

# Groundhog Day in Cuyahoga County Government

By James M. Trutko

*Groundhog Day- a situation in which a series of unwelcome or tedious events appear to be recurring in exactly the same way.*

For a while over the last few years, Cuyahoga County residents could feel better with successful sports teams, the Republican Convention, downtown housing projects and positive national press, and could sense that county government was making some progress. Over the past year, however, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that we're seeing the reoccurrence of county corruption, incompetent county leadership and poor county governance.

Let's run over some of recent lowlights. About this time last year, County Executive Budish's Chief of Staff resigned shortly after it was revealed that Budish had approved an unusual work arrangement that allowed her to complete an out-of-town Master's degree, while theoretically working full-time for the county. Over the past year, an investigation into county corruption has been percolating along focused on county IT contracts with the result that three county employees have been indicted. Two of the county's highest-ranking administrators-Budish's Chief of Staff and the County Law Director- have resigned in the past two months. All of these are bad signs, although not indicative of a Dimora-like level of corruption.

Meanwhile, conditions at the county jail are terrible. Eight inmates have died in the past year and a report by the U.S. Marshall characterized conditions as "inhumane". Budish blames the "command structure", as though Budish was not at the top of the chain of command. Budish's primary interventions appear to be causing a critical county medical supervisor to be terminated, asking Metrohealth to clean up the medical mess and hiring a consultant.

County council was elected to oversee county governance and budgets, but has been MIA. This fall, the chief accomplishment of county council was passing anti-discrimination protections for the LGBTQ community. Evidently, real oversight over more than 7,000 employees and a \$1.7 billion budget is too much to ask.

Why does Cuyahoga County have such abysmal political leadership? At the core, there is little political accountability. There is virtually no penalty for failure, as almost no officials lose office for incompetence or lack of real positive results. In the 2018 elections, the county executive was opposed by an underfunded, last -minute candidate, most of the council candidates were unopposed and virtually all the judges were re-elected. Political offices are regarded as either stepping-stones to other political offices or career appointments for Democratic politicians. Because there is little accountability at the top, public sector bureaucrats (like the officials in the IT department or at the jail) are generally free to run their departments without real pressure for performance as long as they don't embarrass top office-holders.

A decade ago, Cuyahoga County voters made a major change in the county charter and hoped that it would lead to better government. There's no doubt that it ended a period of absolutely terrible, flagrantly corrupt government, but the changes were insufficient to restore competent and effective government. If Cuyahoga County residents want better results from county government, it will be necessary to increase the competitiveness of elections, force periodic changes of leadership and re-establish public control over the county budget, so that neither political offices nor public funding of bureaucracies can be taken for granted. This will mean three significant changes to the county charter.

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First, the county should have non-partisan primary elections with the top two finalists moving to the general election. Every office-holder should face an opponent on election day. By reducing partisan endorsements and identifications, the personal credentials and ideas of candidates will become more important.

Second, the county should have term limits on all county offices. The county executive and county council seats should be limited to eight years (two terms) and county judgeships should be limited to twelve years (three terms). Term limits will ensure a regular turn-over of leadership and encourage new people to seek office. It will also encourage existing office-holders to act more urgently and boldly because they will not be able to look on their offices as a life-time sinecure.

Third, after the county budget is recommended by the county executive and voted on by county council, the annual county budget should be voted on and approved by the public. The most important thing county government does is to use our money to provide public services and infrastructure. In short, the government budget is where the government rubber meets the government road.

Recently, the total Cuyahoga County budget was over \$3,000 per household, enough to gain the attention of many otherwise indifferent voters. A public approval process for the budget will benefit the public by focusing attention on the size of government, the composition and priorities of public spending, the output of county government department and the efficiency of government services. Public approval will also mean that candidates will have to explain the budget during election campaigns, corruption will be harder to hide and Cuyahoga County voters will ultimately have political responsibility for budgets.

Without a meaningful change in the structure of county government, it's likely that Cuyahoga County residents will continue to face poor county governance and future Groundhog Days.

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