
<td>No referendum (missed deadline to place it on ballot)</td>
<td>No referendum (General Assembly passed law changing fire funding)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

tax caps were significant factors in placing consolidation on local agendas. In a third case, a different fiscal crisis played a role.

In Muncie and Delaware County, the impacts of the tax caps were quite large. Muncie’s property tax revenues were reduced by more than 30 percent; Delaware County’s fell more than 17 percent. The mayor of Muncie laid off 32 firefighters and five police officers as a cost cutting measure (Smith 2009). The ensuing controversy created an environment in which the potential for efficiency via consolidation was attractive to local activists, such as Citizens of Delaware County for Property Tax Repeal (CDCPTR), the local taxpayer group that organized the petition drive to require Muncie and Delaware County to appoint a reorganization committee (Werner 2010). In Evansville and Vanderburgh County, the impacts were more modest, with city and county property tax revenues reduced by 4.0 to 5.0 percent. Uncertainty regarding the impact of the tax caps, however, led the county not to renew a homestead property tax exemption (Langhorne 2009b). When the homestead exemption was later reinstated, the combined impact of the exemption and the tax caps was a $15 million combined budget shortfall for Evansville and Vanderburgh County, leading the local newspaper’s editorial board to call for consideration of local government consolidation (“Evansville, Vanderburgh County facing,” 2009). The local League of Women Voters president referred to a need for greater government efficiency when explaining the reason for their petition drive (Langhorne 2009a).

Although the Town of Avon and Washington Township each experienced tax cap revenue reductions of about eight percent, their consolidation effort was spurred by a fiscal problem predating the tax caps. The township had a longstanding practice of relying on emergency loans and emergency levies to fund the township fire department serving both the town and township. In June 2010, a group of local citizens filed a petition forcing the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance (DLGF) to review the legality of the most recent emergency loan for the fire department. Although DLGF upheld the loan, the township trustee was concerned that if the policy of funding the fire department with emergency loans was ever invalidated, then layoffs would be required (Beasor 2010). Minutes from a meeting of the Greater Avon Study Committee (2012a) and the Plan of Reorganization (Greater Avon Study Committee 2012b) both reflect concern by town and township officials about the continued viability of fire department emergency loans.

In these three cases, one can credibly argue that consolidation was a result of power deflation following a fiscal crisis. In Muncie-Delaware County and Evansville-Vanderburgh County, local officials were viewed as having responded ineffectively to the imposition of property tax caps and citizen groups mobilized to force them to consider consolidation. In Avon-Washington, local officials were viewed as ineffective in that they were continually relying on emergency loans and levies to ensure that the township fire department was adequately funded. Citizen attempts to invalidate the emergency loans led the town and township to explore consolidation as a means to fix the fire department funding problem.

Annexation and Development-Related Crises

In some communities, development concerns and annexation battles with neighboring communities contributed to the crisis climates. The Town of Yorktown and the City of Muncie had been engaged in an annexation battle dating back to 2005 (Yencer 2005; Slabaugh 2005). This territorial conflict intensified when the effort to consolidate Muncie and Delaware County got underway. Yorktown and Mount Pleasant officials initiated their own consolidation effort, in part, to minimize the impact on Yorktown and Mount Pleasant in the event that the Muncie-Delaware consolidation effort was successful (Yorktown-Mount Pleasant Reorganization Committee 2010).

Property development concerns combined with an annexation battle created the crisis climate in Zionsville. Rapid development just outside town limits governed by Boone County’s more permissive development standards concerned Zionsville officials (Woodson, 2008). Town and township officials were also concerned that aggressive annexation by nearby Whitestown would curtail Zionsville’s future expansion (Annis 2007; Olson 2007).

Similarly, a battle for control over fast-growing unincorporated areas in White River Township drove the Greenwood-White River consolidation attempt. Merger proponents argued that extending city services to the densely populated, unincorporated areas...
of the township would provide increases in both population and tax base that would allow the city to compete with other cities for corporate offices and high-end retail. The City of Greenwood was also embroiled in an annexation dispute with the Town of Bargersville, which had attempted to annex property along a commercial corridor in the fast-growing suburbs within the township (McLaughlin 2009).

