



THE BATTLE FOR CUYAHOGA

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN 200 YEARS, CUYAHOGA COUNTY HAS A NEW FORM OF GOVERNMENT. BUT WILL A COUNTY EXECUTIVE BE THE FIRST STEP IN WIPING CLEAN A COUNTY IN THE MIDST OF ITS BIGGEST GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION SCANDAL?

What may be the most crucial election in the history of Cuyahoga County is finally drawing to a close, bringing with it not only an end to a tumultuous year that began in November '09 with the passing of Issue 6 by a wide margin of County residents, but the end of a government system. The reform plan signaled a new era for Cuyahoga County, as the charter essentially purged the rotting County government, eliminating all but one existing elected position (including three county commissioners) in favor of a County Executive who will preside over an 11-member county council (elected by district) while managing the county's day-to-day operations, including human services and economic development. It's a bold move for the County as it is the first major change in political structure in more than 200 years and may be the first step to rebuilding a government shaken to its core by the worst corruption scandal it has ever seen.

For the past two years, Cuyahoga County has made headlines after the FBI went public with what became the biggest government corruption investigation in the county's history. As of today, more than three dozen public officials and private contractors have pled guilty to corruption-related crimes, including County Auditor Anthony Russo (whose accusations included using tax dollars to rig his 2006 re-election and corrupting county judges). Russo is serving 21 years in prison. "[Issue 6] was inspired by the ongoing

corruption probe, that's what fueled this desire for change," says Mark Naymik, Politics Writer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. "The biggest argument for the reform up until now was that we never had a traditional system of checks and balance where there is a legislative body like a council checking on an executive. This creates that structure and it will streamline some offices and eliminate others. Smaller areas for the first time will have direct representation on council. Whereas you had three

“County corruption remains at the center of this race. It's who's going to be the better reformer to restore honesty and integrity to the office, that's what they are running against.”

at-large commissioners before...the needs and attention will now have a voice.”

Six candidates appeared on the final ballot for the Executive position, and as the race came to a close, it was evident the pressures of this monumental election were showing on the two frontrunners. Republican Matt Dolan and Democrat Ed FitzGerald's back and forth with each other



100
THANKSGIVING
TABOOS

42. MAKING A DRINKING GAME OUT OF THE MACY'S THANKSGIVING DAY PARADE

43. ASKING THE OLDEST PERSON IN THE ROOM IF HE OR SHE JUST FARTED

44. TURNING THE POST-DINNER CONVERSATION INTO A PRESENTATION FOR TIMESHARE INVESTING

45. **BREAKING THE NEWS TO YOUR NIECES AND NEPHEWS ABOUT SANTA CLAUS**

46. SHOWING OFF PHOTOS OF YOUR NEW PET/CAR/HOME THEATRE SYSTEM FOR LONGER THAN FIVE MINUTES

47. ORGANIZING THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT BY FINANCIAL WORTH

48. CALLING THAT ONE RELATIVE NOBODY LIKES OUT ON ALL THEIR FAULTS

49. **TURNING A FRIENDLY POKER GAME AMONG COUSINS INTO AN AGGRESSIVE-GAMBLING, VIOLENT, ANYTHING-GOES SCENARIO**

50. NOT MAKING AT LEAST ONE PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES REFERENCE

51. POINTING OUT WHO GAINED WEIGHT OVER THE PAST YEAR

52. SUGGESTING A POST-MEAL FIGHT CLUB TO HELP DIGESTION

53. CUTTING OFF THE CHILDREN WHILE GETTING IN LINE FOR THE MEAL

54. SUGGESTING SKIPPING ON ALL THE DINNER PREPARATION AND JUST GETTING A KEG AND A TURKEY FRYER NEXT YEAR

55. BRINGING LAMINATED COPIES OF YOUR CHRISTMAS WISH LIST IN HOPES FAMILY MEMBERS WILL BE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF BLACK FRIDAY DEALS

