

ISSUE 9 IS BAD FOR CINCINNATI: AVOID CALIFORNIA STYLE GRIDLOCK

On its face, Issue 9 feels good. It feels right. It feels American. What, after all, is more American than voting? And in the age of the iPhone and “American Idol,” Issue 9 even feels very 21st century. Nowadays, we can vote for the next Carrie Underwood or the next Fred Astaire by touch screen, whether in front of the big screen or spotlight. Direct democracy has never been easier – so why not let the people decide whether to spend millions on a streetcar line or other rail system?

Well, don't be deceived. Issue 9 is a ruse, constructed to undermine the public interest by removing the streetcar question from the careful analysis and critique of the legislative process that should properly happen in the chambers of City Council. Even the song-and-dance reality shows grasp this. As if modeling a bicameral legislature, they combine the public polling with the decision of a panel of expert judges to determine results. If unchained direct democracy doesn't work in prime time, why would we trust our city's future to it?

Streetcar lines and other rail issues should no more be left to a process of one referendum after another than should any other municipal expenditure. Shall we vote on how many police to have, and while we're at it how many will work the night shift? Shall we vote on which potholes to fill, which streets to clear when it snows, which fires to put out and which we let just burn? Government by referendum may sound great at the water cooler, but in reality it is a paralyzing way to govern.

In June, at a public forum on innovation and cities, a question was posed: Why is Cincinnati's civic culture not as innovative as its corporate, institutional and educational culture?

This is the home of Procter & Gamble, one of the world's most innovative companies, and Toyota has a headquarters in our region, where automotive innovation is nurtured. The University of Cincinnati's design school and music school are, like Northern Kentucky University's College of Informatics, cutting edge examples of higher education, and the Cincinnati Public Schools' new School for the Creative and Performing Arts taking shape along Central Avenue is a monument to innovation in public secondary education. Children's Hospital Medical Center is a magnet for doctors who want to be where medical innovation is happening. And the Contemporary Arts Center was described when it opened by the New York Times architecture critic “as the most important American building since the end of the Cold War.”

Yet for all of this culture of innovation in our companies and institutions around town, our civic culture is, as City Manager Milton Dohoney called it at the June forum, “risk adverse.” We are afraid to take chances – to push ourselves and our city a little further. There are two distinct issues here: the merits of a particular proposed project (e.g., for streetcars), versus using a Charter amendment to require or preclude a certain type of expenditure. The Cincinnati Association has created a task force to look at the merits of the City's streetcar proposal; that analysis is ongoing. But, regardless of the merits of such a proposal, we strongly believe that ballot initiatives should not be used to load into the City Charter language that precludes Council from spending money on any project.

It is important to understand that Issue 9 does not apply only to the current streetcar proposal. It would stop or prevent *any* kind of transportation project in Cincinnati involving passenger rail. If the City, County, State, and/or federal government want to work together on such a project, the City would have to call a time-out, describe its plan in detail in a ballot issue, costing a lot of time and money, and get public approval before it could make any expenditures on the project. The delay alone would kill the project -- or,

more likely, stop other funders from working with the City in the first place. Do we really need any more such gridlock in Cincinnati?

The membership of the Cincinnati Association – an organization with a long history of support for municipal progress – is on record as opposing Issue 9. In our estimation, government by referendum will cost money, not save money. It will create California-style gridlock. It will dissuade talented, smart people from seeking public office if holding office means their hands will be tied, waiting for the next referendum to pass or fail. The Charter is the City's Constitution. Should it be amended for every issue that arises in the City?

Cincinnati is part of a coalition opposing Issue 9. Standing with us are the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, the Charter Committee and the League of Women Voters. A leading reason for this opposition is stated by our coalition like this: "City council members are elected to make decisions on behalf of voters as outlined in the charter. Ballot initiatives that target selective issues tend to paralyze council decision-making by preempting and second-guessing council's efforts."

The good news is, you can vote down Issue 9 and still be heard on the streetcar. Candidates are running for mayor of Cincinnati and for City Council seats. Your selections in those races will guide city policy and spending in a time-tested, all-American fashion. Our nation was constructed not as a direct democracy, but as a representative republic. That is, we elect officials to represent us, then trust them to get well educated on the intricacies of a myriad of issues that arise before making an informed, thoughtful decision. In short, for municipal governance, we invest the public will in representatives who in turn have the responsibility to act in our best interest -- and, if they do not, face the consequences: we vote them out.

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