

# The Debate of Consolidating Law Enforcement Services

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## **Abstract**

*The issue of consolidation of police or law enforcement services has been a topic of discussion throughout the state of Florida as well as nationwide for decades. There have been numerous studies, and in most cases the mergers have proven to be cost effective. The biggest argument or opposition is the misconception that local municipalities will lose control or authority. This is simply not the case. Most mergers are done on a contractual basis; wherein smaller city agencies are absorbed by the larger county Sheriffs' Offices. However, the municipalities' governing bodies, usually the city council, still maintain authority. They simply contract those services with the local Sheriff. A sample of citizens of Fort Walton Beach was surveyed to determine how they felt about consolidation of police services in their area.*

## **Introduction**

For well over half of a century, cities across Florida have attempted to cut costs to their annual budget by consolidating services such as law enforcement. The debate continues over the advantages and disadvantages that come along with this practice. Most municipalities are governed by city councils that are managed by a mayor and/or city manager. When a city or town gains a charter from the state, that city is allowed to then collect a tax from its citizens. Along with the taxes these cities generate from its citizens come certain responsibilities.

One such responsibility is the need for law enforcement or police services. These cities are statutorily obligated and required to provide these services. When a city begins to feel the effects of a declining economy, the solution is pretty simple and limited. They can raise taxes on those citizens or try and cut their costs in some way.

The other choice is to do what many of the cities across Florida are considering by consolidating their smaller police departments with the large county Sheriffs' Offices. Studies have shown that in most cases these mergers are financially beneficial to the cities.

Recently a study was done and a proposal was given by the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office to the City of Fort Walton Beach. The proposal's outcome proved to save the city over \$2,000,000 annually (Ashley, 2012). Though the council desires to save money, they are fearful of dissolving its police department. This fear is common when municipalities are making the decision to merge. There are several factors that seem to guide this fear. The councils are concerned that they will lose identity and control or authority in the process (Barlow, 2012). This is a misconception in that these mergers are contractual in nature and can be terminated or reversed if the city finds that it wants its own police department again. Employees and their families of the

municipalities merging seem to voice the strongest opposition as many fear negative change to their income, benefits, seniority, rank, and even the possibility of termination. The city council members that are voted into office by its citizens are fearful of political ramifications to their positions if the decision is not well received by its voting body. However, given the real cost and tangible savings to the city's budget, it is difficult to deny the need to consider such a consolidation.

## **Literature Review**

There have been several mergers of this nature throughout the last four decades, most of which have occurred in recent years due the country's declining economy. Larger more notable mergers took place as far back as 1957 in the City of Miami and Dade County area. These two entities merged into one form of law enforcement government. There were several different stages to this large merger, but one such stage was in 1981 when the Public Safety Department was officially renamed Metro-Dade Police Department. It is now officially named Miami-Dade County. Another large merger began as far back as 1967 in Jacksonville. In an effort to cut costs, Duval County and the City of Jacksonville set a mandate in August of 1967. The voters passed the mandate with 65% of the vote in favor of the consolidation. October 1, 1968, is the official date of the Jacksonville Sheriff Office merging these two agencies. In just the last decade, several cities in Palm Beach County have dissolved their police departments and merged with the larger county agency. There are other cities across Florida that continue to contract with the larger counties such as Deltona and Daytona in Volusia County (Meyers, 2009).

There are many successful mergers throughout Florida and the rest of the United States. Consolidation of police services has been taking place for decades and in Florida for over fifty years. One such merger was in Ossining, New York in 2010. In September 2010, the Ossining Town Board decided to contract its police services with the much larger Westchester County. The Board consulted with ICMA, an outside consulting firm, to analyze the cost savings for the merger. The firm showed two major advantages to consolidating. Not only would the city of Ossining save \$900,000 annually, the merger would also fill several vacancies within Westchester County's workforce at no additional cost to the Town Board or any of its residents (Borgia, 2010).

