

Testimony of COAST before The Hamilton County Government Reform Task Force  
Presented by: Christopher Paul Finney, General Counsel, COAST

Good afternoon co-chairmen O'Reilly and Cook and members of the Task Force.

Thank you for allowing me to speak, if only briefly. My name is Christopher Paul Finney and I am here to speak on behalf of the organization COAST, the Coalition Opposed to Additional Spending and Taxes.

**Who is COAST?**

COAST has existed for more than a decade, and has been the leading advocate in southwest Ohio for limited government and lower taxes, and challenging the abuse of power by our elected officials. We have saved local taxpayers more than two billion dollars in tax increases and wasteful expenditures since our founding in 1999.

**Your mission**

I have reviewed the County's web site and note that the mission of the Task Force is to explore:

**Alternative forms of operating county government and providing the full range of public services needed by the people of Hamilton County and mandate [sic] by law are better suited to, and more efficient and economical, than existing structures...**

The Task Force is then further charged with:

**The task force recommendations for an alternative Hamilton County government structure shall be within the scope of those permitted by the Ohio Revised Code in Chapters 301, 302, 305 and 307.**

It is a little difficult to understand what that part of the charge is supposed to mean, but since you are to "recommend" alternate forms of County Government and because the only alternate form allowed at present by the Ohio Revised Code is a County Charter, it seems pre-determined that the County Commission desires a recommendation for a County Charter from this Task Force. That certainly is the common wisdom about why this panel was formed.

That is unfortunate and it is COAST's hope that you will not return such recommendation to the Commission. This is because the adoption of a County Charter – any County Charter is a classic Pandora's Box of problems and unintended consequences.

**Statutory County Government.**

Current County government – and each elected official within the County – may only do those things that are expressly permitted by statute.

Under this system, the County Commission does not have legislative power. And they have limited taxing powers. And there are built-in checks and balances from the independent and occasionally competing elected officials. These checks and balances tremendously benefit the citizenry.

**What is the problem we are trying to address?**

Let's step back and ask ourselves for a moment – why are citizens fleeing Ohio? Why does Ohio have one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation? Why has Ohio been the second worst in the nation at job creation over the past decade?

No one seriously suggests it is because our tax burden is too low, our regulatory environment too lax, or our state and local governments are too small. Yet, this task force, and so many state and local initiatives, are aimed at expanding the size and scope of government, rather than simplifying it.

Rather, we would ask you to explore – if your mission allows – whether it is possible that we need to limit the role of state and local government in Ohio to unleash the creative and entrepreneurial potential that the well-educated and hard-working citizens of Ohio possess.

A Charter form of County government offers no “reform.” It will not serve to unleash potential of Hamilton County residents to address their problems. Rather, it – by its fundamental nature – radically empowers elected officials and bureaucrats to lord over the citizenry.

**Positive aspect of the review.**

Before I delve into COAST's perspectives on the misguided nature of a County Charter, let me say a few entirely positive words about what this Task Force should explore and can accomplish:

- ➔ When the current majority took control of the County Commission, they abolished what could have been and should have been the most important reform thrust in recent memory – the Managed Competition Committee. This Committee was targeted to find savings in how we operate County government in the tens of millions of dollars – enough incidentally to close the gaps in the County general fund and stadium fund budget. You should recommend the re-empanelling of this Committee and the implementation of its recommendations with vigor.
- ➔ We think it is important that you shine the spotlight on cronyism, nepotism and other hiring and contracting practices that fail to yield the maximum return for taxpayers. We would even suggest that state legislation on this topic could be appropriate.

- ➔ We think this Task Force and the County Commission encourage the independent elected officials to undertake greater cooperation in their purchasing and operations to achieve savings and to be more innovative and creative in adopting the best practices.
- ➔ COAST believes there is tremendous savings to be had by implementing joint operations between the various cities, village and townships in Hamilton County and with County government. We should explore vehicles to advance this needed cooperation and voluntary consolidation.
- ➔ This Task Force could do a great service to County taxpayers and our State by identifying and demanding change in the real reason that Ohio government is terribly inefficient and wasteful:
  - Prevailing wage laws that drive up the cost of capital expenditures completely unnecessarily.
  - A structure for public salary, benefits, and mostly pensions that far exceed that available in the private marketplace, and results in the looting of state coffers by public employees.
  - Civil service laws that prevent competitive structures for hiring, firing, disciplining and promoting public employees, causing countless wasted dollars- and lost opportunities- unnecessarily.

So, there are a number of important “reforms” that are needed, and we would encourage this Task Force to aggressively explore these issues and embrace those things that would truly change the competitiveness of our region and state.

Now, here’s why we think the direction of this Task Force as set forth in The Mission Statement is misguided:

**What a County Charter by its fundamental nature does.**

Understand that regardless of what the County Charter says, and what structure and limitations are contained in the final document, by adopting a County Charter, we are putting in place a structure that will – short term and long term – empower politicians and bureaucrats to grow in size and scope of County government, to do so with fewer checks and balances and less accountability. This is inevitable regardless of the claimed limits on power in the document.

If the County adopts a Charter, by its nature, we will be:

- ➔ Creating a structure that gives new taxing powers to the County “Council,” even if the Charter – as in Cuyahoga County – expressly says no new taxing powers.

This is because such provision limiting taxing powers can be much more easily amended than currently which requires an enactment of the State Legislature.

- ➔ Empowering our pandering class – the politicians – to fund trolleys, Freedom Centers, the Film Commission, the “Arts” and everything else that those “oh so much smarter than us” always advocate and for which they usually succeed in obtaining public funds.
- ➔ Giving law-making authority to the County “Council,” meaning every goofy type of regulation and social engineering we have seen from City Hall for the last three decades. (How’s that working out, by the way?)
- ➔ Perhaps most importantly, by eliminating important independent elected offices, removing from County government the checks and balances we presently have. For example, an independent auditor can appropriately question Commission actions.
  1. Who at City Hall was questioning the under-funding of the pension system? The mis-use of the Anthem funds? The wasteful use of outside counsel? An independent Prosecutor, Treasurer, Auditor – and even Coroner, give important perspectives that appointed government simply does not.
- ➔ Charter government is a massive power grab by rapacious politicians as against
  1. the people of Hamilton County,
  2. the independent elected officials that assure efficient (and largely honest) operation of County government, and
  3. 49 cities, villages, and townships that make up our County.

### **Conclusion**

So I want to conclude by saying that “refrom” is a great thing, and we should commit ourselves to constant improvement in government and business. But whether that word is contorted to be a power grab to expand government – and thus make us less efficient – or is designed to fundamentally change the structural obstacles to Ohio and Hamilton County competitiveness is the decision before you.

COAST encourages those reforms that will reposition Ohio and southwest Ohio to be competitive for businesses and families. This Proposed County Charter will do exactly the opposite. Thank you.