

Cleveland in the 2000's

By Michael D. Roberts

Since the end of World War II, Northeast Ohio underwent continuous change in almost all ways. As 2000 and a new century appeared, there was one serious exception to those metamorphoses. There had been no change in the way the people who lived here were governed.

The heart of the region---Cuyahoga County---was ruled by a political system that was born in post colonial days, and in the two centuries since, had become wasteful, ineffective and virtually invisible. It hardly met American standards of democracy let alone the demands of a future that was global in scope.

This government had been sustained by a political culture that by the last half of the 20th century had become corpulent, corrosive and corrupt. There had been more than a dozen attempts to change the archaic government since 1917, but they were thwarted by politics mired in patronage and the past.

These politics were perpetuated by the fractured nature of the county itself. Over the years, first ethnic politics and later black politics focused on narrow interests. The county stretched for 458.49 square miles and was made up of 38 cities, 19 villages, and two townships and included 31 school districts.

By 2002 the total cost of all government in Cuyahoga County was nearly \$7- billion annually or \$5,079 per resident. The frightening statistic, though, was that the expenditure per capita had risen 68 percent between 1992 and 2002.

There were many reasons for this government morass. The terrain and transportation system had enabled people to escape the crowded conditions of the city. Over the years, cheap land and plentiful jobs had enabled the creation of an array of suburbs that spanned the economic ladder.

As these suburbs emerged, the city's petty political squabbles created a distraction in Cleveland City Hall, which failed to grasp how this growth would ultimately effect the city. This sprawl of suburbs would ultimately drain the city of population and taxes, the result of poor planning and insular thought.

Thus, the nature of politics led to the creation of 59 separate entities at a time when it was becoming more and more evident that Cleveland and Cuyahoga County needed to adopt a regional approach to its government.

But to take this step into the future was a threat to the status quo, mainly the political structure, which held the power and patronage and by 2000 could see no farther into the future than the next government paycheck.

For more than a century and a half, the most prominent political figure in Northeastern Ohio was the mayor of the City of Cleveland. From that position, political careers were launched that could reach to the U.S. Senate, Congress and the governorship. It was generally accepted that Cleveland City Hall was a point of departure to a higher realm of political stardom, a fact that teased and cajoled the ambitious.

Such were the thoughts of Jane Campbell in 2001 when she set out to become the first female mayor to preside over the city. She defeated an unheralded black candidate, Raymond Pierce, with 54 percent of the vote. Pierce, who served in the Clinton administration and was a lawyer, seemed an unlikely candidate in that he did not have the presence that voters had grown to expect from the black community. Gone were the days when the Lou Stokes, George Forbes and Arnold Pinckney held power.

In fact, the key to Campbell's victory was the number of votes she pulled from the city's black east side. She won 27 percent of the vote in ten of the city's predominant black wards while Pierce could garner only 16 percent in the seven overwhelmingly white wards.

It was an interesting victory, aided by the more than \$700,000 she raised in campaign funds and strong labor support.

At 48, Jane Campbell came to the city hall with notable achievements, serving as in the state legislature for six terms and two terms as a Cuyahoga County commissioner. In the legislature she was selected by the Democrats as the majority whip and later the assistant minority leader.

She was a revered leader in women's rights organizations, stressing the need for more involvement by women in community and government positions. Her work in promoting civil rights helped gain the black vote that was the key to her election.

Like mayors before her, she intended city hall to be a stepping-stone in a political career that would spiral to a higher office, namely that of the governor. However, unlike most of her immediate predecessors, Campbell grew up in Shaker Heights, which was a political stigma that she would carry throughout her one term as mayor.

The city hall that Campbell inherited on January 1, 2002, was in turmoil. In Mayor Mike White's last term in office, he had let government fall to ruin. City departments were barely functional, and the state auditor reported that city finances were in serious disarray.

Business leaders had lost faith in White. The momentum that he had generated for the city early in his term in office was petering out. Any thought of addressing the growing need for regionalism was remote as White had angered a swatch of suburban leaders.

