Two new studies authored by EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis have called into question the trend of cities and counties consolidating their government operations to cut costs. Grant Forsythe, professor of economics, and Kevin Pirch, a government professor, concluded that consolidation does not carry a significant benefit, at least not for Spokane County. “Cities and counties are under financial stress and are looking for different mechanisms to reduce cost without raising taxes,” said Forsythe. “The players in the [Spokane] County were interested in knowing if there were any advantages.”

In several locales around the country, mostly in the eastern U.S., cities and counties have consolidated governmental operations such as law enforcement, fire departments and waste management. Consolidation first became popular in the 1950s and has experienced a resurgence since the ‘90s. Forsythe said that most examples of consolidation have occurred in geographically small and densely populated regions where the entire county is urbanized. He said that consolidation is not likely to work well in the geographically large sparsely populated counties that are more common in the western U.S. This is due to decreased effectiveness of consolidated governments in spread-out populations and the more independent communities found in these regions.

Forsythe said that local politics can make consolidations difficult as city officials and residents may not want to lose control of their jurisdictions. “There is not a lot of evidence of cost savings [due to consolidation],” said Forsythe. “Even if you could show that there were cost advantages, people would resist because of the desire for local control.”

According to Pirch’s report, since 1900, there have been 163 attempts nationwide to consolidate city and county government with only 34 successes. Examples documented in Pirch’s study include Indianapolis/Marion County, Ind.; Louisville/Jefferson County, Ky.; and Athens/Clarke County, Ga. All are heavily-populated counties in which most of the population resides in the suburbs of the major city. Pirch could not be reached by phone for comment.