

St. Louis City-County Governance Task Force Town Hall Discussion – After Action Report

Throughout October and November 2017, Better Together hosted a series of town hall discussions on behalf of the St. Louis City-County Governance Task Force. These discussions were designed to provide the five-person task force with community feedback regarding the possible reorganization of municipal services between the City of Saint Louis and Saint Louis County. Utilizing the public's feedback, along with fact-driven research assembled by Better Together, the task force is developing recommendations to improve the cost and quality of municipal services in the St. Louis region.

Notification of the forums was distributed through traditional media, social media, and advertising. Among the five forums, 270 residents attended the events and an additional 800 residents responded to the same questions via an online survey.

Small Group Discussion Results

Providing an opportunity for all attendees to speak, up to five small groups of forum attendees were formed and directed by third-party professional facilitators. The discussion revolved around the following questions:

- What advantages exist by having individual services, such as police departments, municipal courts, and fire districts? What do residents gain? What does the region gain?
- What disadvantages exist by having individual services, such as police departments, municipal courts, and fire districts? What do residents lose? What does the region lose?
- Of the public services (police, fire, courts, public works, parks and recreation, etc.) offered by your municipality, should not be considered for reorganization and why?

During the small group discussions, the task force members floated among groups to hear the participants' responses to questions. The feedback captured on the following pages represents a summary of the most common statements made by forum attendees. *Italicized responses were expressed in at least 70% of the small group discussions.*

What advantages exist by having individual services, such as police departments, municipal courts and fire districts? What do residents gain? What does the region gain?		
ADVANTAGES	RESIDENTS	REGION
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Local control and direct accountability of those delivering services; ▪ Easier access to municipal staff (including police and fire) and elected officials; ▪ Elected officials live in the municipality being served; ▪ Having their voices heard in smaller communities; ▪ A more democratic process, where their vote counts more; ▪ Responsive and quick resolution to problems because municipalities are serving fewer residents over a smaller area; ▪ Municipal employees being familiar with the area and providing faster service delivery and problem resolution; ▪ A choice of service quality and availability, based on ability to pay (property tax revenue) ▪ Small town feel and sense of community surrounded by cosmopolitan amenities; ▪ Customized services, such as snow removal, tailored to their needs and based on what is valued most; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More municipal employment opportunities; ▪ Economic stability and less employee turnover; ▪ More efficient municipalities because they are learning from each other and experimenting with and implementing practices of good government; ▪ Municipal collaboration, sharing and support because there are more; ▪ Increased neighborhood and municipality diversity; ▪ School choice, where those who can move to the best districts; and ▪ Strong and stable neighborhoods, which attract residents and businesses.

What advantages exist by having individual services, such as police departments, municipal courts and fire districts? What do residents gain? What does the region gain?		
ADVANTAGES	RESIDENTS	REGION
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Having more opportunities to serve as an elected official or commission; and ▪ Enhanced sense of community and neighborhood pride because residents are more connected to each other. <p><u>Mentioned by fewer than 70% of small groups</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tax revenue remaining in the municipality to benefit residents; ▪ Less expensive services due to competitive bidding process and volume discounts; ▪ Courts within close proximity; ▪ Better zoning and more rigorous code enforcement; ▪ Job stability for municipal employees; very low turnover; ▪ Preferential treatment for those with stronger municipal relationships; ▪ Protection from “bullying” by larger and more wealthy governmental entities; and ▪ Public school choice. 	<p><u>Mentioned by fewer than 70% of small groups</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protection from “bullying” by larger and more wealthy governmental entities; and ▪ Consolidation of specialized services, e.g. helicopter and major case squad; ▪ Lower crime rates in some areas because police are more familiar with residents

Sampling of Online Survey Responses

"not much, but if I'm reaching, I would say more accountability. That is, if I don't think Ballwin is doing it right, it means the task for me to get a Ballwin city alderman un-elected is to change the minds of a few hundred voters. If I don't like what a county executive is doing, I would have a task 100x as large."

"Local officials know the residents and residents can more easily reach out to local officials they know with smaller/local individual services."

"Residents could gain personal relationships with departments but I don't think most bother. I do like having the Creve Coeur fire and police departments making visits to neighborhood block parties and similar events."

"nothing"

"A sense of self identity."