Jane Campbell represented hope for a new day, but the task before her was daunting. The economy in post 9/11 years was feeble and for a time the city was ignorant to the deficits it faced. Plus, the political glow was beginning to dim over city hall.

When she campaigned, Jane, as she came to be known, liked to tell voters that one of her goals was to attract enough new residents to

the city to bring its population back over 500,000. The 2000 census counted 477,459 people in the city, down 28,157 from ten years before. Cities with less than 500,000 population became ineligible for certain federal grants.

In that same period Cuyahoga County lost 18,295 residents, while each abutting county gained in population. If these statistics did not illustrate the spreading regional nature of Northeastern Ohio, nothing did. However, against this backdrop it had to be noted that the state lost 506,025 persons since the last census or a staggering 4.7 percent of its population.

For the past 20 years both the city and county government had worked to stem this flow and maintain Cleveland as a major metropolitan center. New stadiums were built, as well as a sports arena, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a new science museum adorned the lakefront.

Plans called for additional pieces to be added. A convention center was needed to replace one that was built in 1922. A plan to spend \$200 million to refurbish Euclid Avenue was in place, and there was the omnipresent problem of the lakefront. No single issue bothered people in the region more than the condition of the lakefront.

The lakefront had been seized in the city's early years by industrial interests, which created the port and the railroads, bringing wealth and jobs, thus propelling Cleveland into the forefront of American commerce. But the industrialization of the lakefront marred the natural beauty of the lake. Over the years city hall paid lip service to the development of the waterfront, but aside from empty headlines little was done to change it.

Jane Campbell wanted her legacy to be the lakefront and she set out to plan for its future on a scale that had never been attempted. By the time the 2004 Waterfront District Plan was completed, some 5,000 people had participated in some 125 meetings at an expense of \$2 million. In a city where secrecy in government was a

way of life, the transparency in Campbell's planning effort was refreshing.

Another issue confronting the public was that of the convention center. Studies had convinced the business community that Cleveland lost \$150 million annually because of its antiquated convention center. The problem was that to build it, would require a tax levy passed and most politicians were fearful of voter repercussions.

The convention center involved the classic Cleveland conundrum. Was the use of public money to generate private wealth at the expense of the taxpayer good for the community as a whole? No politician wanted to be on the wrong end of that argument.

The issue also contrasted the difference a century could make in community spirit.

In 1916, community leaders decided there was a need for a convention center and sought the public's view on the matter. Some 200,000 persons representing 116 organizations helped vote for a \$2.5- million bond issue, which passed four to one in the largest turnout in the city's history. The project they built was the largest in America and among the best in the world.

Amazingly, the Public Auditorium paid for itself in one year, attracting 162 conventions with 72,000 visitors generating \$2.5 million in revenue.

Now, one hundred years later, there was no political leadership for the project; the business community was left to squabble over the site. It was a contentious issue that would cost more than one public official their jobs.

There was no consensus as to where to build a convention center. Forest City lobbied heavily to put it in the flats behind Tower City on land that it owned. Other suggestions included the Warehouse District, the Mall and the Galleria.

No one seemed to have a grip on the issue, Campbell said she did not oppose its construction, but the city's fragile financial picture made it impractical as a priority for city hall.

But it was with the convention center, that Campbell began to show serious leadership flaws that would end her political career here. While she had experience in legislative and administrative government, she lacked the decisiveness of an executive.

And the convention center was an issue that needed careful shepherding through the thicket of self-interest that stood in its way. Supporters sensed that her ambition for higher office had made her cautious, measuring every move in political terms. In the end, she came to symbolize the status quo, which victimized her as well.

"She actually enjoyed ending a meeting where nothing happened," said a former staff member. "She sank the convention center because her decisions were all political and not what was good for the community".

If she would not engage in substantial issues involving the city, she did not shirk from its social life. Campbell could be found at every ribbon cutting, throwing out the first ball, and marching in the gay pride parade, reminiscent of the ethnic mayors who knew the city polka bands and neighborhood fairs better than they knew the city budget.

