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Opinion: Reengaging neighborhoods should be a high priority

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Recently a group of concerned citizens created an initiative to form city districts but failed to gather enough signatures to reach the ballot. The "Fair Cincy" charter amendment came from concern about the barriers facing many people to serving on City Council, and a consequent lack of representation for many neighborhoods. The intent was a broader pool of candidates, with the city's best on the ballot.

People are so detached from city government that their eyes glaze over when a well-intended discussion of city civics is attempted. Between a general distrust of politicians, and a society so extremely polarized, I question whether we are able to have these discussions anymore.

Detachment of the Cincinnati electorate from its elected representatives is a foundational city issue. When Cincinnati rid itself of Boss Cox and his corruption in the 1920s, it was initiated by a bipartisan group of big city names. However, it was only really made possible by a citywide network of regular people ready and organized to fight for a city system that worked for them. Together they created our city charter, which remains only slightly altered today. A citywide movement like the 1920s is what is missing in our city today.

As a former Pleasant Ridge Community Council president, I have seen first-hand that there are many missing connections between our government and our neighborhood residents and businesses. We need city resources to be swiftly available to all neighborhoods that need them. The city, once fully engaged, is very capable of rendering effective service. City government customer engagement is our weak spot.

To enable this foundational fix, we need to reestablish citywide engagement – residents and businesses – in our political process. This is how our city manager form of government, once the envy of the country, can work for us all again. I propose that our city government initiate a program of "customer facing" projects to become an organization serving all of Cincinnati:

City Council members and the mayor should hold regular sessions in all neighborhoods on a rotating basis where they meet constituents (residents and businesses) face to face – and listen.

In addition to the metrics currently available from the city, they need to measure and rate themselves on response times and outcomes of neighborhood, resident and business issues. This simple high-level data should be summarized by neighborhoods and published monthly.

All communities need an accessible, engaged, community council with no "tests" for membership other than address. These councils need proactive support from the city. City Council and the mayor must publicly agree on priorities each year and exclusively work on them except in extreme circumstances. Any other issues should be worked on by council member staffs for monthly "no-debate-just-vote" council sessions.

All city departments must effectively address in all neighborhoods the "quality of life" issues that affect city residents and hamper development.

Every city ordinance needs to have enforcement associated with it, wherever possible and prudent without the use of armed police.

Use of volunteer groups to help neighborhoods or businesses always needs to end in the establishment of direct engagement with city government.

This all fits well with the timing of the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Library Facility Master Plan, which is enabling equitable, judgment-free access and much-improved community engagement. Alongside our community centers, these new community library spaces should regularly be used for City Council and the mayor's proposed meetings, plus informational meetings, etc.

The city needs to make this reengagement of the neighborhoods a number one priority. Until that exists, no charter changes will be worthwhile or representative. Let's make the existing charter work the best it can before we think about improving it. We can and will do better.

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