The Greenwood-White River effort was characterized by a high level of conflict and was ultimately unsuccessful, whereas the Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mount Pleasant efforts were more consensual and ultimately successful. Despite this difference, it is not apparent that any of these three consolidation attempts were characterized by power deflation. In all three cases, municipal and township officials initiated the consolidation effort as a proactive response to annexation and development-related issues.

**A Non-Crisis Climate**

Unlike the other consolidation attempts, the Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln consolidation attempt did not appear to be motivated by a specific crisis in the community. The reorganization plan introduction indicated that the effort was primarily a means to explore “efficiencies in governance” for town and township citizens (Brownsburg Reorganization Committee, 2011). One member of the reorganization committee stated that the goal of the committee was “to determine if [consolidation] makes sense” (Essett 2011).

The plan also mentioned a secondary purpose of protecting against annexation to allow citizens to “control their own destiny” (Brownsburg Reorganization Committee, 2011) and a news report indicated that concern about development just outside the town limits, governed by laxer county zoning regulations, was also an issue of importance to some consolidation proponents (Doan, 2012a). There is no indication in committee records or contemporaneous news reports, however, of a specific threat or crisis.

Considered together, these cases confirm Leland and Thurmaier’s (2005) conclusion that neither the presence of a crisis climate nor power deflation are necessary preconditions for a successful consolidation referendum. Of the six cases with a crisis climate, only three also exhibited power deflation. Two of the three cases that exhibited power deflation resulted in failed referenda. The third was halted prior to a referendum. Of the three cases with a crisis climate but no power deflation, two resulted in a successful referendum and one terminated without holding a referendum. The one case in which there was no identifiable crisis climate terminated with no referendum.

Whatever crisis or situation places consolidation on the local agenda, the consolidation planning process may either represent a contest of interests for favorable consolidation provisions or serve as a consensual study of local needs and how consolidation might serve them. These dissimilar consolidation planning processes are explored in the next section.

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**Consolidation Planning as Contest of Interests vs. Consensual Fact-Finding**

Consolidation provisions impact the results of the eventual referendum results. Johnson (2004) views the consolidation planning stage as a contest of interests between the policy entrepreneurs who advocate for new institutional arrangements under consolidation and the defenders of the status quo. Leland and Thurmaier (2004a) note that particular consolidation provisions will have both supporters and opponents and view the specific provisions primarily as independent variables affecting the likelihood that the consolidation referendum is successful.

**Question 2: What is the role of conflict versus consensus in the consolidation planning process? How did conflict and consensus affect consolidation outcomes in these Indiana cases?**

Two Indiana consolidation attempts, Evansville-Vanderburgh and Greenwood-White River, exhibited the type of contentious, interest-advancing behavior by supporters and opponents described by Johnson (2004). In Muncie-Delaware, consolidation opponents did not emerge until the very end of the development of the plan of reorganization, but became very active once the referendum campaign began. In the town-township consolidation efforts – Avon-Washington, Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln, Yorktown-Mount Pleasant, and Zionsville-Eagle-Union – the process was consensual, rather than contentious, representing more of a fact-finding mission than a contest of interests.

**Contentious Contests of Interests**

The Evansville-Vanderburgh reorganization plan included provisions intended to reduce opposition to consolidation by minimizing the fiscal and regulatory impacts on the non-urban areas. It included multiple tax and service districts to enable non-urban residents to avoid receiving – and paying for – the more intensive services provided to urban residents. It also preserved, at least initially, the less restrictive county land use ordinances that were in effect in the non-urban areas of the county (City of Evansville-Vanderburgh County Reorganization Committee 2011).