The reporters covering her administration sensed something else that was different about Jane. She may know about the city, but she was really a product of Shaker Heights, and people in Cleveland wanted a native ingredient in their mayor. In one publicized incident, Campbell appeared on a national television show for a beauty makeover. The performance was disdainfully regarded in the city's poor neighborhoods.

The publicity that her lakefront plan garnered irked the county commissioners, who had long sought increased representation on

the city-county port authority. City hall appointed six board members, but the county appointed only three. Citing the exodus of population from the city, the commissioners wanted more seats on the board.

Part of the reason the commissioners wanted more control of the port authority was that it would consolidate the planning process. As it was, the city, through the port authority, could make plans for the lakefront, but had no financial wherewithal to execute them. But always in the background, was the issue of patronage.

The port authority had been created during the Stokes administration and was visionary in that it represented one of the first elements of regional government.

When she was a commissioner, Campbell supported a transfer of seats, but as mayor she reversed her position creating friction between her and the county. She had little choice because City Council President Frank Jackson was adamantly opposed to the realignment.

After the anger of the Mike White years, Campbell seemed refreshing and accessible. She sorted out the city's tangled finances, used her consensus skills to bond with city council and spoke of overcoming the economic and educational problems that paralyzed the city. However, halfway through her term political observers began to wonder whether that she was too busy with small things to accomplish the larger tasks.

As she danced away from leadership on the convention center, the business community changed its tune. Two business groups, Cleveland Tomorrow and the Growth Association, that had actively supported Campbell's lakefront plan, dropped it in favor of the convention center.

For all of its hail and hype, planners were beginning to question the lakefront effort. For one thing, it had taken on massive proportions and had embraced input from thousands of citizens

making its scale so grand that it was impossible to achieve. After spending millions of dollars, and thousands of hours of manpower the plan was unmasked for what it had become.

The plan had evolved into nothing more than a public relations platform for Jane Campbell's city hall. Like every waterfront plan in the past it was quietly relegated to a dusty shelf and with it the political ambitions of its architect, Jane Campbell.

Other events were in motion that would play a role in shaping the area's political future. At first they went unrecognized, dismissed as business as usual, but slowly the elements took shape and gathered into the perfect storm.

As the business community fretted over an unresponsive city hall, federal investigators were in the midst of a probe into corruption allegations of the Mike White administration. At the same time, the Cleveland Bar Association was sponsoring yet another in depth study into the merits of regional government.

While the two incidents were seemingly unrelated, they were the beginnings of profound change in the way Cuyahoga County would be ruled. The publicity generated by each would alert the public that all was not well with the way they were being governed.

While the U.S. attorney's office prepared to prosecute a number of people with connections to city hall, including Nate Gray, Mike White's best friend, those running the bar association study were attempting to find a way to put regional government on the ballot. To be successful the issue needed the support of the black political community.

There was no enthusiasm among black leaders for such a change and they offered no help. Despite that setback, the bar association managed to present its case to the public through a series of meetings and a report. This sparked interest in the community regarding the quality and cost of its government.

In April of 2004, City Council President Frank Jackson gave an unusual speech at the City Club. He called for the adoption of regionalism to support all public schools. He called efforts to change the way we are governed was destined to lead to “alienation, divisiveness and doom.” These were ironic words for a man who would have an opportunity later to help make a change, but failed to act.

In 2005, Nate Gray was found guilty and sentenced to 15 years in jail after having made a reported \$13 million through corrupt practices tied to city hall. Others were convicted and sent to jail. It was, in all probability, the single largest such case in the city’s history.

Meanwhile, Jane Campbell’s tenure as mayor was becoming increasingly shaky. When it became known that black ministers, formerly Campbell supporters, were now pushing the administration to put more blacks in leadership positions in the safety forces, she was embarrassed.

Campbell’s next blunder occurred months before a vote for a convention center tax, when she refused to support the issue, throwing the business community and the county commissioners for a loss. She attributed her decision to polls that said 65 percent of the public was against the tax.

Then an accord she made with City Council President Jackson erupted into a conflict in which he charged that she failed to keep the council informed on matters regarding a nagging city deficit as well as layoffs and a plan to raise the income tax for the schools. Jackson told the media he could no longer trust Campbell.

