

# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Fix it - now

**As the public's faith in county government plummets, the need for immediate reform has never been greater**

Sunday, May 18, 2008

The pathetic spectacle of Cuyahoga County Recorder Patrick O'Malley pleading guilty in U.S. District Court on Thursday to one count of obscenity is only the latest example of a county government gone horribly wrong.

O'Malley is the poster child of the need to reform that government. But O'Malley wasn't the only problem with county government. Far from it. What O'Malley's felony conviction did was push the people's outrage over public-sector waste, patronage and scandal to a dangerous level - leaving county government especially vulnerable to a taxpayer revolt that would dry up funding streams and possibly do irreparable harm to critical human services and health care investments.

Taxpayers have long suspected Cuyahoga County's government is wasteful, inefficient and run by people with little regard for those who pay their salaries. Now they know it. Recent reports of corruption and patronage abuses offer even more compelling reasons to change the way county government is structured - to relieve the taxpayers of funding a handful of positions, each with separate and bloated payrolls.

So utterly disgusting have some aspects of county government become that even the coroner's office is now a patronage pit. Samuel Gerber must be spinning in his grave over how the Democrats have abused that office.

Every few years or so anger and frustration boil over and lead to calls for county reform. But this time must be different. The state legislature is poised to give commissioners the right to place a reform issue before voters. Any local legislator who doesn't go along isn't worthy of the office he or she holds.

To his credit, House Speaker Jon Husted, a Republican from suburban Dayton, has told County Commissioner Tim Hagan and The Plain Dealer he wants to be helpful.

Husted may push for the reform package to be passed as part of a budget bill that must clear the legislature before its session ends later this month.

The plan being discussed would give voters the right to retain the three commissioners, prosecutor and judges as elected officials. It would eliminate an elected auditor, recorder, clerk of courts, treasurer, coroner, engineer and sheriff. Some of those positions could be consolidated, and all would be appointed.

This plan may not be perfect, but it's a good start. And acting quickly is crucial. Previous reform efforts died of over-analysis and extended debate that sucked the energy out of the crusade.

If the legislature acts, the commissioners must place the question on the Nov. 4 ballot. There can be no excuse for delay. And there can be no place in public life for any elected official who stands in the way of needed change.

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