

For Pat Kelly, May 16, 2014, is the day the Better Together proposal came into focus.

That was nearly five years before the nonprofit funded largely by financier Rex Sinquefeld would [unveil its very specific plan](#) to merge the city of St. Louis with St. Louis County. At the time, the organization was planning to study several areas of government service in the St. Louis region. Kelly, then the mayor of Brentwood, wanted a seat at the table.

The May letter came from former Ambassador Bert Walker who was chairman of the [Better Together](#) board. It offered several area municipal officials an opportunity to study finance, economic development, public safety and other issues.

“We really want and need your input,” Walker wrote.

He didn’t mean it, says Kelly. The same letter that asked municipal officials to sit on various study committees mentions that one of the reports, on public finance, was already produced. The one that interested Kelly, on economic development, was due in a few days. The report was out before Kelly even knew when a meeting would be scheduled.

“They issued a report a week after they offered us a chance to serve on a committee,” says Kelly, now the executive director of the [Municipal League of Metro St. Louis](#). “I think they were just laughing at us.”

That Kelly is one of the point men on criticism of the Better Together merger plan is not unexpected. The plan would strip most of his member cities of police departments and municipal courts, as well as much of the local control, zoning and taxing authority they maintain now. But his criticisms shouldn’t be laughed away as one more bureaucrat trying to save his job.

For the past few years, Kelly and I have discussed the merger concept several times, over coffee, on the phone and by email. Generally, I’ve been on the pro-merger side; he hasn’t. The discussions have been spirited. But the release of the Better Together proposal changed the tenor of our talks significantly.

Frankly, the crew led by Better Together Executive Director Nancy Rice deserve some credit for this. In filing their proposal, and pushing to get it on the ballot right away, they’ve changed the conversations about merger from broad esoteric discussions to very specific ones about who will lead, how the next charter will be drawn and where the money will come from.

It’s that last piece — the money — that draws much of Kelly’s fire.

“This is just tax reform,” he says.

It’s an argument repeated by the former economic adviser to Mayor Francis Slay in an [op-ed last month](#) in the Riverfront Times:

“Ultimately, I fear that the proposal is little more than a Trojan horse designed to advance a libertarian billionaire’s quest to cut taxes on the wealthy and defund government,” wrote Nahuel Fefer.

He has a point.

Two of the most significant elements of the Better Together proposal are that it phases out the city’s 1 percent earnings tax and it cuts the county property tax in half. In the nonprofit’s much ballyhooed reports — the ones issued before municipal officials could participate — Better Together found significant duplication and waste in how the region spends its tax money. Instinctively, in a county with 88 municipalities and separate city-county offices, that makes sense.

But when Better Together filed its proposal with the state, it didn’t show its math.

That led Auditor Nicole Galloway to issue a financial projection of the initiative — the one that had been filed and has since been rewritten — of [“unknown.”](#)

That doesn’t give Kelly much confidence.

Neither does this: The proposal merges two government entities that according to their own budget documents and elected officials are nearly functionally bankrupt, and then it starves them of income they currently rely on to balance their books.

Maybe that was the plan all along.

Sinquefield has been trying to get rid of the earnings tax for more than a decade, and when he first commissioned a study on the issue, it floated replacing the revenue by [privatizing city services](#), such as the city’s valuable airport or water resources.

It should not be lost on voters that Sinquefield’s organization is functionally in charge of the ongoing process of studying the potential of privatizing St. Louis Lambert International Airport at the same time it is pushing a massive tax cut tied up in what Kelly and Fefer believe is a merger facade.

Is that the future for St. Louis that Better Together imagines?

If so, taxpayers should be worried, Kelly says. When merger proponents point to Louisville and Indianapolis as success stories that St. Louis should emulate, it's worth noting: Both have a [higher earnings tax](#) than St. Louis does, and the tax is applied in the entire merged city and county.

“It just doesn't make much sense at all,” Kelly says of the Better Together tax cuts. “There's going to be less money to go around. They don't care about the fallout. They just want the tax breaks.”

[Read more about Reshaping St. Louis](#)

Read the Post-Dispatch coverage of the Better Together plan to reunite St. Louis City and County.