

**MODERNIZATION
OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT:
LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS
PERSPECTIVE**

League of Women Voters of the Cincinnati Area
103 Wm. Hd Taft Rd, Cincinnati, Oh 45219
www.lwvcincinnati.org
info@lwvcincinnati.org

April 2010

MODERNIZATION OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT: LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS PERSPECTIVE

The League of Women Voters has called for modernization of county government since the 1920's. The Cincinnati Area League has worked on this issue through citizen education, publications, public forums and surveys and by working with other groups on proposals for changes in county government structure.

As early as 1934, a proposal to reorganize county government was on the ballot. The issue was defeated. In the early 1960's the Ohio General Assembly passed a reorganization bill making two alternative forms of county government available. In 1967 an "alternative form" was put on the November ballot by unanimous vote of the Board of County Commissioners. The League of Women Voters of the Cincinnati Area conducted an action campaign favoring this Appointive Executive Plan. The constitutionality of the issue was challenged and after a lengthy taxpayer suit, the Ohio Supreme Court declared the law constitutional in 1968. The impounded ballots then were counted. The issue was defeated.

Changing government structure is a political process that has involved representatives of political parties, business and civic leaders and community groups. Within the past forty years, the LWVCA has been a part of three major attempts to reform Hamilton County Government.

In 1971, the Citizens Committee to improve Local Governments (Lingle Committee), was formed because certain civic groups were convinced the present government structure (in which the county is defined as an arm of the state, without legislative powers and with limited mandates) was not organized to handle the needs of an urban county. A seventeen member Executive Committee was appointed which consisted of political party representation and was broadly based, including cities, townships and villages and civic organizations. The Executive Committee guided the process which included 200 citizens assigned to eleven task forces which reviewed services. In addition there was the recognition of a need for an executive authority for capable management of present and future responsibilities. The result was a recommendation of an alternative form of county government structure with an appointed county executive and a 7-9 member County Council. The issues of number of council members and at large districts could not be resolved by the political parties so the proposal was never presented to the voters.

During 1980-1982, a Coalition to draft a County Charter was formed after a change in Ohio Law allowed a charter to be placed directly on the ballot by petition. The LWVCA, Cincinnati Association, Woman's City Club, Cincinnati Bar Association and the Cincinnati Business Committee, after seeking input from present and former County officers and holding public meetings, completed a Home Rule Charter. A Home Rule NOW campaign obtained sufficient signatures to put the Charter on the ballot. However on the basis of two community surveys and lack of important political support the issue was withdrawn.

In 1990, the 1980-1982 Coalition and other groups formed a Committee to Restructure Hamilton County Government and received a grant from The Agnes and Murray Seasongood Good Government Fund. A part time director was hired who implemented an extensive county-wide education program and public meetings for input regarding a new county structure. A Charter was drafted, but a petition drive was put on hold because of lack of community interest and funding.

In addition to these major efforts for structural reform, the LWVCA studied other means to improve county service delivery efficiencies, such as the use of intergovernmental contracts, use of special districts, and criteria for service delivery proposals (private and public). Most recently, the League studied the County Property Tax levy funding of services and efficiency possibilities in that system.

In promoting modernization of county government, the LWVCA has engaged in producing citizen education publications, public forums and surveys and has worked with other groups on proposals for changes in county government structure. To provide a comprehensive description of the government of Hamilton County, *Know Hamilton County* was first published by LWVCA in 1926. It has been revised and updated over the years, most recently in 2007.

In addition to particular issues of the time, the 3 most recent initiatives to modernize county government identified similar problems: inadequate representation and dispersed leadership/accountability. All 3 major initiatives to reform Hamilton County government failed; each was withdrawn before reaching the ballot. The lack of political consensus and support on key aspects of each proposal led to the defeat of each plan to restructure.

