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Next ACE should push benchmarking study

By Colin McNickle

Allegheny County voters will elect a new chief executive in November. But whomever is chosen, researchers at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy say the executive should advocate for benchmarking the county's performance against those nationwide.

"Establishing and maintaining a benchmark peer group of counties should be a priority of the next chief executive—a mechanism that can be regularly used to measure how Allegheny County compares on key metrics of governance," say Eric Montarti, the think tank's research director, and Scott T. Cross, a research assistant there (in *Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 29*).

Benchmarking Allegheny County was a central component in the shift to home rule and the executive-manager-council form of government in 2000.

It was in a 1996 study, "Preparing Allegheny County for the 21st Century," that six counties were selected to serve "as models of quality government and economic progress."

But years after that examination, Allegheny County's metrics, when put up against those benchmarks, are not flattering.

Allegheny County was the second-largest county of the benchmarks in 2000 with a population of 1.281 million, second only to King County (Seattle, Wash.).

"Despite population growth of 2.2 percent between 2010 and 2020, in the two-decade period Allegheny County saw a population decrease of 2.4 percent and stood at 1.250 million in 2020, placing it third largest behind King and Hennepin County (Minneapolis, Minn.), which increased 30.7 percent and 14.8 percent, respectively," Montarti and Cross note.

Those counties, along with three others in the benchmark group—Davidson County (Nashville, Tenn.), Mecklenburg County (Charlotte, N.C.) and Montgomery County (Rockville, Md.)—had double-digit percentage growth between 2000 and 2020. Mecklenburg led the way at 60.4 percent, Davidson at 25.6 percent and Montgomery at 21.6 percent.

The remaining benchmark, Milwaukee County (Milwaukee, Wisc.), saw a slight decrease of 0.1 percent, which placed it ahead of Allegheny County in population change.

Based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Local Area Unemployment Statistics, Allegheny County's job growth from 2000 through pre-pandemic 2019 was 3.1 percent. This was far outpaced by increases in Mecklenburg (54.3 percent), King and Davidson (both at 31.3 percent).

The only benchmark county to post worse job growth was Milwaukee, a decrease of 1.8 percent.

"Looking ahead, it would be useful for the next chief executive to develop a benchmark county group to assess where Allegheny County stands," the think tank researchers recommend.

And results of such a study would help to fulfill the county Home Rule Charter's requirement of a sunset review of departments and functions and help guide the once-every-decade Government Review Commission (scheduled to convene in 2025).

That said, there are opportunities for benchmarking with other counties to see what they might be doing differently and possibly more effectively.

"A very good group of peer counties for benchmark comparisons to Allegheny County includes the counties that encompass the cities in the Benchmark City that the Allegheny Institute has used since 2004 as a way to measure Pittsburgh's fiscal performance," Montarti and Cross say.

That would include Franklin County (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus is situated in three counties in Ohio, but Franklin is the primary county and thus used in the sample), Salt Lake County (Salt Lake City, Utah) and Douglas County (Omaha, Neb.) as well as Hillsborough County (Tampa, Fla.).

That comparison, however, is not only unflattering but sobering.

In an analysis of comparative per-capita revenues, expenditures and county government employees per 1,000 people (using pre-pandemic audited data for the fiscal year ended in 2019), consider this:

"On per-capita revenue, which takes into account taxes, fees, intergovernmental revenue and all other sources across all governmental funds, Allegheny County ranked highest and was 48.6 percent above the peer-group average," Montarti and Cross found.

"On per-capita expenditures, which measures general government functions, public safety, health and others, Allegheny County ranked highest and was 52.3 percent above the peer-group average."

And on full-time equivalent employees per 1,000 people, Allegheny County ranked second-highest and was 19.7 percent above the peer-group average.

Indeed, the county could choose other counties to serve as benchmarks (or seek to update the 1996 study). But it would not be useful to use counties not experiencing growth or those that have expanded government operations, the think tank scholars conclude.

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