

# Jacksonville no stranger to excitement

## Consolidation made city government more efficient, cost-effective

Amid the furor surrounding NFL Jacksonville, someone exclaimed, "I don't believe anything like this has ever happened in Jacksonville!"

Wrong. Consolidation happened.

At midnight on Oct. 1, 1968, a new city of Jacksonville was created, extending from county line to county line, with the exception of the Beaches and Baldwin. The city's population leaped from less than 200,000 to more than 500,000, making it the 27th most populated city in the nation and the largest.

On that first Consolidation Day, schools and businesses closed to allow the public to take part in Jacksonville's "date with destiny." The day began with whistles blowing, church bells ringing and an early morning prayer breakfast. One of the biggest parades in city history and a waterfront barbecue that evening, followed by a fireworks extravaganza, rounded out the day.

Police estimated as many as 200,000 people flocked downtown to join in the celebration. Nothing like it has happened before or since. A time capsule filled with historic documents and souvenirs of the day was buried at City Hall to be opened in the year 2000; the new City Council met in an emergency four-hour session to transfer powers from old city and county governments to the new consolidated government.

Mayor Hans Tanzler delivered his first State of the City address, quoting from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." The tide was at the flood in Jacksonville, "as never before and as may never be again," Tanzler declared, and called on every citizen "to lend a hand to pull the oars, and our ship of state will truly ride on to fame and fortune — God willing." He concluded, somewhat ominously: "We dare not fail."

Before consolidation, Jacksonville and Duval County were in a state of political crisis. The discreditation of local high schools, grand jury indictments of many

public officials and a succession of scandals over waste and mismanagement in local government had given the city a black eye nationally. We had a city council and a city commission, a county commission and a county budget commission, and almost two of everything — two police forces, two fire departments, two tax assessors, two tax collectors and so on. In spite of, perhaps because of, these many layers, community needs were not being met.

Outside the city limits there were hardly any streetlights, hundreds of miles of unpaved roads, 30,000 homes using septic tanks and neither the hydrants nor the water pressure necessary to fight fires.

Within the city there still were backyard privies and hundreds of miles of sewer and drainage lines disintegrating. The city was pouring 600 million gallons of raw, untreated sewage and industrial wastes monthly into the St. Johns River.

At the same time, there was "a shameful, shocking waste of public funds" in government purchasing and contractual agreements.

"Any private business similarly operated would long since have closed its doors," a grand jury reported in 1966.

Consolidation changed all that spectacularly. It reduced taxes in 10 of its first 11 years while mounting massive public works programs that cleaned up the St. Johns, installed or repaired hundreds of miles of water, sewer and drainage lines and extended unified police and fire services throughout the county. In its first 10 years, consolidated government obtained \$500 million in federal funds for which the city was not eligible before consolidation. It is estimated that largely because of the better political and economic climate consolidation created, about \$2 billion in new construction and development has occurred here in the past 25 years. Many of the new businesses that have moved here cite consolidation and the simplicity of dealing with just one government locally as important factors in the decision. Consolidation spawned scores of new programs and services for the poor, the elderly, children, the handicapped, those in need of health care and minorities.

Prior to consolidation, only a few blacks had jobs in local government, most of them as laborers, janitors or maids. Today, there are blacks in responsible positions at every level of the government, including a deputy mayor, department heads and division

chiefs. Of 11,398 School Board and government employees today, 4,027 are blacks; 3,971 are women. Consolidated government was a gift of good governance from the people to themselves, crafted by its wisest and most respected leaders and many thousands of citizens who contributed to its development. It was given life at the polls by an informed and inspired citizenry who joined in a quiet revolution that toppled existing governments without firing a shot.

Consolidation replaced the old governments with a unified, efficient and cost-effective system for local governance and self-determination — staffed largely by professionals.

It is not perfect. It is not a cure-all. It needs to be adjusted from time to time to keep abreast of change, to prevent its bureaucracy from settling too comfortably into routine; and to renew within the public the spirit which gave it birth, and which, from the beginning, has made it not merely special, but the envy of other cities.

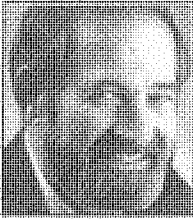
Mayor Ed Austin's restructuring of the government (443 jobs cut, another 229 being phased out), his empowerment and Insight programs and River City Renaissance plan, are in line with consolidation's unspoken mandate to keep the government and the community "on track." But the most significant thing about consolidation remains that we have one mayor (where the buck stops), one City Council (also where the buck stops), and one layer of government — in an area big enough to build several cities the size of New York or Los Angeles. Those who can't appreciate what this means should consider this: In 1967, when Jacksonville and Duval County consolidation was ushered in, there were 350 special tax districts, 76 communities and 100 school districts in Los Angeles County alone.

In the New York metropolitan district there were 1,487 political entities, each with the power to raise taxes.

Those kind of problems remain commonplace around the country today. Not in Jacksonville. Not as long as we keep consolidated government "on track." That's what Tanzler meant when he said, back in 1969, "The most outstanding achievement of consolidation is consolidation itself."

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### QUEST COLUMN



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