

# Together We Can Do Better . . .

Committee For Ashtabula County Reform  
P.O. Box 582  
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## A Charter for Better Government

Like most other counties in Ohio, Ashtabula County has a form of government that was created by the Ohio Legislature more than one hundred and fifty years ago. This form of government was designed to deliver services and manage systems that were simpler, smaller and very different from those of today.

Formed in the fall of 2009, the Committee for Ashtabula County Reform is proposing an initiative that offers the citizens of Ashtabula County an alternative form of county government - a charter form that restructures government and provides professional management and direct accountability. A community review of how we are governed in Ashtabula County is long overdue.

## Our Current Form of Government

At present, our county government is led by three elected commissioners who serve both as the legislative branch and executive branch of government. In addition, there are eight elected county "department heads": the Prosecutor, Sheriff, Clerk of Courts, Recorder, Treasurer, Auditor, Engineer and Coroner. Except for an annual appropriation of funds from the commissioners, each of these departments operates separately and independently from the commissioners and from one another. There is no comparable form of government. The citizens of Ashtabula County have never voted for this, or any other form of government.

At a different time and under different economic and political circumstances, the State of Ohio created a series of laws that establish the form and operation of county government. We in Ashtabula County have, to date, followed one of those structures without question and without exploring whether we have other choices.

Despite the efforts of the individuals who have been elected and appointed to county office, our county government has been, and continues to be, fragmented and in crisis. Serving both as legislators and administrators, our commissioners have virtually no day-to-day authority over the eight departments headed by other elected officials. Clear accountability and measurable performance of our elected county officers is nearly impossible to establish because it occurs, or does not occur, piecemeal, in partisan elections held at four year intervals.

As county government has grown vastly more complex over the past 75 years, our form of county government has remained unchanged. Ashtabula County government is, in reality, a business that supplies an array of professional services, manages an annual budget in the tens of millions of dollars, deals with multiple collective bargaining units, and employs and supervises hundreds of employees. Like any other business of that scope and magnitude, it can neither survive nor prosper without both professional management and financial expertise. Our present form of county government, despite the earnest efforts of the elected officials, assures neither.

### Our Charter Proposal for Better Government

Our right to choose the structure of our county government is established by Article X, Section 3 of the Ohio Constitution, which mirrors other provisions of the Ohio Constitution granting cities and villages the right to choose a charter form of government. We are proposing that Ashtabula County restructure its county form of government by

adopting our own charter. A draft of the charter can be viewed at our website:

[www.ashtabulacountyreorm.com](http://www.ashtabulacountyreorm.com). The key components of this charter are to:

- 1) Replace the three elected commissioners with a seven member county council which would serve in a legislative capacity and hire a professional, qualified county executive. Five members of the Council will be elected from five districts and two to be elected at large.
- 2) Create the position of an appointed, professional county executive, with minimum qualifications, to serve as the chief executive officer of county government.
- 3) Appoint most of the currently elected county administrative officers through the county executive, subject to county council approval.
- 4) Provide checks, balances, financial accountability and clear lines of authority.

If the proposed charter is adopted, Ashtabula County would not break new ground. To the contrary, it would follow the tradition of self-determination set by dozens of Ohio cities and villages that have adopted their own charters in efforts to reflect changing circumstances and to assure accountability and efficiency. Summit County has worked under a charter since 1980. Cuyahoga County recently adopted a similar charter.

It is important to note what this charter is not intended to do:

- 1) The proposal to adopt a charter is not a criticism of any current or past county official.
- 2) The adoption of a charter will have absolutely no impact on townships, villages or cities.
- 3) Adopting a charter is not a magic bullet. Government works best over the long term under a good structure with good people. We believe the charter provides a

better and more efficient structure for government and that it will bring out the best in county leadership.

- 4) Adopting a charter does not dispense with the process of electing and appointing good people to serve the public.
- 5) The charter is not designed to advance the interests of any political party, but rather to help all the people of Ashtabula County realize the full potential of their county government and remind us that we are all responsible for our government.

We are seeking the input of all county residents regarding the proposed charter. We have a goal of obtaining 5,000 signatures on petitions no later than July 6, 2010 in order to place the charter on the ballot at the November 2, 2010 election. If the charter passes, the county council and prosecutor elections will take place in the primary and general elections in 2012, and the charter itself will take effect on January 1, 2013. All currently elected county officers will remain in office until December 31, 2012, or until such time as the new county executive re-appoints or replaces them.

Comments and suggestions are welcome. You may post them on our website or address them to the Committee for Ashtabula County Reform, P.O. Box 582, Jefferson, Ohio 44047. The Committee, as a political action committee, is also accepting donations in the amounts of \$25, \$50, \$75, or \$100, payable to the Committee. The Committee is not accepting corporate donations.

This is our future. We present it for your consideration on its merits, and we welcome your suggestions, support and help.

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Also

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