Despite these provisions, the fiscal impact of consolidation in Evansville-Vanderburgh became a matter of controversy between consolidation advocates and opponents. One important concern was the potential for shifting the costs of sheriff patrols from urban to non-urban taxpayers. The reorganization plan ultimately specified that the police patrol function would remain unconsolidated. The city police department would continue to serve the urban areas, and the county sheriff department would continue to patrol the non-urban areas (City of...
Evansville-Vanderburgh County Reorganization Committee, 2011). In the pre-consolidation situation, city property owners, as county residents, helped fund the rural sheriff’s patrols, but would cease to do so in the consolidated government. After consolidation, all sheriff patrol costs would be borne by residents of the non-urban area, leading to a substantial post-consolidation tax increase for non-urban taxpayers (Crowe Horwath 2010). This tax shift generated conflict during consolidation planning and subsequent referendum campaign (Gootee 2011; “Evansville residents help” 2011).

The decision not to consolidate the law enforcement agencies was itself a matter of substantial conflict during consolidation planning in the Evansville-Vanderburgh consolidation effort. Early in the charter development process, the city police chief and county sheriff each submitted proposals for consideration by the public safety subcommittee. Under the chief’s proposal, the two agencies would remain separate, but the police department would be responsible for countywide law enforcement operations, leaving the sheriff’s department responsible only for operation of the county jail, court security and process serving. The sheriff proposed merging the two agencies into one, under the supervision of the sheriff (Langhorne 2010a). The public safety subcommittee approved the sheriff’s proposal, but the conflict persisted (Langhorne 2010b). The police chief and local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) continued to argue against the sheriff’s proposal, claiming it would lead to increased costs, reduced efficiency and conflict between the mayor and sheriff that could negatively impact law enforcement (Langhorne 2010b). The sheriff continued to argue that accountability for public safety properly belonged to an elected sheriff, rather than an appointed police chief (Langhorne 2010c).

Although the sheriff’s proposal was included in the plan of reorganization submitted by the committee to the city and county (City of Evansville-Vanderburgh County Reorganization Committee 2011), the city council and county commission used their power granted under the GMA to remove the law enforcement merger from the plan out of concern that it would lead to strong opposition from city residents (Gootee 2011). Despite this change to the plan, the sheriff supported consolidation during the referendum campaign, while the Fraternal Order of Police continued to oppose it (Langhorne 2012).

In the Greenwood-White River consolidation effort, the committee took a different approach to fiscal impacts. Although the Greenwood-White River plan included urban and rural tax and service districts, nearly all urban services would be extended to the rural service district. The Greenwood Police Department would be expanded to serve the rural district. The Greenwood Board of Public Works and Safety would take responsibility for street and sidewalk maintenance in the rural district. The White River Township Fire Department would continue providing fire protection within the rural district, but the plan proposed a future merger of the city and township fire departments. Solid waste and yard waste collection were the only urban services not proposed for extension to the rural district (White River Township and City of Greenwood Reorganization Committee 2009a).

This plan also did little to minimize the regulatory impact on residents of the unincorporated portion of the township. It proposed an update of Greenwood’s comprehensive plan to govern land use in the rural district after consolidation, but incorporation of “right to farm” policies protecting agricultural land was the only concession made to rural land owners in the plan of reorganization (White River Township and City of Greenwood Reorganization Committee 2009a).

This approach to services, taxes and land use regulation created additional potential for conflict in a situation that was already contentious because of the ongoing annexation battle with the Town of Bargersville. Many township residents who would be affected by the consolidation had expressed a preference to be left alone, but if they had to choose would prefer to be annexed by Bargersville than consolidated with Greenwood (White River Township and City of Greenwood Reorganization Committee 2009c).

Because the reorganization plan extended so many urban services to the rural district, the proposed Greenwood-White River reorganization took on many aspects of an annexation, rather than a consolidation, further aggravating the existing conflict. The fiscal analysis included in the reorganization plan compared property tax rates in the City of Greenwood before and after the proposed consolidation, which demonstrated that the larger, post-consolidation city would have a lower tax rate than the city prior to consolidation. The analysis ignored, however, the increased taxes to be levied on residents of the unincorporated portion of the township to fund the
higher level of service (White River Township and City of Greenwood Reorganization Committee 2009a). The White River Township trustee funded an independent fiscal analysis which found that residents of the unincorporated portion of the township would experience tax increases of 19 to 27 percent after consolidation. The trustee’s analysis also questioned whether the proposed expansion of the city police department would be sufficient to provide the same level of coverage township residents currently received from the county sheriff’s department (Pete 2009).

