



Pittsburgh's Allegheny County offers Cuyahoga some lessons in reform

By Jim Nichols, The Plain Dealer

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In 1998 Greater Pittsburgh's Allegheny County eliminated its three-commissioner form of government. The ballot issue passed by only 564 votes. In its place is a system in which a county executive counterbalances a 15-member County Council.

PITTSBURGH -- Considering that this city is Cleveland's most bitter rival, this particular advice from Pittsburghers to Cuyahoga County residents could sound a lot like a taunt:

Things are better here, but you should push aside the calamity, believe in a brighter future and expect that future to take some time to arrive.

But it's not the gloating of Pittsburgh Steelers loyalists. It's sincere counsel for Cuyahoga County as it revolutionizes the way local government works, much in the way Greater Pittsburgh's **Allegheny County** did earlier.

In 1998, Allegheny County voters sacked a three-commissioner government. Installed in its place: a home-rule, charter form of county government led by a powerful, elected county executive, and a counterbalancing 15-member County Council.

Nineteen Browns losses to the Steelers later, Cuyahoga County is following suit. Earlier this month, 11-1/2 years after their counterparts' peaceful revolution, Cuyahoga County voters overwhelmingly elected to replace their three-commissioner government and most other elected county offices with an even stronger elected county executive and an 11-member council.

Whether Cuyahoga County did the right thing will be up to Northeast Ohioans to decide, but there's no longer much doubt that Allegheny County did, say leaders here, including some who passionately opposed reform. It won approval in Pittsburgh's big and balkanized home county by only 564 votes out of almost

211,000 cast. But that vote wouldn't be close if it were held today, said one of the plan's chief architects, Duquesne University Chancellor John E. Murray Jr.

"I think the overwhelming majority supports the current system," he said.

William Russell Robinson, a black Democratic who bitterly fought the change as a state legislator but is now on County Council, couldn't agree more.

"We don't have a perfect situation in place, but we've done a pretty good job."

Cuyahoga County could do an even better job than Allegheny (unlike the Browns vs. Steelers) if the electorate insists on it, several Pittsburgh-area civic leaders say.

Here are some prognostications and bits of advice gleaned from interviews with more than a dozen civic, government, academic and neighborhood leaders in interviews last week.



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / John Heller

Former Allegheny County Executive Jim Roddey, of Pittsburgh

People are still the key. "Just because you've changed the form of government doesn't mean it's automatically going to be good," said Jim Roddey, a Republican businessman who took office as the first county executive in January 2000. "You've still got to be careful who you elect -- and maybe even more so. Good people can make a bad system work, and bad people can make a good system fail."

Demand a purge. Said Morton Coleman, director emeritus of the **University of Pittsburgh's Institute of Politics**: "The first test of your county executive will be this: Does he or she clean the place up?" Terminations and attrition in Allegheny County pared hundreds of jobs from the county payroll in the first few years, and 600 more after voters approved a 2005 charter amendment that abolished several other elected countywide offices. "We contributed to the unemployment rate," Roddey deadpanned.

Remain vigilant and hold the county's chief accountable. The new executive will get tremendous power -- and should take credit or blame accordingly. "The county executive will be the second-most politically important elected official in Ohio, after the governor," said Roddey. That could be a good thing for the region. But as power increases, the chance of abusing it does, too, unless voters -- and the news media -- hold the executive up for constant examination. "There are always those who see government as a shortcut or a cow to be milked," said former Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy, who worked in tandem with both county-government forms. "Inherently, a county executive is not any more honest than commissioners, except that

there's clearly someone who can be held accountable."

Have a big transition committee that thinks big. After Allegheny County adopted its charter, but before the elections that filled council and the executive's seat, reform leaders rounded up nearly 500 people for a transition team. They brainstormed about how to refine the new government, examined every department, broke the government into 32 distinct functions and came up with some 800 recommendations for procedures, rules, cuts and consolidations.

Advice to Cleveland's mayor: "Learn to like it," said Murray, who was Duquesne's president when he headed the commission that drafted Allegheny's charter. "It's the way of the future. If you don't like [losing power as mayor], then try to become the county executive."