Slowly, she alienated nearly everyone.

Meanwhile, the debate over regionalism heightened and the business community issued a report calling for the establishment of gambling casinos to give some life to downtown and provide revenue for a struggling school system.

The political tension between Mayor Campbell and Council President Jackson heightened as well, when in November of 2004, speculation began that he would run for mayor in the next year's election. It did not take Jane Campbell long to react to the emerging challenge.

Sensing the growing momentum in the business community for casino gambling, Campbell, in an uncharacteristic move, announced her support and reopened the dormant convention center proposal. She also initiated a study on the future of the Lakefront Airport. The airport was a thorn in any planning of the lakefront's future.

But it was too late.

Frank Jackson was 58 when he decided to run for mayor. A sitting councilman had not been elected mayor since 1867, and it had not been Jackson's ambition to seek that office. He said he had no choice because the city was struggling under a person who avoided difficult decisions by looking through rose-colored glasses.

Almost on cue, Campbell backed off another difficult decision, seeking a tax increase to aid the struggling school system which had failed to pass a levy the previous fall. The community chastised the decision and accused the mayor of putting her own future ahead of that of the school children.

As a politician, Jackson was somewhat enigmatic. His speech was slow and sometimes awkward, and he had a demeanor so retiring that he sometimes appeared not to have enough energy to deal with a city. Those who knew and worked with him described his character as honest and contemplative. For a man in his position, ambition and ego were hardly evident. Conversely, some worried about the depth of his drive and spirit.

The offspring of bi-racial parents, Jackson grew up in the city, attended its school system, its community college, served in Vietnam, and took three degrees at Cleveland State University,

emerging as a lawyer. He was elected Ward 5 councilman in 1989 and became council president in 2002. If Jane Campbell knew the city theoretically, Jackson knew it practically.

In truth, the campaign for mayor in 2005 held little drama. Eight candidates vied in the primary for the two runoff positions which were won by Jackson and Campbell. It was the first time an incumbent mayor finished second in the primary in 26 years.

The turn out was light, some 52,000 voted, and Jackson overwhelmed Campbell with 38 percent of the vote to her 29 percent, while the rest was scattered among the other contenders.

Then a month later, Jackson would win the general election with 55 percent of the vote.

The election that fall of 2005 returned Tim Hagan as a county commissioner. He had served for 16 years before retiring in 1998. Over the years Hagan had become a perennial political candidate running for mayor and governor and losing. Voters liked him as a county commissioner.

The business community had been so angered at Commissioner Tim McCormack's negative stance on the convention center that it threw its money and resources behind Hagan. It was presumed by some businessmen that Hagan would take the lead on the convention center issue. He, along with commissioners Jimmy Dimora and Peter Lawson Jones, would have much to say about its future.

Elsewhere a series of events were unfolding that would have a profound effect not only on the future of city hall, but of the region as well. Part of it would reveal that the Nate Gray case was not an isolated incident, but an example of systemic corruption throughout the region's political subculture.

The problem with the county political system was there was only one viable party, the Democratic Party. The fragmented Republicans could hardly assemble enough votes to win a county-

wide office. And the death of *The Cleveland Press* in 1982 had removed an essential check and balance from the community. By 2005 the county was so riddled with corruption and larded with patronage and inept leadership that it was a government in name only.

The county commissioners spent \$45 million on the vacant Ameritrust Tower as a new administrative building only to find it was unsuitable. This came about after the commissioners paid a consultant \$3 million to locate appropriate office space. It was puzzling, and *The Plain Dealer* began to call for more transparency in county business.

The commissioners responded angrily, especially Dimora who, in one meeting, ordered reporters ejected. To add to the tension, citizen groups were actively organizing, continuing to cry for a regional government that would replace the commissioners.

In the past, the Democratic Party had shrugged off attempts at reform. Reform of any kind was anathema to the entrenched office holders whose friends and family enjoyed political largesse. But political observers sensed there was something different at work.