56. WEARING YOUR WIFE'S MATERNITY PANTS IN PREPARATION FOR A BELLY FULL OF TURKEY

57. **OBNOXIOUSLY CORRECTING THE SILVERWARE PLACEMENT AT THE DINNER TABLE**

58. ONLY INVITING THE FAMILY MEMBERS YOU WANT TO ATTEND

59. MAKING BREAST OR THIGH JOKES WHEN ASKED WHAT PART OF THE BIRD YOU'D LIKE

60. DEBATING THE FOLLOWING TOPICS OVER DINNER (PART THREE) – HEALTH CARE REFORM, IMMIGRATION RIGHTS, THE MOTIVES BEHIND GLENN BECK'S FONDNESS FOR RALLIES

61. EATING HALF OF THE TURKEY AS YOU CARVE IT IN THE KITCHEN

CONTINUES ON PAGE 45

“We are going to shift the government. This is going to take a while and we are not going to be evaluating the success of this reform for some time.”

became regular fodder. But in an interesting twist, debates focused less on the typical stances on the issues or party politics and shifted toward the local corruption and whether the candidates were trustworthy. Dolan condemned FitzGerald (and the Democratic party) for opposing the reform measure that created the County Executive position, while FitzGerald fired back at Dolan's ethics for accepting sizeable campaign contributions from his father, Cleveland Indians owner Larry Dolan (about \$1.4 million of county sales tax goes to debt on the Gateway sports venues, including Progressive Field, home of the Indians). Dolan's retort to FitzGerald's slams of his questioning an ethics committee over the Gateway venues fiasco was nothing urbane, “It's to keep you quiet!” Then there was the taped 30-second phone call between FitzGerald and County Commissioner Jimmy Dimora (who is heavily implicated in the corruption charges) that Dolan tried to use to insinuate FitzGerald's involvement in the scandal. FitzGerald was never formally charged with anything and dismissed the claims as being anything scandalous.

“The corruption is a backdrop and it is still the main issue in this race,” says Naymik. “These candidates are not talking about what they are going to do if elected, they are stating they are not related to the corruption and they are going to bring optimism and integrity and be ethical. That is an interesting dynamic because it goes to show you how powerful the problems of the past and the corruption have been. County corruption remains at the center of this race. It's who's going to be the better reformer to restore honesty and integrity to the office, that's what they are running against.”

The very idea of whether or not this new form of government will actually work for Cuyahoga County is still the big question being asked, and unfortunately one that cannot be answered right away, even after the position is assumed in January. Only one other Ohio county, neighboring Summit County, runs under a similar model, which Naymik says “works, but they still run into problems, a lot of which have to do with the individuals, not the structure. We are going to shift the

government. We are literally figuring out how to merge offices. You can't evaluate it based on the first six months because we have to set it up. This is going to take a while, and we are not going to be evaluating the success of this reform for some time.”

But if Cuyahoga residents were to look elsewhere for inspiration, they should consider less than 200 miles to the east at New York's Erie and Chautauqua Counties. Both have seen great successes under the direction of Executives Chris Collins and Greg Edwards (respectively) – who attributed striking a balance between business manager and politician in rebuilding their counties to not only endure through a brutal economic recession, but to emerge successful in moving towards a prosperous future. Erie County had acquired a \$13-million surplus by the end of Collins' first year, while Edwards managed to balance the County budget, improve its bond rating, and pay off significant debts within four years of office. The position may also lead to bigger political ventures for both men, as Collins' name has been hinted several times for state office (he was also the only County Executive in the nation to speak at the 2008 Republican National Convention) and Edwards was on the Republican and Conservative parties' nominations for Lieutenant Governor of New York this election.

“This county needs leadership – political leadership, business leadership, civic leadership,” said longtime Cleveland journalist and political sage Mike Roberts, when asked what type of candidate is best suited for this new position in an interview with *GLL* earlier this year. “All three of these areas have to be there – but especially political leadership, we've just gone through the biggest scandal in the history of Cleveland. We are shaping and forming a new government. No one really knows what is going to take place. This is a pivotal time and we are going to need people with vision and people who are not thinking just about their suburbs or their wards. We need people thinking about the region and what they can do to create a sense of confidence in people.”

– Mark Toriski