Fears about minorities being marginalized should fade. Longtime Democratic politician Robinson was a state legislator in 1998. He recalls that he and many black politicians and ministers saw Allegheny's reform wave as a bid by white Republicans and businessmen to wrest power from Democrats and further

marginalize black citizens (none of whom had ever been elected to countywide office). That hasn't happened, said Robinson, who is one of two African Americans on County Council. The county has passed an anti-discrimination ordinance and instituted a new audit procedure to ensure racial and sexual equity in county-worker pay.

Don't over-concentrate black voters. Creating "safe" seats for a couple or a few black council members won't necessarily help black residents in the long run, Robinson said. It's better to distribute plenty of white residents in each district, so that white politicians from other areas will still have affinity with every district in the county, he contends. "I always looked for an opportunity to represent a broad spectrum of people [because] that dark face in a high place is going to have a very difficult time delivering otherwise," Robinson said. "Unfortunately, people of color are not the majority in Cuyahoga County or in the Ohio legislature. So whether things change is left to white people."



Martha Rial,
Pittsburgh Post-
Gazette

William Russell Robinson,
Allegheny County (Pa.)
council member

Expect problems at first, but come back to fix them. The drafters of Allegheny County's charter wanted to abolish not just the three commissioners, but also the "row offices" (auditor, treasurer, recorder, registrar of wills, coroner, controller, clerk of courts, another court official called a prothonotary and more. That would've antagonized even more Democratic machine pols, though, so the reform architects settled for consolidating the commissioners. Reformers came back five years later with a successful charter change that swept most of the row offices under the executive, like Cuyahoga County voters did.

This reform is just a first step. Demand more. Cuyahoga is among the nation's six most fragmented counties, with 59 municipalities. Allegheny is twice as bad: It has 130. Both communities need to pursue even greater consolidation, starting with a combination of the largest city's government with the county's, many Allegheny County civic observers believe.

Economic development should benefit -- a little. In Allegheny County, as in Cuyahoga, reformers in the business community vowed that a strong county executive would help lure jobs by providing a single sales pitch and focal point for economic development. To some degree, Pittsburghers believe, that has borne out. Since 2004, the county has seen \$10.8 billion in investment, said Megan Dardanell, a spokeswoman for Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato. "Even during an economic recession, we've had building going on like we've never seen before," she boasted. But even the reform's biggest boosters acknowledge it's impossible to say how much the new government form, or the county executives themselves, encouraged that.

Aim low, as well as high, with economic development. Pittsburgh and Cleveland must regain their lost status as giant magnets for poor but entrepreneurial immigrants, said Michael Madison, a University of Pittsburgh law professor who writes a civic-criticism blog called **Pittsblog 2.0**. Newcomers from the Far East and India are streaming to Milwaukee, Des Moines and Minneapolis -St. Paul, saving money in crummy jobs, then starting businesses, he said. The cultural diversity, in turn, makes a city even more appealing to the educated creative classes. Strong, united and welcoming leadership should actively court foreign laborers, Madison said.



Jeff Greenberg / Plain
Dealer file

County-government reform in Pittsburgh's Allegheny County was an uphill climb that has proven worthwhile, many locals say. Cuyahoga County's similar reform move "is going to be an interesting journey for you," says former Allegheny County Executive Jim Roddey.

Don't expect miracles. The Pittsburgh area has gotten great publicity in recent years for its purported revival and its quality of life. But economically and socially, Allegheny is still a struggling, almost desperate county by many measures. The county lost almost 67,000 residents, or 5.2 percent of its population, so far this decade -- the equivalent of Middleburg Heights, Solon, Bay Village and Bedford. It fails to attract enough

of the vibrant young professionals all cities covet, and the county's percentage of residents over age 65 (16.8 percent) is among the highest of any county in the country. Both Pittsburgh and the county face massive budget crises and are contemplating stunning revenue hikes (tuition taxes on college students and a tax on charities). And despite the county's vaunted economic-development success, median household income remains 12 percent below the national average.

Be patient. Any attempt to merge Pittsburgh and Allegheny County governments into one would be doomed today, but that seems to be changing, close observers say. In the meantime, the two are taking baby steps. They've combined purchasing departments, police and fire dispatch centers and some criminal booking functions, saving \$20 million a year.

Go ahead and look back. You won't regret changing, and the new form of government will look better every day. "It is better," said Suzanne Broughton, president of the League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh. "I don't think anyone would want to go back."

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