As the county evolved from a rural to an urbanized area, demands for services increased. More comprehensive planning and oversight was needed for services provided for on a basis larger than a local government. Municipalities have home rule authority; county government, an agency of the state, is a unit of government encompassing a larger area than a municipality and better positioned on the local level to provide urban services such as water supply, sewage, transportation, solid waste disposal, police protection and communications, detention facilities, protection of children and services for the elderly.

The results of League studies of Hamilton County government are the basis for our current position statements that allow us to take action in this area. The position statements are included in Attachment A.

April 2010

ATTACHMENT A

POSITIONS

League of Women Voters of the Cincinnati Area

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES

SUPPORT OF MODERNIZATION OF HAMILTON COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Position: The LWVCA supports the modernization of county government through some form of reorganization, such as adoption of a county charter or one of the alternative forms of county government permitted by Ohio Law.

Criteria to be used in defining/judging "modernization":

Group A

1. The county executive should be appointed by the county governing body.
2. The county executive should have budgetary responsibilities and powers of policy execution and be directly answerable to the county governing body.
3. Hamilton County governing body should have implied powers and some self-taxing ability.

Group B

1. The county governing body should be elected in combination method including districts and at-large and should have 5-11 members.
2. Means of citizen participation should be explicitly provided.

Group C

1. Members of the county governing body should serve 4-year, staggered terms.
2. Means of citizen recourse should be explicitly provided.
3. All county department heads should be appointed.

SUPPORT OF CERTAIN CRITERIA FOR METHODS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Position: The LWVCA supports criteria for service delivery in areas of:

1. Relationships with other governments and service providers
 2. Accountability and responsiveness
 3. Taxes, fees and assessments
 4. Quality of service.
- I. The LWVCA believes the following features are of primary importance in judging new proposals for service delivery whether directly by government unit, public/private contract or a special district:
- A. In regard to relationships with other governments or service providers, service provider should take part in cooperative planning for the region. In the case of special districts, the proposal should include firm guidelines for dissolution or merging with another district or governmental unit.
 - B. In regard to accountability and responsiveness, there should be 1) clear responsibility for planning and delivery of the service, 2) a clear line of recourse for unsatisfactory service, 3) preannounced open board or council meetings,

- 4) accountability to citizens through an elected official and 5) annual financial and program reports readily available to the public.
- C. Elected officials should approve fees and assessments.
- D. The service delivery plan should be the best service delivery option in terms of cost-effectiveness (assuming cost-effectiveness means the best service for a reasonable price, not just low bid); provide for qualified staff to plan, to write RFPs (requests for proposals) and contracts and to monitor and evaluate service.

Other features considered important but without consensus on the level of importance are: 1) the service provision not be duplicated by another source, 2) the proposal not have an adverse effect on prospects for change in county structure, 3) annual financial and program reports be reviewed at state and local level with results of that review published, and 4) there be a public referendum on new taxes.

It is the intention that these criteria for service delivery be applied in Cincinnati and other municipalities and townships as well as at the county level.

II. LWVCA members support special districts, contractual arrangements (both public/private and intergovernmental) and general purpose government as appropriate means of service delivery.

CRITERIA FOR HAMILTON COUNTYWIDE VOTED PROPERTY TAX LEVIES

Position: A model tax levy process would include:

1. A committee of citizens with the authority to review tax levy proposals and tax levy recipient organizations; to review the requesting agencies' financial, management and performance audits; and make recommendations to the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners. This committee must be adequately funded and staffed.
2. Reduction of the total number of voted levies without sacrificing needed services.
3. Timing that prevents placing all levies on a ballot at the same time.
4. Funding county services based on a determined level of need that balances funds, services and resources.
5. Funding broadly defined services that can respond to changing conditions and needs.
6. The provision of meaningful opportunities for citizen involvement, input, monitoring and review.
7. Assuring agency accountability to the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners for the appropriate use of tax levy dollars.
8. Ballot language that is understandable to citizens and accurately describes services funded by the proposed levy.