There are many more notable mergers like the beginning of the Los Angeles County Metro Sheriff's Office. They first began by contracting their services for the adjoining city of Lakewood in 1954. Another large metro merger was that of the Las Vegas, Nevada Police Department and Clark County Sheriff's Department. In 1973 they consolidated to make the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Previously noted was the 1967 forming of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office from Duval County and Jacksonville Police Department in Florida (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2003).

Often small municipalities are forced into merging when attempts to raise taxes or millage rates are defeated by its residents at the voting polls. As in the case in Washtenaw County, Michigan in August of 2010, residents declined the millage increase the police departments needed to keep personnel on the streets. Both the

Township of Ypsilanti and the City of Ypsilanti have been forced to reduce the number of officers patrolling the streets. The Township has had no choice but to contract their police services with the larger Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office. This merger came after talks of joining forces between the Township and City were also defeated by local councils (Maynard, 2010).

Often small municipalities try to merge with each other rather than a large county agency. An example of this was in the cities of Crystal City and New Hope, Minnesota. A third party report was completed by Public Administration Services Associates. The report reflected an 11% budgetary savings. However, the report came upon opposition for accuracy and was challenged. The result was an actual cost savings of 8%. Many of the same obstacles that face all police service mergers ended up causing the demise of the proposal. There were personnel, facility or structure, and governing disagreements. But ultimately the New Hope Council pulled out of the mediation over the merger due to appropriate authority and control issues (New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police, 2007).

There are also hybrids or partial mergers, where the smaller municipalities contract certain responsibilities to the larger county agency. Many cities in California have taken this plan into practice reducing duplication. The City of Cupertino contracts with the larger Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office to answer all of its 911 emergency calls. This contract has proven to save the city millions annually (Rohleder, 2011).

As of 2002, there were over 17,000 police agencies throughout the United States. Since 1950 there have been discussions to regionalize into approximately 1,000 agencies. The discussion finds much opposition for many reasons. Predominately, the idea of losing control of their local law enforcement agencies does not appeal to most Americans that live outside large urban areas. Americans that live in rural areas feel they would lose identity, independence, and influence. Rural Americans prefer as little large government intrusion as possible. Secondly, most leaders of small departments would lose the control of the quality of employee they hire. Additionally, many people view regional law enforcement as more expensive to the taxpayer than that of a smaller, relatively modest municipality. The argument is supported in rural areas where citizens reject the idea that they need additional protection or services that could be offered by a regional force. Lastly, most of the small police departments across the United States maintain a good rating by their citizens. They provide adequate law enforcement services in the communities they serve (Tully, 2002). Though regionalizing police services may clearly be consolidation on too large of a scale, small local mergers are beneficial.

The city of Fort Walton Beach was founded in 1941. Its police department was formed that year as well. There are currently less than 20,000 citizens that inhabit the city's jurisdiction. On May 17, 2011, the Fort Walton Beach City Council voted 4 to 3 to request a formal proposal from the Okaloosa Sheriff's Office for contracting law enforcement services for its citizens. A letter from the city's manager was delivered to the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office on May 18, 2011, formally requesting this proposal. On May 23, 2011, the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office sent a letter to the City Council asking for information that would be needed to prepare an accurate proposal of this nature. It was seven months later on December 22, 2011, that the city's manager sent portions of the information requested by the Sheriff's Office. Then on

February 10, 2012, the City of Fort Walton Beach sent another formal letter to the Sheriff's Office detailing the work it was requesting and expecting the Sheriff to perform. On February 28, 2012, the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office gave the City of Fort Walton Beach a detailed proposal for the upcoming Fiscal Year 2012-2013. The proposal had three major advantages for consolidating over keeping the current police department in place (Ashley, 2012).

