



Bold and Accountable Leadership for Cleveland Heights

Elected Mayor: Why here? Why now?

By Len Friedson

Cleveland Heights is having a healthy and long-overdue discussion about our form of government. This is a good thing: it has been 98 years since there has been any similar discussion.

Self-government is not easy. History has made this crystal clear, from our original Constitutional Congress to today's news stories.

There are many examples of local governments that work well. There is also no shortage of examples where local governments have failed in their responsibilities. These examples include commission, council/manager and mayor/council forms of government.

In the council/manger form we have in Cleveland Heights, the city council is in charge, providing policy and direction to the city manager. The city manager is also the safety director, with the sole authority to appoint the police and fire chiefs, and all other directors and staff, with these exceptions: appointment of the directors of law, planning and finance must be approved by a majority of council—however, these individuals may be fired upon the sole authority of the city manager. While all political power is vested in council, our appointed city manager holds the executive authority some say they are afraid to grant to a mayor we would elect.

In the mayor/council form of government, as proposed by the charter amendment appearing on the November ballot, checks are in place for both the mayor and city council. The mayor may approve or veto legislation passed by the city council, and the council can override the mayor's veto with a vote of 5 of its members. This check will limit the powers of both the executive (mayor) and legislative (council) branches of our city government. And the mayor will face the voters every four years.

From an article in the Yale Law Journal, "Under a strong mayor, the exercise of power is easily identified: Attention can be focused on a single official, whereas it is difficult to follow boards, commissions, or a large council, each member of which is seeking to shift the burden of responsibility on to someone else." "The diffusion of political authority both generates confusion and creates political tension between executive officials. As one weak mayor told his constituents, 'The buck doesn't stop here.'" "... dispersing political power by lodging it in multiple local institutions or in expert administrators tends to diminish democratic responsiveness." These comments ring true to me. I think they are especially relevant to the current discussion in Cleveland Heights.

Today Cleveland Heights is rich with amazing assets: a vibrant arts community, top-tier recreational opportunities, historic neighborhoods, proximity to University Circle's exciting growth, and – most importantly – diverse, compassionate, engaged and friendly residents.

Yet we lack the effective and decisive political leadership required to address the serious challenges that threaten those assets and our collective future. We need an elected mayor focusing full-time attention on our issues. We need a decision-maker who is accountable to the people. The November election provides an opportunity to move our city forward with the structural changes most likely to produce the results we all want: a vibrant, diverse and economically healthy city.



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Perhaps not all cities everywhere need to directly elect their mayor. But this city, at this time, requires transformative change. We can join other well-governed cities in this area such as Lakewood and Shaker Heights. Help us get started by voting to directly elect our mayor!

Len Friedson is treasurer of Citizens for an Elected Mayor and a Cleveland Heights resident.

Citation: Yale Law Journal; 2006; [Can Strong Mayors Empower Weak Cities?](#)