In the Muncie-Delaware case, interest-based conflict emerged much later in the process. As in other cases, the reorganization committee included provisions intended to mitigate opposition to consolidation. It provided for multiple taxing districts and grandfathered the existing county land use regulations (Muncie-Delaware County Government Reorganization Committee 2010). The committee also decided early in the process to leave the police department and sheriff department separate to avoid controversy (E. Kelly, personal communication, September 26, 2016). In any event, little conflict characterized the process of developing the plan of reorganization, as local officials and groups who would later express opposition mostly did not engage in the process of developing it.

After the governing bodies received the plan of reorganization for review, however, the Muncie City Council and Delaware County Commission used their authority to amend the plan to add a double supermajority requirement for passage, making voter approval unlikely (Roysdon & Walker 2012). As in the Evansville-Vanderburgh case, a fiscal analysis commissioned by the City Council and County Commission found that the costs of sheriff patrol would be shifted to non-urban property owners, increasing tax rates in the non-urban area (Crowe Horwath 2011b). Muncie-Delaware consolidation opponents were relatively silent during the development of the consolidation charter, but once the referendum campaign began, the contours of conflict were similar to those in Evansville-Vanderburgh.

### Consensual Fact-Finding

The four town-township consolidation processes exhibited minimal conflict. In all four cases, town and township officials, rather than a community group, initiated the consolidation process. In each of the four cases, the reorganization committee included common consolidation provisions intended to minimize the fiscal and regulatory impact on residents and businesses outside the existing town limits, such as multiple tax districts and grandfathered county land use regulations in the non-urban areas (Greater Avon Study Committee, 2012b; Brownsburg Reorganization Committee, 2011; Communities of Zionsville Area for Better Government, 2008a; Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant Township Reorganization Committee, 2011c).

Three of these four town-township consolidations (Avon-Washington, Zionsville-Eagle-Union, and Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant) projected only very small fiscal impacts. The only high-cost service the towns had in common with the townships was fire protection, and in each case the communities already had longstanding agreements to jointly fund their fire departments. The remaining township services, such as park and cemetery maintenance and poor relief, would be transferred to the town government with no expectation that service costs would change. Property owners and residents in the urban service districts consisting of the area within the pre-consolidation town limits would continue receiving and paying for the higher level of service provided prior to consolidation. The newly consolidated governments would enter into memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the county governments to continue providing the pre-consolidation level of sheriff patrol and road maintenance to the non-urban areas (Greater Avon Study Committee, 2012b; Brownsburg Reorganization Committee, 2011; Communities of Zionsville Area for Better Government, 2008a; Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant Township Reorganization Committee, 2011c). As a result, the Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant consolidations were projected to produce small cost reductions for both urban and non-urban residents, primarily due to the elimination of the township trustee’s salary (Crowe Horwath, 2011a; Woodson, 2007). The fiscal analysis presented as part of the Avon-Washington plan of reorganization projected zero net impact on property tax rates for the areas affected by the consolidation (Greater Avon Study Committee 2012b). In the fourth case, the Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln reorganization committee did not prepare a fiscal analysis, but because it adopted provisions very similar to those contained in the other town-township consolidations, there was no indication of substantial fiscal impacts (Brownsburg Reorganization Committee 2011).

With negligible fiscal impacts and no expensive duplicate services to sort out, the consolidation planning processes in all four town-township consolidations proceeded without conflict. In Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mount Pleasant the reorganization committees focused their discussion on the most orderly and rational methods for merging town and township services (see, for example, Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant Township Reorganization Committee, 2011a, 2011b; Communities of Zionsville Area for Better Government 2007, 2008b).
Consolidation Planning Efforts

In addition to the normal consolidation considerations that characterized the other town-township consolidation efforts, the fire protection situation in the Avon-Washington case was a focus of consolidation planning efforts. As noted earlier, concerns about the continued viability of the emergency loans and levies funding the fire department was a major motivating factor that led the town and township to consider consolidation (Greater Avon Study Committee 2012a, 2012b). To resolve this issue, the Avon-Washington reorganization plan proposed that the Town of Avon would use its financial reserves to purchase fire department capital equipment owned by Washington Township, which would then use the proceeds of the purchase to retire outstanding emergency loans. As part of the consolidation process, the town and township would apply to DLGF for approval to replace the emergency levy with a permanent operating levy to fund fire protection services for the consolidated government (Greater Avon Study Committee, 2012b).