The first and most notable was the over \$2,000,000 in annual savings to the city. The current Fort Walton Beach Police Department budget is \$5,589,287. This budget has been an increasing trend year after year despite the number of citizens and calls for service decreasing annually. The Okaloosa Sheriff's Office proposal is \$3,541,214. This is a net savings of \$2,048,073 annually. Additionally, this merger would tremendously drop the cost of law enforcement per capita to \$181.28. The Fort Walton Beach Police Department's current cost per capita is \$286.13 which is well over the national average of \$279.13. This is a cost savings of 37% and over \$100.00 less per capita. Lastly, the third largest advantage of consolidation is it would stop the adverse funding of the City of Fort Walton Beach's Pension Plan. If consolidated, the employees would fall under the Florida Retirement System where they are only required to put in 3% of their salaries toward their pension. The Fort Walton Beach Police Department employees currently have to contribute 5% to their pension and the city has indicated this percentage needs to be increased to 11% (Ashley, 2012).

Several non-law enforcement related departments within the City of Fort Walton Beach have already consolidated under the county. The Fleet Maintenance Departments have merged. The purchasing of fuel has merged. And the city's Parks and Recreation Department is currently being reviewed for consolidation with the county.

Often there are misconceptions to coincide with these consolidation contracts. The largest misconception is that the city or town will give up its local control or authority. The city council still maintains full control of law enforcement services it contracts from the Sheriff just as it would if their municipal police department was in existence. There is often fear that once under contract, that the resources will be reallocated elsewhere within the larger agency. However, in the case with the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, the 43 proposed officers will be dedicated exclusively to the city's jurisdiction. And often, as it is in the case cited in this Okaloosa County example, the Sheriff is seen as attempting to take over the police departments. What most do not understand is that the Sheriff's jurisdiction, law enforcement authority, and service population does not change with or without a contract for exclusive services. As it is in this case, it was the City of Fort Walton Beach that approached the Sheriff's Office and requested the proposal (Ashley, 2012).

The Fort Walton Beach City Council is statutorily responsible to provide law enforcement services to its citizens. They are also fiscally responsible to its citizens to provide such services at the most economical costs at their disposal, as long as this would not sacrifice the level of service. The proposal from the Sheriff's Office clearly dispels the misconceptions and opposition to consolidation while providing as good or better level of service at significant savings to the city it already serves.

## Methods

For my research, I chose to survey the Fort Walton Beach residents and asked ten generic questions related to my paper. Because the city is broken into two zip codes, I chose to email residents from both zip codes. The zip code for the citizens that reside in the city limits of Fort Walton Beach is 32548. The zip code for citizens residing in Fort Walton Beach but in the county jurisdiction is 32547. I surveyed 100 citizens from the two zip codes. I tried to get 50 from each zip code so that it was evenly dispersed among county and city residents. I attempted to avoid sending to law enforcement personnel from either agency in an attempt to make the survey as “double blinded” as possible.

## Results

I began my survey on May 3, 2012. I did not send out my survey to my target audience until May 29, 2012. The first round of surveys went out to 84 email addresses of residents in Fort Walton Beach. I asked that they complete the survey and requested they get their spouses and significant others to complete the survey as well. I then sent the survey out to an additional 50 email addresses on June 19, 2012, to make certain that I had at least 100 responses.

The strengths of my research and surveys are that the zip codes made it really easy to determine residents from both the city as well as the county. This allowed me to calculate the average opinions from both zip codes. I was able to rule out the stereotype that citizens from the county were for it while citizens from the city were not. The survey allowed me to test my hypothesis; which was that most citizens from both the city and county merely desire quality in local law enforcement and would like to see this at a cost savings to the city. The surveys allowed me to formulate graphs and retrieve accurate data on several sides of the issue.

After drafting the survey and sending it to the first 84 email addresses I had on May 29, 2012, I received a very good response rate. Within the first two weeks of sending out the survey, I received 71 responses from the 84 addresses. Approximately three weeks after the initial request on June 19, 2012, I sent an additional 50 addresses survey requests. This second request gave me the additional 29 surveys I wanted to complete at least 100 responses. The survey site I used, Survey Monkey, allows for a maximum of 100 responses on the Basic Plan I utilized. Though ultimately, I had 104 total responses by July 2, 2012, the site only calculated and analyzed the first 100 responses.

