



County of Hamilton

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A TALE OF TWO COUNTIES

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In early 1990 "The Cincinnati Post" broke the story that Hamilton County Auditor Joseph DeCourcy was improperly reducing property values outside the mandated Board of Revision process. The allegation was that he was giving special treatment to some property owners in what became known as the "Friends of Joe" scandal.

Shortly thereafter Mr. DeCourcy resigned and the Republican Party appointed an interim Auditor who then sought election to a full term. In spite of being outspent by three-to-one the voters responded by electing me, the first Democratic County Auditor in 60 years upsetting a long-time all-Republican stranglehold on Hamilton County's administrative county offices.

In 2008 Cuyahoga County Auditor Frank Russo and Cuyahoga County Commissioner Jimmy DiMora were charged with a host of irregularities including conspiracy, racketeering and bribery. Both men were later found guilty and sent to federal prison. Mr. Russo got nearly 22 years and Mr. DiMora got 28.

Instead of giving voters the opportunity to elect a new County Auditor and County Commissioner in competitive elections, various "reform" elements seized on the scandal to advance their long held dream of a "county charter".

Heavily promoted by "The Cleveland Plain Dealer" and driven by general disgust over the scandals, voters there approved the new form of county government which eliminated the independent elected offices and established a county council with an elected County Executive. Most of the county offices which were controlled by the voters are now appointed by the County Executive.

Cuyahoga County's new government is similar to a city council and Mayor. It allowed the Democratic Party organization there to escape responsibility for the transgressions of two of their top local officials, to maintain domination of county government and established their County Executive as a statewide political figure. After being in office just over two years, the first one to hold the post is now traveling the state and has announced an "exploratory committee" for a campaign for Governor.

In Hamilton County, I cut our staff from 172 in 1991 to just 80 employees today through attrition and cross-training. I cleaned up the property appraisal process establishing pre-notification of tentative values for every property owner. I held neighborhood conferences for owners to informally discuss their tax valuation. This provided taxpayer participation and helped us check our work.

By way of comparison, with 525,000 parcels Cuyahoga County received about 18,000 valuation appeals in 2012. With about 350,000 parcels, Hamilton County received 7,000 appeals in 2012. Challenges from Cuyahoga County amount to about 36 percent of the State Board of Tax Appeals current caseload. In contrast, Hamilton County's appeals are about 3 percent.

Last year, in our smaller county, I returned \$16.5 million in unspent Real Estate Assessment (REA) funds to local governments, schools and taxing entities. Cuyahoga County just returned \$5 million from their REA Fund. "The Cleveland Plain Dealer" called that a "good government dividend". The "good government dividend" here is over three times Cuyahoga's and taxpayers did not have to establish a bigger, less accountable county government to get it.

Here are several more examples of Cuyahoga County's "reform". The new County Executive was reportedly planning to pay his former campaign manager's firm \$51,000 to lobby the state legislature for six months. The appointed Fiscal Officer hired a former colleague for an \$110,000-a-year job that was not publicly posted. And the Ohio Supreme Court suspended the law license of Cuyahoga's Inspector General for failing to meet attorney registration requirements.

Hamilton County's "reform" came from the voters themselves who hold their elected county officials accountable in competitive elections. Hamilton County is now a two-party county. Democrats now hold the offices of Auditor, Sheriff, Coroner, Recorder and one County Commissioner. In last year's race for Sheriff the Democrat won convincingly in spite of being outspent about 15 to 1.

Cuyahoga County's "reform" came from a bigger county government replacing elected officials with high-priced appointees. The county council districts assure unchallenged Democratic majorities. As an added bonus the Democrats get a springboard to build potential statewide candidates. What kind of lasting good government will this rigged, one-party control bring?

The Democratic Party's success in Hamilton County is the result of good candidates who made their case to the voters and then followed through with performance. Real reform does not come from changing government structure. It comes from the ballot box. It is called democracy.

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