"Probably a very good thing for the wealthier suburbs but not for the majority municipalities."

"Fire districts offer faster response time and maybe the police too but we gain nothing with separate government ran municipalities."

"I don't think the fragmentation benefits the region as a whole. I think it is divisive and perpetuates the segregation and racism in our region. The zip codes that are more affluent are ok with the status quo and those who are in struggling zip codes are hurt by resource and wealth hoarding."

"A smaller government is more efficient and less corrupt."

DISADVANTAGES

What disadvantages exist by having individual services, such as police departments, municipal courts and fire districts? What do residents lose? What does the region lose?	
RESIDENTS	REGION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disparity and inequities of service quality between high and low income/property value municipalities; ▪ Limited access to economic drivers for lower income municipalities; ▪ Lack of knowledge and understanding about varying ordinances, especially important when traveling through and/or moving to a different municipality; ▪ Lack of preparation for natural disasters due to minimal funding for crisis situations; ▪ Duplication of services and no economies of scale, leading to possible waste of tax payer revenue; ▪ Possible excessive ticketing and fines to support municipal budget; ▪ Potentially, limited access to municipal administration (some municipalities have a city clerk with multiple responsibilities) ▪ Poor law enforcement response time because one officer may be closer to crime, but it's not his/her municipality; ▪ Unqualified and fired police officers can float from one municipality to another; and ▪ Lack of professionalism, competence, especially with police departments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inter-municipal competition for state, federal and corporate funding, as well as economic development (Ballwin and Ellisville competing for Wal-Mart and City/County competing for Amazon; ▪ Limits our ability to compete with other parts of the country (i.e. departing corporate HQs, loss of airport hub) ▪ Skewed statistics because City of St. Louis (smaller population) is assessed as the representation of the region; ▪ Poor national reputation and image; ▪ Varying zoning codes makes negotiations for residential and commercial developers more difficult and time consuming and deters movement throughout the region; ▪ No true governmental structure for regional decision-making, limiting ability to create a regional vision and plan for transportation, public health, etc. (policies which impact us all); ▪ "... the system of multiple municipalities makes racial and economic equity/justice impossible by encouraging those with means to settle in insular communities" (From post-it-note); ▪ Reinforces the "us vs. them" mentality among high and low income municipalities; County residents benefit from City's assets, but they don't want to pay for them; ▪ Reinforces stereotypes because people are judged by their zip codes and high schools ▪ Too many opportunities for corruption, nepotism and dishonesty (e.g., excessive ticketing impacts all who travel through St. Louis City and County; ▪ Limits our ability to attract and retain young talent who favor urban living with accessible and broad public transportation; ▪ People don't care to change, if their services are great; minimal concern about those without financial resources; and ▪ Less safe throughout the region with competition for resources, especially true with public safety (police and fire).

Sampling of Online Survey Responses

"The duplication of services and thus the cost...then small areas need to find revenue and might over ticket, etc., to support costs."

"We lose a fast response that saves lives. We lose our closeness in the community."

"So many departments, so many different standards. The quality of employees probably varies greatly from one municipality to the next. We probably lose out on overall higher quality of services."

"The region loses the opportunity to create economies of scale through the wasteful spending of taxpayer funds."

"nothing, the city and county should not merge. We moved to the county to get away from corrupt city government."

"Local affluent areas will lose some control and may see their services diminished if the " money pot" is diluted. However, there are great gains to be had by correcting inefficiencies. As long as we have such parochial attitudes, the region loses."

"Economic waste, uneven services to citizens, confusion as to where you are, too many mid to top level officials."

"Constant fighting for grants and federal funds."

"The region loses the ability to compete with other cities that are investing in their infrastructure, and our brand as a region continues to suffer under this separation."

"Too much parochialism leads to lack of ownership of Regional Problems."

"I don't feel there is a disadvantage."

"Lack of standardized, quality and equitable public services, inefficiencies in their delivery."

"Staffing redundancy, which mean very little coordination across the region on common topics. It also means redundant/wasteful expenses/costs. Petty competition amongst municipalities. Many municipalities don't have the resources/tax base to support even the most basic government functions."

"Dollars are wasted. Wealthier areas receive superior services while lower income neighborhoods increasingly suffer. In this cycle, those same lower income residents are disproportionately affected by aggressive ticketing and policing policies that are developed in order to raise income to keep afloat. If combined, the higher income areas will have a stake in what happens in lower income places which does not currently exist today."

