

The following guest column ran on June 6, 2010 in "The Toledo Blade"

COUNTY "REFORM" IS A POWER GRAB IN DISGUISE

Once again there are those claiming the mantle of "reform" proposing that we can achieve a more accountable and unified government if only we will drastically alter the current form of county government. It is unfortunate the "Toledo Blade" has chosen to join the chorus from the bleachers.

County functions were established and have been improved by the state legislature for nearly a century and a half. The legislature has progressively changed the law relating to counties as circumstances have warranted. County government benefits from the checks and balances of independent, elected officials who are directly responsible to the voters.

The contrast with other forms of government is compelling. An independent Auditor or Prosecutor does not have to appease or cater to the politicians who might appoint those offices under a county charter.

It is convincing to note that 86 out of Ohio's 88 counties have not yet discovered the supposed benefits of a county-charter. Cuyahoga County's recent decision was the direct result of corruption allegations which voters there apparently were unable to correct by voting out the offending officials.

Before assuming that a county charter is desirable it would be well to wait, watch and observe the experience of Cuyahoga. So far it has been anything but an orderly, inexpensive process. A plethora of candidates for the new expanded County Commission has emerged including even a convicted murderer.

Calls for a bigger, more powerful county organization are based on a fundamental misdiagnosis. County government is a limited form of government. It was never intended to be a second-tier, super government rivaling cities, villages and townships to provide local services.

Imagine for a moment whether you, as a citizen, would hear back sooner from your village councilman, small-town mayor, township trustee or from a Lucas County commissioner. Size of constituency alone dictates the answer.

Besides replacing independent, elected officials with high-priced appointed bureaucrats, the big-government crowd's idea of a county commission would either be larger (like a super city council, if that appeals to you) or elected by a voting method that would be so cumbersome that neither frugality nor public understanding would accompany it.

The inevitable result of a county home-rule charter would be a new layer of more expensive government added to the current burden of taxpayers. An ordinance-passing, regulation-creating county council would hurt business as well as compete unnecessarily with the local governments that know the value of real accountability.

The American experiment, which predates the reformer-ridiculed county government founding date of the 1850's, also intentionally has a separation of powers and institutional checks and balances. Like county government, it is not perfect. No human institution is, but real democracy is better than anything else.

In truth the county-charter crowd is now trying to play with the county structure to the detriment of the taxpayers and to the advantage of a few County Commissioners and professional bureaucrats who have decided that their personal accumulation of power is good for the rest of us.

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