

Democrats control a county government that's stumbling

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Cuyahoga County government is sputtering.

And the recent resignation of its recorder, Patrick O'Malley, who pleaded guilty to one count of obscenity on Thursday, will draw more attention to its problems - and possibly be the catalyst for reform.

Among the county's troubles:

A poorly managed downtown redevelopment project that will cost taxpayers millions more than what was budgeted, even if the property is unloaded to a private buyer.

A domestic court that moves slower than lava.

A county hospital hemorrhaging money at a record pace.

A patronage system that keeps regular taxpayers from getting government jobs.

The highest sales-tax rate in the state, raised last year without a vote of the people for a convention center-related plan that benefits a private company.

O'Malley's resignation also will surely highlight who controls the levers of county government: the Democratic Party machine.

At the top, county government is led by three commissioners - all Democrats, including local party Chairman Jimmy Dimora. Every other office, from coroner to prosecutor, and all but a few judicial seats are in the hands of Democrats.

Dimora and other party officials declined to comment. County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones, who faces re-election this year, defended county government.

"You can't blame economic problems that have ravaged most of the Midwest on county government and the problems that have besieged county hospitals on county government," he said.

"Right now, it's the county government that's in the fish barrel. There have been problems like in any private or nonprofit company. But a lot of this has been in the recorder's office because of his hiring practices and now his resignation."

Jones also pointed out that it was his colleagues, not he, who voted for the tax increase and favored the expensive plan to raze the asbestos-laced skyscraper at East Ninth Street and Euclid Avenue to make room for a new county government building that was to spur downtown growth - the one the commissioners are now backing away from.

Although O'Malley was forced to resign for a crime committed outside the office, he was among county government's most partisan players.

Once a firebrand Cleveland city councilman, O'Malley built a network of party loyalists through hustle and personality. It included neighborhood leaders, who control endorsements and can move votes.

He rewarded political allies with jobs, a fact recently documented by The Plain Dealer, which identified at least three dozen politically connected people on his office payroll.

He also received help over the years from his college roommate, county Prosecutor Bill Mason.

Mason, whose political base grew out of the Democratic stronghold of Parma, often backed O'Malley and threw supporters his way.

Mason, for example, backed O'Malley over the endorsed candidate, Jones, in a messy intraparty battle in 2002 for the commissioner's seat left vacant by Jane Campbell, who was elected Cleveland mayor.

O'Malley would lose the contest but not before he sued the party and exposed a fierce sense of entitlement to the job.

Mason and O'Malley helped elect mayors and city council members in a half dozen cities, including Euclid, Fairview Park, Brooklyn and Seven Hills.

Then there is Auditor Frank Russo, who has a long history of plying fellow Democrats with campaign contributions and volunteers. He, too, hires political friends.

The Plain Dealer recently has spotlighted one Russo hire, Rosemary Vinci, whose résumé listed just one previous job: manager of a strip club.

The partisan nature of county government - and its inefficiencies - have been the subject of several reform proposals in the last 20 years. None had the traction to succeed in a Democratic county. But recent problems have revived the issue.

Commissioner Tim Hagan is trumpeting a plan that would preserve the three commissioners jobs but eliminate many other elected offices.

He quickly found support from Republican Ohio House Speaker Jon Husted, who is considering legislation to allow the commissioners to put the issue before voters in November.

Jones says he supports Hagan's proposal.

But Russo, who is the bon vivant of the Democratic Party, is not happy. For one thing, his job would be eliminated.

"It is irresponsible and insulting to every county resident as well as our public officials to proceed with changing our county government in such a random way," he wrote in a letter to The Plain Dealer.

Russo said he wants to lead a committee to study streamlining government.

In the meantime, the Democrats will pick O'Malley's replacement. Only a couple of Democrats have the political muscle to secure the job.

But the battle will highlight the same old problem: Cuyahoga County government has become the Democrats' playground.

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