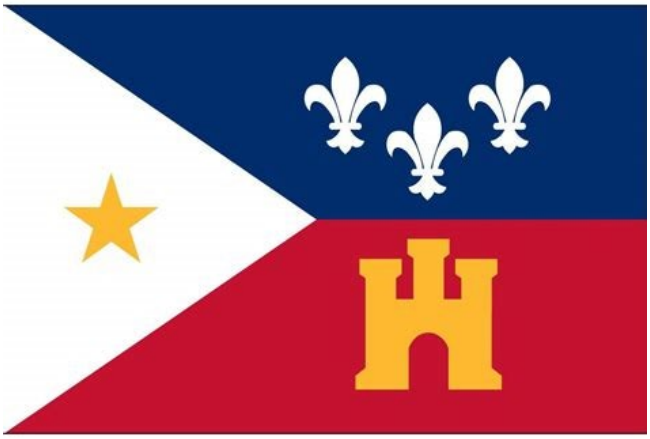

Dissenting Opinion on

Protect the City Committee's (PTCC)

Final Report

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July 19, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

This report was composed by Mark Pope, committee member on the "Protect the City Committee (PTCC)," a seven-member advisory committee established by the Lafayette City Council in January 2021 to study "deconsolidating" the city and parish functions of Lafayette City-Parish Consolidated Government (LCG).

My perspective about deconsolidation differs from the other six committee members. Specifically, I cast the lone dissenting vote in accepting the 28-page Final Report of the PTCC. While I respectfully challenge the facts and logic presented in the PTCC report, I greatly respect and appreciate my fellow committee members for serving on the volunteer advisory committee.

I served 27 years in local government in Lafayette from 1990 to 2016. I began my career in the Environmental Division of Lafayette Parish Government, and I became an LCG employee when LCG officially commenced on June 6, 1996. My last 11 years with LCG, I was the manager of LCG's Environmental Division. I learned a great deal about the LCG budget process from managing a $15 million budget within the Environmental Division.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

I believe – and have witnessed first-hand as an LCG employee – that there are inherent efficiencies in sharing personnel and equipment within LCG. There are, however, problems with the current revised charter (i.e., the "constitution" for LCG) because the former nine-member City-Parish Council rushed through amendments to the original LCG charter. Voters narrowly approved the charter amendments on December 8, 2018, based on bumper-sticker slogans that offered no real information. A well-funded advocacy group promoted the so-called "Fix the Charter Amendments" using widely distributed mail cards.

"Autonomy" for the city of Lafayette was enthusiastically promoted, to be achieved by forming a separate five-member city council and a separate five-member parish council. Anyone paying attention to the ill-conceived Fix the Charter Amendments was not surprised that significant unintended consequences arose. One year after the implementation of LCG's "new government," serious problems were identified, prompting the city council to call for yet another change in Lafayette's government. Hence, the PTCC was established in January 2021.

It is now abundantly clear that language in the revised charter lacked the specificity needed to adequately define the functions and responsibilities of the newly formed city and parish councils. The unintended consequences of the Fix the Charter Amendments — and the

subsequent failure to achieve the intended autonomy for city government — is the basis for the current battle cry to separate city and parish governments.

ESTABLISHING THE PTCC

Prior to the city council writing a resolution establishing the PTCC, the city council extended a symbolic gesture to include the parish council in the process. Yet, the parish council was ultimately left out of the process. The parish council *must agree* with the city council to proceed to the second step of deconsolidating (separating) city and parish governments. To leave out a key ally in such a heavyweight process does not seem like an ideal formula for "winning friends and influencing people."

Further, in appointing the two at-large committee members for the PTCC, members of the city council failed to appoint to the committee the person with the most knowledge and understanding of LCG's finances and budget, Mrs. Lorrie Toups. City Council Member, Andy Naquin, nominated Mrs. Toups, LCG's Chief Financial Officer, to serve as one of two at-large appointments to the PTCC. Subsequently, Mr. Naquin cast the sole vote for Mrs. Toups' committee appointment. Why?

SOME COMMON GROUND

Many residents in the city of Lafayette with whom I've spoken agree that the city could benefit by having a mayor serving the city exclusively. I agree with this assessment. There are numerous options for Lafayette to have an exclusive mayor and still maintain an efficient consolidated government. Those options should be explored.

But, as previously stated, language within the current charter needs to be clarified to define the duties of city and parish governments. Many also agree on this point.

Numerous persons with whom I've spoken have also expressed disbelief that after only 18 short months of the "new government" in Lafayette, we are facing yet another attempt to change our local government. I encouraged them to express their opinions at PTCC town hall forums in June 2021. Unfortunately, many expressed to me their feeling that it was futile to express an opinion contrary to PTCC's apparently predetermined outcome. They felt their voice did not matter.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MYTHS

It is a common misconception that one of the main reasons for consolidating city and parish governments was that the parish government was losing sales tax revenue because municipalities were annexing parcels of unincorporated commercial and residential properties.

Another misconception is that "the parish is withering away" due to its declining sales tax base. In fact, while parish sales tax revenue (1% or 1 penny on the dollar in tax) does decline with annexations, *the parish's property tax revenue remains constant.* Therefore, parish government is responsible for maintaining *fewer* public works functions within Lafayette Parish, while retaining the same level of property tax revenue (dedicated revenue for predominately public works functions).

FACT: Residents and businesses in all six cities in Lafayette Parish, as well as residents and businesses in unincorporated areas of the parish, pay the same level of property taxes to Lafayette Parish Government.

NOT "BROKE"

Another "urban myth" that has survived since the 1996 consolidation of city and parish governments is that "the parish is broke." This claim is misleading. In 1995, the city of Lafayette had a $12.87 million Fund Balance (*Exhibit A*, *Appendix*). Lafayette Parish Government had a Fund Balance of $7.24 million in 1995 (*Exhibit B*, *Appendix*). While it is true that parish government operates on a bare bones budget, it has *never* had a negative fund balance – and this fact is not due to the fallacious assertion that "the city has been subsidizing the parish." (City government in 1995 was approximately six times the size of parish government; this is determined by examining the number of employees in each government just prior to consolidation, and the total number of departments in each government at the time.)

"LEGAL ENTITIES" AND EVOLUTION OF LCG

The charter commission that wrote the original LCG Charter in the early 1990s had the foresight to have the city of Lafayette and Lafayette Parish Government retain their respective standings as a "legal entity." This means, among other things, that city-owned buildings, property, existing contracts, and debt will remain a possession and responsibility of the city of Lafayette. The same provisions apply to Lafayette Parish Government. In the 2018 Fix the Charter Amendments, both the city and parish governments retained their respective standings as a legal entity. In 1995, parish government had approximately 300 employees; city government had approximately 1,600 employees. Parish government was little more than a public works department in 1995. For example, parish government had no community development department; city government had a community development department with approximately 60 employees. In 1995, parish government had four or five employees working in areas *related* to community development (e.g., securing small state and federal grants) but there was no official department.

In addition to hiring 60 employees for its community development department, city government spent millions of dollars purchasing property, constructing buildings, and

developing various programs in the years prior to consolidation. Parish government had five employees in areas *related to* community development. No buildings, property, or social programs were supported by parish government under a community development department in pre-consolidation years *or thereafter*.

NOT RATIONAL, NOT REASONABLE

How, then, can the "legal entity" of parish government, in 2016, be asked to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars toward the support of the city of Lafayette's Community Development Department? City-Parish President Joey Durel stated in his 2016 budget message that parish government was not paying its fair share of consolidated government. President Durel listed a "Parish Deficit" column in budgets he submitted to the Lafayette City-Parish Council in 2013-