

Personal View: Finding safety and happiness in Cuyahoga County

James M. Trutko

The Fourth of July is a time when we celebrate one of the great documents of human history: the Declaration of Independence. In just 1,458 words, the document defines man's fundamental rights and the nature of legitimate government. Is county government operating in the spirit of the founders?

The Fourth of July is a time when we celebrate one of the great documents of human history: the Declaration of Independence. In just 1,458 words, the document defines man's fundamental rights and the nature of legitimate government.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. — The Declaration of Independence

Most people are familiar with the famous line in the Declaration of Independence that reads all men are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Many readers probably skim over the balance of the paragraph, which describes government as the means to secure man's God-given rights and derives the "just powers of government from the consent of the governed." At the end of the paragraph, the Declaration of Independence declares the right of people to create a new form of government to "effect their Safety and Happiness."

"Safety and Happiness" is a wonderfully simple formulation of the goals of government in terms that everyone can understand. One doesn't need to have a doctorate or understand the nuances of various economic and social policies to understand the Declaration of Independence said the purpose of government was to create safe conditions for individuals to freely pursue their own personal goals, the things that would make them happy.

While we tend to think of the Declaration of Independence in a national context, local governments can also be judged in terms of their effectiveness in promoting two simple metrics: "Safety and Happiness."

Let's evaluate the county government according to these criteria. Has the government of Cuyahoga County created safe conditions that allow our entire community to freely pursue our individual

goals of happiness? Or are large areas of Cuyahoga County largely off-limits to productive activity because they are unsafe?

Has the government of Cuyahoga County provided public services at reasonable cost and created an environment that fosters the growth of businesses and allows all persons to pursue economic opportunity, good-paying jobs and their dreams of happiness? Or have local government officials — like the king of England — run government primarily for the benefit of themselves, bureaucrats and employees with little regard for the services they provide to the public?

An honest assessment of Cuyahoga County government is that it has failed to "effect the Safety and Happiness" of county residents. Ten years ago, voters attempted to reform county government and were partially successful. At the time, it was thought that eliminating corruption at the top and focusing accountability in a single chief executive, with county council oversight, would lead to honest and more effective government. However, the reforms did not restore accountability or lead to competent leadership because the subsequent elections were noncompetitive. Moreover, the reforms did not eliminate corruption because large sums of money continue to be hidden in a bureaucratic labyrinth out of public view.

To change the situation, the public must change their attitude and realize, like the colonists, that citizens have a right to good, uncorrupt government that provides key services competently at reasonable cost. It's not enough to hope that government will change without pressure or to beg the government to bestow good services. If Cuyahoga County residents continue to have low expectations and tolerate poor performance, county government will live down to that low expectation.

In addition, significant additional charter reforms are needed to foster change of leadership, encourage competitive elections and gradually bring county government under control of the people. First, there needs to be a two-term limit for the county executive and council, and a three-term limit for judges, to discourage lifetime politicians and bring about new leadership.

Second, there should be nonpartisan primaries to ensure competitive elections of the two best candidates. In the last county election, there were virtually no competitive contests. Without a meaningful choice of alternative candidates with different platforms, it's not possible to determine public preferences and obtain "consent of the governed."

Third, the voters and taxpayers should vote to approve the county budget after approval by the county executive and county council. A public vote on the budget will make the priorities of county government more transparent and provide a real test to obtain the "consent of the governed."

Only by making political leadership more accountable to voter input will Cuyahoga County government improve to make citizens feel safer and more able to pursue their individual goals and happiness.

Source URL: <https://www.crainscleveland.com/opinion/personal-view-finding-safety-and-happiness-cuyahoga-county>