

El Paso Times

It's time to consolidate-El Paso's ready, but needs help from the Legislature

Local Staff

It is unfair that El Paso's attempt to consolidate city and county governments - an effort that could save El Pasoans \$1 billion over 30 years- is being thwarted in the Legislature by lawmakers who live nowhere near El Paso.

It's particularly disturbing that members of the Senate Intergovernmental Relations panel essentially refused to allow El Paso officials to fully present El Paso's case for consolidation.

And, it's even worse that the committee chairman, Sen. Frank Madla, D-San Antonio, (a longtime anti-consolidations) couldn't bring himself to even consider a proposal from El Paso County Commissioner Carlos Aguilar III, City Attorney Charlie McNabb and El Paso businessman Larry Peterson.

"They didn't even give us a chance," Aguilar said. "All we want is to let it go through the House for a vote. We're asking for the right of self-determination ... the same principle that this nation and the state of Texas - and the Republic of Texas - were founded on."

Part of the blame rests with El Pasoans. If we could more quickly enact interlocal agreements such as already exist for the health district, the jail and tax collections, and demonstrate their success, even the greatest cynics such as Madla would be more prone to allow the process to evolve.

El Paso's long-range plan is to merge city and county governments into a single, metropolitan form of government. The goal is to reduce duplication in certain government functions, such as parks, purchasing, law enforcement, etc. Another strong argument in favor of consolidation is the fact that the bulk of El Paso County's population resides within city limits. A disgusting point about the Senate committee's refusal to seriously entertain El Paso's consolidation bill is Madla's feeble excuse that committee members "have a lot of questions." Why not ask them? Aguilar said Madla wasn't too inquisitive. Changing the governing structure for El Paso County requires a constitutional amendment that must be approved by voters - even though the measure would be purely local in impact. It would take at least two-thirds of the Texas House to agree before a proposed constitutional amendment reaches the ballot.

The city and the county are asking state lawmakers to approve this measure for the ballot to allow El Paso to move forward with consolidation attempts. There is no logical reason to oppose this measure as an El Paso-only amendment - that is, unless some lawmakers and political entities such as the Texas Association of Counties - fear success.

That's a sad statement about self-serving politics. San Antonio, Laredo and Austin officials also are interested in consolidation, though El Paso is taking the lead. The Legislature needs to approve the amendment so that El Paso officials can seriously pursue a consolidation plan. It would take at least five years before consolidation could

even be started - which is why lawmakers should act on El Paso's consolidation measure now. Government must be allowed to modernize. As Aguilar correctly pointed out, "What worked 100 years ago isn't necessarily working anymore." To blindly force Texas cities and counties to adhere to antiquated and costly forms of government - simply because some narrow-minded officials are afraid to try something new - is a disservice to Texans.