These town-township consolidation efforts illustrate that charter development need not be a contentious contest of interests. In the four town-township consolidation efforts, town and township officials developed reorganization plans in a consensual fashion with the goal of solving common problems. In Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mount Pleasant, the primary problem was an annexation threat from a nearby community. In Avon-Washington, the issue was continued sustainable funding for the fire department. The Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln consolidation effort was motivated by no specific identifiable crisis and was, instead, a general exploration of the potential benefits of consolidation.

While the Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mount Pleasant efforts proceeded to referenda and were each approved by a large margin, the Avon-Washington and Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln consolidation efforts were terminated without being placed on a referendum ballot. In each case, the decisions to proceed to a referendum or to terminate the process were based on facts determined during the development of the plan of reorganization. The Greenwood-White River effort was also terminated without a referendum, but for different reasons. The varied reasons for these terminations are the subject of the next section.

Halting the Consolidation Process

Three of the consolidation attempts examined – Avon-Washington, Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln, and Greenwood-White River – were halted after development of a reorganization plan, but prior to placing the consolidation on a referendum ballot. In the cases of Avon-Washington and Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln, officials utilized legal provisions allowing them to determine that consolidation was not in the public interest and halt the process, as contemplated in Johnson’s (2004) LCC model. The Greenwood-White River consolidation was halted largely due to public official error, but the three cases highlight the possibility that consolidations will not necessarily proceed to a referendum once placed on the agenda, as implied by the C3 model (Leland and Thurmaier, 2004a).

Question 3: What factors contributed to the halting of the consolidation process in three communities?

In the Avon-Washington case, the Indiana General Assembly provided a decelerating event that resolved the crisis that motivated the consolidation effort. After the reorganization plan was drafted, but before it had been approved by the town council and township board, the Indiana General Assembly enacted legislation allowing township fire departments to convert emergency levies to operating levies (Washington Township Board and Avon Town Council, 2013). This change in law resolved the crisis, leading the town council and township board to reject the reorganization plan as unnecessary (Coggeshall, 2013).

A different concern regarding fire protection derailed the Brownsburg-Brown-Lincoln consolidation attempt. Fire protection is provided by a fire territory created to serve the town and both townships. The plan of reorganization proposed that the fire territory be dissolved and a new fire department created to serve the newly consolidated government (Brownsburg Reorganization Committee, 2011). Officials later determined, however, that the new local government would not be able to implement a levy to replace the fire territory’s equipment replacement levy, which generated more than $580,000 per year for capital purchases, or about six percent of the fire territory budget. With no viable method to replace that revenue, the town and township elected to reject the consolidation plan and halt the process (Doan, 2012b).

The Greenwood-White River consolidation was ultimately halted by a combination of actions by various local government officials, some of which were unintended. The reorganization plan was originally approved by the township board and city council in December 2009, with the referendum set for May 2010 (White, 2009). The plan was later amended to postpone the referendum until November 2010 because the township board and Greenwood mayor felt that additional time was needed to educate the public about the plan (White River Township and City of Greenwood Reorganization Committee, 2009b). However, local officials missed the August deadline to place the referendum on the November ballot. Then, during the November elections, new members were elected to the White River Township Board, who rescinded support for the consolidation proposal as their first official act (McLaughlin, 2011).
The terminations of these consolidation efforts highlight the necessity for accounting for multiple potential stopping points in a comprehensive consolidation analytical framework. These cases also underscore the possibility that officials may utilize an opportunity to halt the process when they agree that the consolidation is not in the public interest or that consolidation opponents may use stopping points as a weapon in the conflict to defeat the consolidation. The ability to explore consolidation without necessarily committing to holding a referendum also supports the view that consolidation may be a deliberative and evolutionary process, rather than a conflict driven revolutionary process. Taylor, Faulk and Schaal (forthcoming) provide a detailed model examining these issues.

