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# TESTIMONY

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## THE NORMANDY AND GLEN ECHO PARK MERGER PROPOSAL

*By David Stokes*

Testimony before the St. Louis County Boundary Commission

### **TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMISSION**

My name is David Stokes. I am the Director of Municipal Policy at the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state and local policy. The ideas presented here are my own and summarize research regarding municipal mergers, annexations, and disincorporation.

The adjoining St. Louis County municipalities of Normandy and Glen Echo Park are considering merging. I believe this is the type of community-driven approach to municipal cooperation and consolidation that will benefit St. Louis County and the residents of these two communities. Glen Echo Park, population 122, is one of the smallest communities in St. Louis County. The financial burden of operating such a small municipality in 2023 is imposing.

Merging is a valuable option for municipalities looking to maintain services without raising taxes. In

recent decades there have been at least three municipal mergers in Missouri. These include Jefferson City and Cedar Hill (which was flood-related), Marble Hill and Lutzville in Southeast Missouri, and, most recently in 2017, Vinita Terrace and Vinita Park in St. Louis County. In 2011, a portion—but not the entire area—of Unity Village near Kansas City was annexed by Lee's Summit. Right across the river from St. Louis in Southern Illinois, three municipalities (Cahokia, Alorton, and Centreville) voted to merge into one combined city of Cahokia Heights in 2021.

There was a prominent effort to merge many of the municipalities within St. Louis City and County from 2016 to 2018. Known as "Better Together," the combined proposals would have been the most significant change to Missouri municipalities since St. Louis City became an independent city in 1876. However, the overall effort faltered, and no major changes were enacted. Similarly, in 2007, Clayton and Richmond Heights in St. Louis County discussed merging their two cities. Unlike the other mergers and dis-incorporations discussed

here, this one would have been done from a position of strength, as both cities were (and still are) in good financial shape. However, political and civic opposition to the change combined with a lack of hard evidence for the benefits scuttled the talks before the proposal ever came to a vote.

The economic and political science literature on municipal mergers is cautious. In one major literature review of studies of municipal mergers from dozens of counties, the author came to three primary conclusions.<sup>1</sup> First, the cost savings from mergers do happen, but they are usually smaller than predicted. Second, public services may be improved through greater municipal resources, but often result in a larger bureaucracy that limits any cost savings there may have been. Third, voter and civic participation declines in mergers as residents don't feel their votes and voices count as much in larger communities. Finally, the author of the review makes a vital note that the large majority of these studies considered municipal mergers imposed upon the municipalities by higher levels of government and thus may not be a good indication of the effects of smaller, voluntary municipal mergers like the current proposal between Normandy and Glen Echo Park would be.

Currently, both cities make commendable use of contracting with other governments (primarily St. Louis County) and private companies to provide services to their residents.<sup>2</sup> The private trash service will continue, as will some of the contracting with St. Louis County. A few services in Glen Echo Park that were contracted to St. Louis County will now be performed in-house for residents by Normandy, including public works and the municipal court. Normandy is a large enough city to provide these services, although Normandy should consider contracting or privatizing more of its local services regardless of whether the merger goes through.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the very positive comments about the merger proposal from residents of both communities that I heard during the March meeting of this commission, I am optimistic that the “bottom-up” initiation of this plan and strong residential support will lead to a continuation of community involvement by residents of both municipalities. Furthermore, if this merger were to pass, I believe the absorption of the very small community of Glen Echo Park by Normandy will not lead to any increases in the Normandy municipal bureaucracy beyond the smallest increases necessary to serve the new 122 residents from Glen Echo Park.

The voters of Normandy and Glen Echo Heights deserve the opportunity to decide on this issue at the polling place. Not only does the merger make sense for them in both the short term and long run, but passage would set an excellent example for other municipalities in Saint Louis County that residents and taxpayers will support farsighted thinking and much-needed changes in their local government structure without the need for “top-down” imposition of such changes upon them.

## NOTES

1. Tavares, Antonio F., “Municipal Amalgamations and their Effects: A Literature Review” *Miscellanea Geographica*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp.5–15.
2. St. Louis County Municipal Contracting Matrix, <https://stlouiscountymo.gov/st-louis-county-departments/transportation-and-public-works/public-works-publications-and-manuals/pw-matrix/municipal-contract-matrix1>.
3. Stokes, David, “Privatization Can Benefit Missouri Taxpayers,” Show-Me Institute, February 18, 2014, <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/privatization/privatization-can-benefit-missouri-taxpayers>.



**5297 Washington Place · Saint Louis, MO 63108 · 314-454-0647**  
**1520 Clay Street · Suite B-6 · North Kansas City, MO 64116 · 816-561-1777**

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