I sent a total of 134 surveys out over the course of three weeks. I received the 100 responses back in just over 30 days. The percentage of participation and responses were extremely high and surprising to me. I have no idea how many people outside of my requests actually received and responded, because I did ask in the email that everyone have their spouses complete as well and to forward to any family or friends. I am quite certain that many outside of my network of emails received the survey from my target audience and decided to complete it as requested. Additionally,

I believe that the topic's media coverage and impact locally assisted in the high percentage of participation.

Question one of the survey asked if the target had any knowledge or heard anything on the topic of consolidation between the Fort Walton Beach Police Department and the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. Of the 100 surveyed, 89.0% responded yes and 11.0% responded no.

Question two asked the audience if they had already formed an opinion on the matter. The response was 71.7% yes and 28.3% no.

Question three was an important one. It asked if the target was serviced by the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office or the Fort Walton Beach Police Department. The response was 64.6% serviced by the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office and 35.4% serviced by the Fort Walton Beach Police Department. This is important for two reasons. It showed that my survey was not split evenly with 50% of those surveyed being county residents and 50% of those surveyed being city residents. However, and more importantly, it was ironic that the numbers were 64.6% county and 35.4% city. The reason this is important is that those figures are representative of the total population numbers for all Fort Walton Beach addressed residents, both city and county. There are approximately 20,000 residents that live within the city's 8 square miles. This is just about 30% of the overall population of both city and county residents combined. So the responded targets were very reflective of the overall residents' demographics.

Question four asked if the targets or any member of their family have been a law enforcement officer within the last five years. The response was 37.4% yes and 62.6% no.

Question five asked if the targets or any member of their immediate family was an employee of the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. The response was 46.0% yes and 54.0% no.

Question six asked if the targets or their immediate family members were an employee of the Fort Walton Beach Police Department. The response was 0.0% yes and 100.0% no.

Question seven asked the audience if they were satisfied with the level of law enforcement services in their perspective neighborhoods. The response was 79.6% yes and 20.4% no.

Question eight asked if those surveyed were satisfied with the level of professionalism of the law enforcement agency that served their neighborhoods. The response was 83.7% yes and 16.3% no.

Question nine asked the targeted audience if they had any negative experiences with their local law enforcement agency or officers within the last five years. The response was 15.2% yes and 84.8% no.

Lastly in question ten, I asked the most important question. I asked the targets if consolidating agencies would significantly save the City of Fort Walton Beach annually, would they feel the consolidation warranted. The response was 61.7% yes and 38.3% no.

Because the survey had 100 respondents, the percentages obviously correlated to the numbers responding. The only difference was on questions where targets skipped or opted out of answering that particular question. Out of 100 surveyed all answered question numbers one, five, and six. One person skipped questions two,

three, four, and nine. Two targets avoided questions seven and eight. And lastly, six people skipped question ten. The occasional question omission was not surprising as those may have been done by mere accident. However, having six people skip question ten obviously shows some citizens' reluctance to answer the question altogether. It was not surprising that the majority of those surveyed opted in favor of consolidation if a cost savings could be accomplished.

The three most important questions in the survey were numbers three, seven, and ten. Question three allowed me to see how many of those surveyed actually lived in the city that responded. This also told me what agency actually served their community. Question seven allowed me to see the level of satisfaction the community had with their perspective law enforcement agencies. Lastly, question ten allowed me to gauge the citizen's overall support level for consolidating.

## **Discussion**

The ten questions I chose for the surveys were simple, direct, and required merely one answer; yes or no. The nature of the questions provided a clear understanding of how the residents felt about consolidation. The questions also clearly gave insight as to personal relationships that could be impacted by such a merger and helped determine if these relationships were factors in how residents answered the questions. The questions were arranged and designed in a manner that would deter bias towards one side or the other. The survey hinged on one final question. The last question asked did a significant cost savings warrant consolidation.