**Referendum Outcomes**

In this section, we focus on the consolidation attempts that reached the referendum stage and explore differences in socioeconomic characteristics and the role of functional consolidation in referendum outcomes. A community’s social and economic characteristics represent other important aspects of the institutional context within which a consolidation attempt takes place. Leland and Thurmaier (2004) suggest that when the urban and non-urban interests in a community have diverging interests, then it will be more difficult to gain approval for consolidation than in a more homogenous community.

**Question 4: Is there lower support for political consolidation in communities in which the urban and non-urban populations exhibit diverse social and economic characteristics than in communities in which these populations are homogeneous?**

Once set in motion in each community, the consolidation efforts proceeded under a common legal framework, but other aspects of the institutional context varied across the four communities that had consolidation referenda. Previous research suggests that the level of support for consolidation will depend, in part, on the level of socioeconomic diversity in the community. Specifically, we expect that greater support for consolidation will be exhibited in communities where the urban and non-urban populations are more similar. We examine the four communities that reached the referendum stage because the referendum vote is a quantifiable measure of support. Table 3 compares the urban and non-urban populations in each case on three dimensions: racial diversity, income, and poverty. In the city-county consolidation cases, “non-urban” refers to the portion of the county outside the city limits. In the town-township cases, “non-urban” refers to the portion of the township(s) outside the town limits.

A review of the data presented in Table 3 reveals that the urban and non-urban areas in the two city-county consolidation cases were very different. In both Muncie and Evansville, the urban population was poorer, had much lower earnings, and consisted of a greater proportion of non-white residents than in the non-urban areas of the county. The communities in which the town-township consolidations occurred were more homogeneous. Zionsville and the surrounding townships were very similar. Yorktown was different from the other communities in that the urban population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zionsville-Eagle-Union Townships</th>
<th>Yorktown-Mt. Pleasant Township</th>
<th>Muncie-Delaware County</th>
<th>Evansville-Vanderburgh County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Non-Urban</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Non-Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>13,444</td>
<td>9,483</td>
<td>7,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Non-white</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate (%)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita income ($)</td>
<td>48,692</td>
<td>69,752</td>
<td>26,986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita earnings ($)</td>
<td>42,804</td>
<td>42,258</td>
<td>22,401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum support (% yes)</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Socioeconomic Characteristics and Referendum Support

Source: Author calculations

Note: Note a: Non-urban population and income figures for the Greenwood-White River case are estimated from Census block group data because Greenwood is located within two townships, one of which was not involved in the consolidation effort.

Note b: Earnings data are not available at the Census block level. Earnings are in 2010 inflation-adjusted dollars.

Note c: Non-urban population is the county population less Muncie or Evansville.
was less diverse and wealthier than the surrounding area, but the urban and non-urban areas were still more similar than in either of the city-county consolidation cases. These data suggest that the more homogeneous communities experienced greater support for consolidation than the more diverse communities.

Another potentially influential factor within the institutional context is the existing state of functional consolidation in a community. Leland and Thurmaier (2004) explain that the existence of interlocal agreements for the provision of shared services may reflect a high level of trust between the governmental units. This trust may make it easier for the affected governments to consider political consolidation. In addition, existing functional consolidation decreases the complexity of the consolidation process, which may lead to greater support for consolidation. On the other hand, a high level of functional consolidation may decrease support for political consolidation because many of the benefits of shared service provision have already been gained.

**Question 5: Is there greater support for political consolidation in communities with high levels of functional consolidation than in communities with little functional consolidation?**

This question addresses the effect of functional consolidation on support for political consolidation. We want to know if communities in which there is a high level of functional consolidation would exhibit greater support for political consolidation. Evansville-Vanderburgh was the only community in which a great number of local government services were functionally consolidated. After the 1974 consolidation referendum was defeated, city and county officials proceeded to implement many of the consolidated functions that had been proposed in the consolidation plan. As a result of this functional consolidation, by the time of the 2012 referendum, Evansville and Vanderburgh County had 12 jointly funded local government departments: traffic engineering, central dispatch, animal control, human relations commission, purchasing, computer services, solid waste management, emergency management, building commission, area plan commission, and legal aid society (Langhorne 2010c).

