

POLITICAL FIX

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Better Together pulls St. Louis city-county merger proposal

By David Hunn St. Louis Post-Dispatch May 7, 2019

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FILE PHOTO: Washington University Chancellor Mark Wrighton and his wife Risa Zwerling Wrighton hear him introduced as leading Better Together as task force members Arindam Kar and Will Ross, and St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson listen at an unveiling event where the group's plan to merge the city and county was revealed at the Cheshire hotel on Monday, Jan. 28, 2019. Photo by Robert Cohen, rcohen@post-dispatch.com

After months of widespread and unflagging criticism, organizers of the city-county merger initiative on Monday pulled their beleaguered consolidation proposal from ballot consideration.

“Faced with the reality that we have an enormous challenge, in terms of winning the ballot initiative, we decided to step back,” said Mark Wrighton, chancellor of Washington University and chairman of Better Together’s campaign, UniteSTL.

Better Together leaders said they would not soon refile their petition to merge the governments of St. Louis, St. Louis County and all 88 county municipalities but will instead focus on working with local officials and residents — including their opponents — toward structural change.

The effort’s defenders have been privately urging the organization for weeks to pause and restart. The investigation and indictment of St. Louis County Executive Steve Stenger, who had been slated to play a key role in the initiative, threw county leadership into turmoil.

“I said that this needs a reset,” St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson recalled telling Better Together leaders weeks ago. “I just thought, ‘Now is not the time to push.’”

At the same time, a groundswell of the measure’s supporters, including Krewson, were prodding Better Together leadership to rethink a particularly controversial component of the petition: the requirement for a statewide vote.

Better Together has long said that its proposal made such sweeping changes — consolidating courts and police departments, for instance — that it required an amendment to the Missouri Constitution and a statewide vote.

But many residents and municipal officials considered that component a deliberate scheme to overpower local voters. Even Better Together board members raised the issue.

“Essentially, I think it’s time to pause, to think about the process going forward,” board member Will Ross, associate dean for diversity at Washington University School of Medicine, told the Post-Dispatch before a Better Together board meeting last week. “The process of unification is so important, we just don’t want to do this wrong. It’s becoming too divisive.”

The Better Together board met Wednesday. Spokesman Ed Rhode said nothing newsworthy happened. But Ross said before the meeting that he would present his concerns to members, predicting not all would be happy to hear them. Afterward, Ross said there would indeed be “major new developments” in the merger initiative, though he wasn’t sure if it was “real, systemic change.” He declined to further discuss the matter.

No consensus

Others told the Post-Dispatch of their concerns last week, too.

Arindam Kar, a Bryan Cave lawyer who sat on the task force that helped write the Better Together proposal, said he was “saddened” and “disappointed” that the Better Together campaign hadn’t built consensus.

Former Stifel Financial Corp. CEO George Herbert Walker III, a founder of Better Together, said he had discussed worries with fellow board members, and he hoped the Better Together goals were still alive.

Boeing engineer and task force member Kira Van Niel said it had been painful to hear African-American residents say they had been ignored in the process. “This community needs to listen fully to the lived experience of their neighbors,” Van Niel said.

Joe Adorjan, chairman of the Better Together board, acknowledged that the effort was struggling.

“People are concerned. We’re all concerned,” Adorjan said. “I’d like to see this city, county move forward.”

Monday's move represented the third time Better Together had pulled its petition from state consideration.

Better Together announced its proposal in January and filed an initiative petition and constitutional amendment language with the state in the hopes of forcing a statewide vote next year.

But Better Together was almost immediately attacked by residents and officials from the region's multitude of municipalities, publicly outraged by two main parts of the measure: the statewide vote, and Stenger's automatic appointment as first chief of the merged "metropolitan city."

Those sentiments grew over the months. A variety of agencies, residents and officials mounted fights against Better Together.

'Divisive at all levels'

The last several weeks have been especially tumultuous. When news broke in March that federal prosecutors were investigating Stenger, Better Together removed him from the proposal. But the group had a hard time shaking the shadow.

It looked to rebound when the St. Louis County NAACP announced last month that it was supporting the measure. But at that same announcement, county NAACP branch President John Gaskin III admitted he was employed by Better Together's campaign.

The next week, about 35 black elected officials from St. Louis and St. Louis County denounced the Better Together city-county merger proposal and called for Gaskin to resign. The national NAACP president then suspended Gaskin, leaving Better Together with little, if any, official African-American support for the measure.

“If these are the people leading, no wonder we’re in trouble,” Normandy Mayor Patrick Green said on Monday after Better Together pulled its petition. “How could you not see this was going to be so divisive, at all levels?”

Krewson said she hopes the work to unify the region’s governments continues.

“I think we need to revisit this down the road,” she said. “It needs rehab and recuperation, not hospice. I would hate to think this is the end, and I don’t believe it is.”

New St. Louis County Executive Sam Page said he had “several serious reservations” about the proposal and was encouraged to see Monday’s news.

“It shows they’re listening,” Page said in a statement. “I hope that future efforts at reform will be built from the ground up, engaging community leaders, the African-American community, the Municipal League and other stakeholders.”



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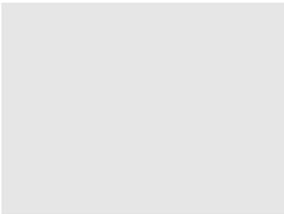
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