Because the issue of consolidation has been on the recent agendas of the city council and all over the local news, it was a fresh topic on the minds of the citizens of the county and the city alike. Most people have already formulated an opinion on the matter. Many do not understand the actual concept of consolidation. Most of the resistance to consolidation comes from employees or their family members that are fearful of unemployment or reduction in rank and/or salaries. Yet many other citizens could care less whether the two agencies merged or not. Most citizens merely desire quality law enforcement presence for their neighborhoods and communities with low crime rates. If the cost savings for consolidation does not directly affect them, they do not seem to hold a strong opinion on the matter.

Okaloosa County is an anomaly in that it has nine municipalities and over 50 sitting council members, mayors, and administrators. This is extremely unusual, at least throughout Florida's Panhandle. The neighboring County to the West, Santa Rosa County which is similar in size has only two municipalities, Milton and Gulf Breeze both with city police departments. Walton County, which lies to the east of Okaloosa and is also similar in size, has only one municipality, Defuniak Springs which has its own police department. Further to the west is Escambia County which has only one municipality, Pensacola Police Department. Most counties in Florida are this way until you get down in the southern region where the population is much denser. The result is that merging or consolidating police services is foreign to this area. Despite the survey resulting in support for the consolidation of the Fort Walton Beach Police Department under the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office and the Sheriff's proposal of a \$2,048,073

annual savings to the city, the city prematurely decided to leave the Fort Walton Beach Police Department in place. While the decision was going to be tabled for several months, shortly after the Sheriff presented his proposal to the council, The Chief of Fort Walton Beach agreed to cut roughly \$900,000 from his \$5,589,287 annual budget. Though the savings was still significantly less than what the Sheriff was presenting, the city opted to accept the Chief's reduction in lieu of the merger. The council's decision could be based on a merger this size being unprecedented in this area. However, there have been smaller mergers with municipalities in Okaloosa, but not the size or magnitude of Fort Walton Beach. In January 2001, Mary Esther was a very small public safety department. It was dissolved by the Mary Esther City Council and law enforcement services were contracted to the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. All but one of its former personnel was employed by the Sheriff's Office.

The Fort Walton Beach City Council's decision to accept the Chief's reduction could also be for many of the reasons mentioned in the introduction to this research paper. It is largely believed that the city council never really wanted to merge, but merely wanted to use the Sheriff's proposal as leverage to get the Chief to reduce his budget. Nonetheless, the merger did not take place but will likely be mentioned and possibly tabled again.

A colleague in Palm Beach County where several cities have merged with the larger Sheriff's Office advised that a similar situation happened in that county where on three different occasions in three different cities, the Sheriff was asked to present a proposal only to have the councils use that proposal to get the Chiefs to reduce their budget. In all three instances, the councils came back at a later date asking the Sheriff to consider consolidating again. In all three cases, the Sheriff declined to present an additional proposal and would not consider merging with the municipalities.

The Chief of Fort Walton Beach ultimately had to make significant cuts to manage his \$900,000 budget reduction. Some of the negative ramifications were that three patrol sergeants' positions were ultimately eliminated. Additionally, a civilian commander, classified as a Captain was released from duty as well as a full time communications officer. Patrol went from six overlapping shifts down to four twelve hour shifts reducing manpower and uniformed presence. The monthly six hour training blocks have been removed. The Investigations Division went from nine investigators down to four. The SWAT budget has been cut significantly, and the ability to get overtime for employees is obsolete.

There are often mergers that are not necessarily law enforcement mergers but have positive impacts on law enforcement agencies that consolidation effects. Such mergers include communications or dispatch consolidation. In 2010, the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office proposed a merger of its 35 dispatchers that answer 89% of the calls that come into its communications center with that of the county's 25 Fire and EMS dispatchers that answer only 11% of the call volume. Many of these dispatchers are cross-trained and can answer the same type of call. The Sheriff submitted a proposal to the County Commission to merge the two centers into one and cross train all dispatchers thus reducing duplication, personnel, and costs. The proposal showed a \$1,500,000 annual savings. Opposition to the proposal argued there was really only a \$1,000,000 savings. Even with that much potential savings to the county, it was ultimately defeated for what many believed was fear of losing control.