In the other communities fewer services had been functionally consolidated. Muncie and Delaware County’s only jointly funded department was central dispatch (public safety). In Zionsville-Eagle-Union and Yorktown-Mount Pleasant, only the fire departments were jointly funded. In the case of the towns and townships, however, the fire department is the only government service for which both towns and townships are responsible, so one might claim that the towns and their surrounding townships had already implemented all the functional consolidation that was possible. In any event, within the four cases that reached referendum, there doesn't appear to be any systematic relationship between functional consolidation and support for political consolidation. Taylor, Faulk, and Schaal (2017) provide a more detailed analysis of this issue.

**Within the four cases that reached referendum, there doesn’t appear to be any systematic relationship between functional consolidation and support for political consolidation.**
Conclusions

This policy brief reviews the literature on local government consolidation, provides an overview of Indiana local government structure and the 2006 Government Modernization Act, and discusses seven consolidation attempts that have occurred between 2008 and 2012 under the GMA. A key feature of this analysis is a heightened focus on consolidation planning. Not only do we include this planning as a separately identified step in the local government consolidation process, but we also allow for the possibility that consolidation planning may be a consensual investigation of community needs and solutions, rather than a conflictual contest of interests. Consolidation efforts in which the planning process is characterized by investigation and learning are more likely to be evolutionary, as envisioned by Hughes and Lee (2002), than revolutionary, as envisioned by Leland and Thurmaier (2004a, 2004b) and Johnson (2004). Our analysis also contemplates additional points at which the consolidation process might be halted, creating the potential for a wider variety of consolidation outcomes and types than has been considered in the literature.

Examination of the consolidation efforts in Indiana confirms a number of Leland and Thurmaier’s (2005) findings from their reassessment of the C3 model. First, we find that neither a crisis climate nor power deflation are necessary preconditions for local governments to consider consolidation. Out of six cases with an identified crisis, only two proceeded to a successful referendum and neither of those involved power deflation. In contrast, we find that the consolidation process can derive from consensus with two governments exploring ways to solve common problems. Second, we find that economic development concerns are more likely to motivate voters to support consolidation than promises of greater efficiency. In the cases of the two successful consolidation referenda, local officials presented consolidation as the solution to problems of development (annexation issues). The threat of annexation by a less desirable local government unit influenced successful town-township consolidations. The two unsuccessful referenda promoted consolidation as a means to efficiency and cost savings. As Leland and Thurmaier (2005) note, consolidation proponents had difficulty selling the efficiency argument to voters. Third, we corroborate that taxation (along with the related organization of public safety services) are major issues in consolidation politics regardless of the level of government. In the three consolidation efforts that were contentious in the charter development and/or referendum phases, the potential for shifting burdens among taxpayers was a primary point of controversy.

The cases examined here highlight the role of consensus and conflict in consolidation outcomes, where consensual processes are more likely to lead to consolidation or halt before referendum if a solution advantageous to both parties can be developed. Consolidation may or may not be the appropriate solution to problems facing local governments within a county or region, but discussion and exploration of cooperative efforts among nearby local governments may lead to productive solutions.

Local government consolidation is one mechanism for boundary change. While consolidation is the most extreme form of boundary change, annexation and inter-local agreements are other mechanisms that have been examined in the literature (Carr and Feiock 2004; Fleischmann 1986). Little analysis of other forms of boundary change has occurred in Indiana. Likewise, little analysis of citizen perceptions of changes in local government services after consolidation have occurred. We leave these topics for future analysis.

8. Martin and Schiff’s (2011) review of research on U.S. consolidation effects found little evidence that consolidation leads to greater efficiency or lower costs.

9. The formation of special districts (McCabe 2004) and quasi-governmental units such as economic development corporations (Bauroth 2009) and municipal incorporation are other forms of local boundary change that are not addressed here.
References


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