

Why would a Cleveland Heights “progressive” want to replace our “progressive” form of local government?

When I began my education as a city planner back in 1970, I learned about the cronyism and corruption associated with some big city mayors, like the Tammany Hall politics of New York City in the early 1900's. I also learned that the city manager form of government was instituted in some cities as a reform-minded, progressive alternative to corrupt big city political machines.

Naturally, being a progressively-minded young college student, I found a lot to like in the city manager form of government in its call for professional management of the city over politically motivated management. I also learned, however, that some support for the city manager form of government came not from progressively minded individuals but from members of what could be called the corporate elite, who wanted more control over city government and believed that average citizens couldn't be trusted to choose a city's leader.

Today, after working as a city planner for over forty years – in suburban communities as well as in a big central city – I've come to understand that selecting a form of city governance is a lot more complicated than simply choosing between potentially corrupt politicians, on the one hand, and unelected managers who may have little direct accountability to citizens, on the other hand.

I've come to believe that the city manager form of government may work well for growing and stable communities that need little more from their city government than good business-like management. In Cuyahoga County, this may apply to cities like Pepper Pike or Bay Village, although both of those cities are among the 55 municipalities in Cuyahoga County that are led by a popularly elected mayor. Only Cleveland Heights and Bedford have chosen to be governed without a mayor elected by local citizens.

For Cleveland Heights and other suburbs grappling with issues like declining population, building abandonment, falling property values, demographic changes and increasing tax burdens, I've concluded that a government made up of seven part-time city council members and their appointed city manager is unlikely to provide the kind of bold and decisive leadership necessary to navigate a city's forward progress through these formidable obstacles.

Some advocates for the current council-manager form of government in Cleveland Heights say that any form of government can work as long as the people running the government are capable and hard working. No doubt this is true to some extent, but others, including me, would argue that certain forms of government are *more likely* to result in effective leadership for a community with the issues that Cleveland Heights is facing.

In fact, I believe that our current city council members and city administrators are, for the most part, very capable, scrupulously honest and hard working. What holds us back I believe is not the people in our government but our current *form* of government – one that results, from my observations, in painfully slow decision-making, an overly risk-averse approach to progress, disadvantages in working with the elected leaders of other governments, the lack of a singular

vision for our community, and the lack of leadership necessary to articulate and implement that vision. In addition, I have found that the goals of transparency and accountability are more elusive in a government led by and appointed manager than in one led by an elected mayor.

Some advocates for city manager-led governments argue that a popularly elected mayor may lack professional management skills and that city government would suffer without the benefit of a professionally trained manager. Shaker Heights, however, offers a simple alternative that pairs a popularly elected mayor, who functions as the city's leader, with a chief administrative official, who oversees the day-to-day operations of the city – something like the roles of a CEO and a COO in the business world.

What would a more decisive, more accountable form of government in Cleveland Heights have done differently than has been the case in recent years? Although, as it is said, hindsight is always 20-20, I believe that a mayor-led form of government would have likely done a better job in addressing such local issues as the following:

- building new houses on vacant lots and rehabilitating recently foreclosed houses (as has been done in South Euclid and some parts of Cleveland);
- crafting a vision and an incentive package for the transformation of Severance Center, while the property was in receivership, and soliciting an owner willing to invest in that transformation (as is being done with the Van Aken district in Shaker Heights);
- facilitating optimal, tax-paying new uses on vacant and under-utilized properties like the Medusa Building on Monticello, the Rockefeller Point (May-Lee) Building, the former Medic/Pick'n'Pay site on Noble, the long-vacant Lee-Meadowbrook site, and the former Oakwood Country Club site;
- developing a practical plan to stabilize and revitalize the Noble neighborhood;
- attracting technology-oriented start-up businesses to Cleveland Heights;
- capitalizing on our proximity to the institutions of University Circle; and
- partnering with or creating a community development corporation (as has been done in Lakewood, Shaker Heights, South Euclid and Cleveland).

Cleveland Heights is a community with unique assets and tremendous opportunities. It is the “place to be” for many of us, including those of us who would describe ourselves as progressively minded advocates for good government. As one of those citizens, I have come to the conclusion that it is now time for the citizens of Cleveland Heights to amend our City Charter to change our form of local government to one that can better provide the vision and the leadership to act decisively, effectively, transparently and accountably.

Along with many other citizens, I have concluded that the right form of government for Cleveland Heights, moving forward, is one led by a popularly elected mayor, paired with a professional chief administrative officer and a city council that is part of a system of checks and balances.*

**The make-up of city council is a Charter issue that warrants a separate discussion.*