

The 1995 consolidation bill was forged from compromise agreements in order to "make it happen". This section focuses on procedural deficiencies that have arisen since consolidation. The Richmond County Special Grand Jury believes there is a need for a charter, and we commend the Mayor and the Commission for creating a Charter Commission. We trust that this body will be allowed to work in an open and apolitical manner. Since the charge of the Charter Commission is similar to that of the Special Grand Jury, we would like to share our findings and make specific recommendations. We strongly recommend that the Charter Commission study the Athens, Ga., Charter and the Charter of the old City of Augusta. We recognize that much of what we suggest will need to be tested by the U.S. Justice Department in light of all pertinent voting/civil rights legislation. Following are our recommendations.

- A. Mayor with veto power – To foster a better government process, we strongly recommend veto power for the mayor, with a seven-vote commission override provision. This would bring more stability by setting up a check and balance system. Because the whole county elects the mayor, he is not bound by particular geographical loyalties. He is the voice of the whole county. We believe the veto would help him to better represent this constituency, and bring more forthrightness and cooperation to the overall governing process.
- B. Commissioner-employee contact – The Charter should include an ordinance that forbids commissioners from giving work instructions or directing any city-county government employee. The Administrator or his designee would act as the gatekeeper regarding all routine, non-emergency communications with employees from department head on down (employees working directly for the commission would naturally be exempted). Many municipalities already treat such conduct as a misdemeanor offense. This ordinance would protect the employees from micromanagement and interference by political officials.
- C. Ethical Standards– The Charter should include the county's existing ethics ordinance. The Athens, Ga., Charter also has such a provision. The penalties for ethics violations should be spelled out clearly. The Athens Charter has a provision regarding testimony given by a public official who is "*...duly and properly called as a witness before any unified government, state, or federal judicial or administrative tribunal...*" An official would be guilty of an ethical violation if he does not answer any proper question as to the performance of his official duties. The Athens ordinance specifies how ethics violations are defined and evaluated, and prescribes the penalties for such violations. These statutes are worthy of our emulating.
- D. District Make-up - We suggest that the county be divided into 10 electoral districts, with six commission seats representing geographical districts and four at-large representatives. This would create a commission that would represent the interests of a broader cross-section of citizens.
- E. Review Committee- We recommend that, like Athens, the Augusta-Richmond County Charter should include a provision for a review committee. This committee would be formed four years after the Charter goes into effect, and every four years