"It is so much more expensive to run everything separately. Combining services would save money and allow for more uniform services."

"Merge!!!!"

"Consolidation would decrease racial and economic segregation and that's crucial for making this city a respectable place."

Of the public services (police, fire, courts, public works, parks and recreation, etc.) offered by your municipality, which should not be considered for reorganization and why?

For many small groups, regardless of the forum, this question did not always lead to a discussion about which public services should remain locally managed and controlled by the municipality. Two camps existed – those who did not want to consider reorganization for any service and those who felt all services should be assessed for reorganization. If satisfied with service quality and delivery, the rationale was why fix something that isn't broken; and if dissatisfied, the rationale was assessment and change could lead to better service quality and delivery, as well as cost efficiencies.

In many, but not all small groups, residents will consider some form of reorganization after a third-party assessment; and if a vote is required, only those living in St. Louis City and County should be allowed to vote.

Additionally, at all forums in a few small groups, the social inequities and disparities within public education were discussed; and many wanted to know why this public service was not being considered by Better Together.

Finally, residents talked about “organic” grown collaboration that occurs when neighboring municipalities develop cooperating agreements based on local needs and cost savings. Some residents felt municipal officials and staffers were better qualified to assess reorganization because their interest is for their residents.

As reflected below, there was very little agreement about what services should not be considered for reorganization.

SERVICE	RATIONALE
Parks and Recreation	Parks are more localized and have special programs based on community desires; no issue in my municipality.
Public Works	Slow response time already and could become slower with consolidation.
Fire Districts	Work well as they are structured today.
Police	Many police departments are working; fear that would not continue, if reorganized; not duplicate or redundant services.
Municipal Courts	Community doesn't have an issue; voting would not occur in close proximity to home.

Sampling of Online Survey Responses

"Not sure"

"None. They should all be re-organized and consolidated."

"Merge everything into one large city."

"Would have it all on the table for consideration. Some things might best remain somewhat segmented, but I imagine most things would benefit from more sharing and centralization."

"None. all should be subject to this change through a rigorous testing process with the goal of using data to determine what is working well as a regional service and what is working well as a local/municipality service."

"Fire department because they respond fast and don't kill people. Public works need to stay local as well because they respond quickly."

"Everything should be 'on the table' especially the public services."

"Other than school districts (which aren't aligned with municipalities anyway), they should all be reorganized."

"I think public works MIGHT remain a local function but that option is on the table."

"Police, fire, public works should not be brought together. Collaborate yes, but no, not consolidate. Parks, recreation...yes could be consolidated."

Aligned with the previous question, forum attendees were asked about their satisfaction with public services:

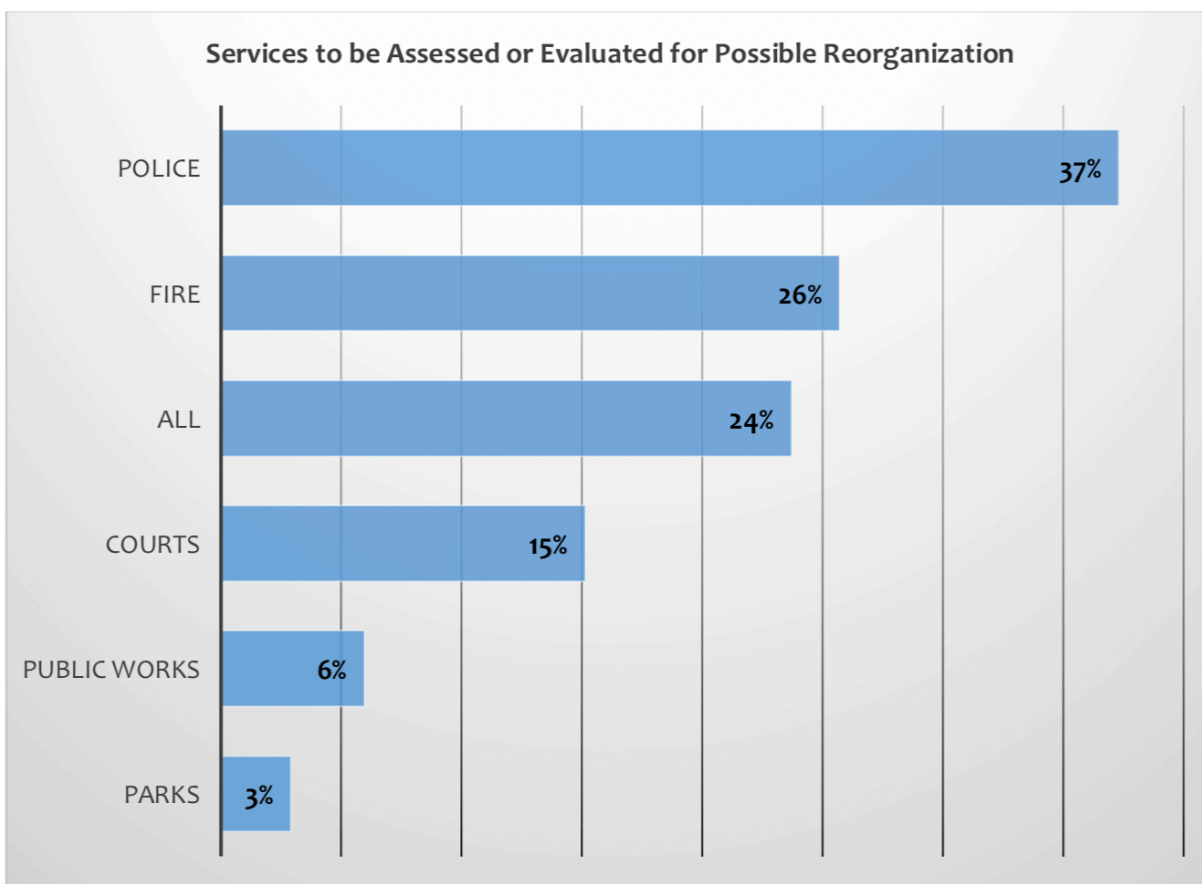
- St. Louis County residents are most satisfied with their services with **86% of them rating their satisfaction level as either "satisfied or very satisfied."**
 - For those living in unincorporated St. Louis County, **79% rated their satisfaction as either "satisfied or very satisfied."**
- For those residing in the City of St. Louis, **34% rated their satisfaction as either "satisfied or very satisfied."** The services most mentioned as requiring improvement were policing and public works.

Additionally, town hall attendees and online survey respondents noted the following:

- **Eight of 10 (82%) think it is likely or very likely that fragmentation impacts regional economic growth.**
- **Eight of 10 (84%) think it is likely or very likely that fragmentation impacts the financial stability and sustainability of some municipalities.**
- **Eight of 10 (80%) think if all municipalities are stronger, benefits accrue to their municipality.**
- **Nearly 9 of 10 (88%) think it is important or very important for all residents to receive consistent service quality and professionalism.**

With the goal of promoting economic growth and improving efficiencies and operations for St. Louis City and County, residents were asked which public services, if any, should be assessed or evaluated for possible reorganization.

- **Slightly more than one third (37%) of respondents felt police services should be evaluated for reorganization.**
- **Roughly one of four (26%) felt fire services should be evaluated**
- **Nearly one of four (24%) felt all services should be considered for possible reorganization**



Only four percent of respondents felt no services should be assessed or evaluated for possible reorganization.

Finally, one of the most frequently mentioned services was economic development and/or planning. From several responses, it appears residents felt economic development and the use of incentives should be managed by one entity instead of multiple governing bodies.

Residents were asked to rank possible considerations for reorganization; notably for the purpose of promoting economic growth and equitably providing better service to residents, regardless of where they live.

- **Nearly five of ten (46%) ranked promoting economic growth as either a first or second consideration.**
- **Four of ten (41%) ranked providing better services to residents as either a first or second consideration.**
- **Four of ten (42%) ranked helping to ensure residents receive the same services as either a first or second consideration.**

Alternatively:

- **Only three of ten (29%) ranked making large-scale projects easier to plan for and implement as either a first or second consideration.**
- **Only three of ten (27%) ranked making it easier to do business in the region as either a first or second consideration.**
- **Less than two of ten (18%) ranked helping reduce taxes as either a first or second consideration.**

Please rank the following considerations for regional reorganization from most important to least important.