## **Recommendations**

Ultimately, the decision for consolidation of police services comes down to a case by case basis. There are times where consolidation does not make sense. However, where there is significant cost savings to the smaller municipalities, consolidation must be considered as a viable option. In the current economic recession that faces this country, all local and governmental agencies are being forced to find ways to save money. Contracts and consolidation has been a proven tool for over fifty years to save smaller municipalities from financial crisis. Florida has seen many cities benefit from such mergers and will continue to see more cities consider this as a realistic solution to its budgetary problems. With so much opposition for raising taxes, there are not too many other options to consider.

Lieutenant Eric Aden began his career with the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office in 1995. He spent three years on patrol before joining the School Resource Officer Program. He resigned from the OCSO in 2003 to pursue opportunities in the private sector as a Mortgage Consultant. He also owned and operated his own Private Investigations Agency. In late 2008, he was hired by the Walton County Sheriff's Office where he served as Lieutenant over Special Operations. His duties included supervising Warrants, Civil Process, Prisoner and Inmate Transportation, Court Security, as well as the United States Marshal's Fugitive Task Force. In November of 2010, he was hired again by the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office where he currently serves as Lieutenant over Judicial Services. His duties include Court Security, Inmate Detention, as well as still serving on the U.S. Marshal's Task Force Team. Eric earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminology from Florida State University.



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# Appendix A



PAGE: 1



1. Have you heard or read anything on the recent discussions, proposals, and /or [Create Chart](#) [Download](#) decisions of the Fort Walton Beach City Council's consideration of consolidating the city's law enforcement services by contracting with the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office?



		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Yes</b>		89.0%	89
<b>No</b>		11.0%	11
		answered question	100
		skipped question	0

2. Do you currently have an opinion on the council's decision on the issue of consolidation? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Yes</b>		71.7%	71
<b>No</b>		28.3%	28
		answered question	99
		skipped question	1


3. Which local law enforcement agency serves your neighborhood?		<a href="#">Create Chart</a>	<a href="#">Download</a>
		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office</b>		64.6%	64
Fort Walton Beach Police Department		35.4%	35
		answered question	99
		skipped question	1

4. Have you, any member of your household, or any immedaite family member been a law enforcement officer within the last 5 years?		<a href="#">Create Chart</a>	<a href="#">Download</a>
		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		37.4%	37
<b>No</b>		62.6%	62
		answered question	99
		skipped question	1

5. Are you, any member of your household, or any immediate family member an employee of the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office?		<a href="#">Create Chart</a>	<a href="#">Download</a>
		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		46.0%	46
<b>No</b>		54.0%	54
		answered question	100
		skipped question	0



6. Are you, any member of your household, or any member of your immediate family an employee of the Fort Walton Beach Police Department?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		0.0%	0
<b>No</b>		<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100</b>
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>100</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>0</b>



7. Are you currently satisfied with the level of law enforcement services in your neighborhood?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Yes</b>		<b>79.6%</b>	<b>78</b>
No		20.4%	20
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>98</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>2</b>



8. Are you satisfied with the professionalism of the law enforcement that serve your neighborhood?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Yes</b>		<b>83.7%</b>	<b>82</b>
No		16.3%	16
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>98</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>2</b>



9. Have you had any negative experiences with the law enforcement agency that serves your neighborhood within the last 5 years?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		15.2%	15
<b>No</b>		84.8%	84
		answered question	99
		skipped question	1

10. Do you feel a significant cost savings to the City of Fort Walton Beach would warrant consolidating police services under the Sheriff's Office?

[Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Yes</b>		61.7%	58
No		38.3%	36
		answered question	94
		skipped question	6