Meanwhile, a tax increase to pay for the \$465-million convention center was turned down by voters. In response, the commissioners unilaterally levied a .75 percent increase on the county's sales tax to meet the cost. To accompany the project, a medical mart was proposed that would house medical suppliers and in turn attract conventions.

The plan was bold, but controversial for it involved the participation of a private company.

MMPI, a Chicago trade show company that managed marts nationally were hired by the commissioners to oversee the construction of both complexes and manage them. At the head of MMPI was Chris Kennedy, a friend of Commissioner Tim Hagan, and the son of the late Robert F. Kennedy.

Then on July 28, 2006, federal agents, in a stunning raid of the offices and homes of top county officials, produced search warrants that indicated that they were looking for evidence of government corruption. In the succeeding weeks, it became clear that the county was in the midst of its biggest scandal in history.

Among those who followed the day-to day events of the area, there was a feeling that *The Plain Dealer* had not covered government as closely or as impartially as was warranted. Certainly, Mike White's years as mayor deserved more scrutiny, but the scope of the county corruption case far overshadowed it and that, too, had gone undetected by the media.

In fact, the media was beginning to have problems of its own. The internet was becoming such a phenomenon that it was cutting into the revenues and readership of newspapers and eroding television news and advertising. News staffs were reduced and the size of the newspapers drastically cut. The internet presented the greatest challenge to the traditional media in its history.

Despite the internet, story after story of bribery and deceit played out on a daily basis in the newspaper with a new zeal. Page one was dark with headlines outlining the betrayal of the public trust by a coterie of Democratic office holders led by County Commissioner Jimmy Dimora and County Auditor Frank Russo.

Day after day, *The Plain Dealer* hammered at the corruption until the very foundation of the sitting government was an issue in doubt. There were some who thought the newspaper's coverage had lost its objectivity. Others countered that there was no objectivity to display, the situation had lost any sense of fairness or balance.

A citizen's group, formed out of the earlier interest in government reform, was launched in an attempt to put a charter change on the county ballot. Passage would streamline government and be a step toward regionalism. The main problem again was getting support from the black leaders. They were reluctant to give up their hard-

earned political base.

Events were moving fast. The federal investigation mounted with each week and the newspaper devoted more and more space and resources to the story. There was no topic discussed more in town than the extent of probe, which touched on more than 100 persons.

The citizen's group was successful in putting the charter change on the November 2009 ballot as Issue 6. But Democrats and labor leaders countered with Issue 5 that called for the creation of a commission to study the situation. Given the circumstances and the mood of the community, it was a tired tactic aimed at confusing the issue of reform.

Only one black political leader, Nina Turner, supported the charter change and she was castigated by her community. It was a critical moment for black leaders, especially Frank Jackson, who could have used his support to barter for possible concessions to aid his beleaguered school system. He did nothing.

On November 9, 2009, voters passed the charter change with a decisive 66.18 percent of the vote while Issue 5 went down hard, losing by 72.03 percent. It was truly an historic moment. The voters slammed the door on the past with vengeance.

The charter called for a county executive and an 11- member council that would eliminate the three county commissioners and eight other elected offices. The first election of the new government was held in 2010 and Lakewood mayor Ed FitzGerald was elected to the executive's office.

FitzGerald, a former FBI agent who ironically opposed the charter change, wasted no time in reforming a bloated and unresponsive government. He cut \$20-million in payroll and expenses. Some said he moved fast because he wanted to run for governor. Just the thought was an indication of how the new government had superseded city hall in political importance.

At times, Jackson's stewardship at city hall was unremarkable. A

new lakefront plan developed by the Cleveland-Cuyahoga Port Authority under the mayor's direction floundered, wasting a million more dollars to say nothing of time. City hall announced yet another plan, but the lack of money and leadership most likely will doom it, too.

One of the big blows was Jackson's failure to convince Eaton Corporation to follow through with plans to build its new headquarters on the lakefront. Instead, the company opted to build it in Chagrin Highlands.

City Hall continued to have housekeeping issues. The water department, full to the brim from years of patronage, was having such difficulty in billing and service that suburbs were talking of opting out of the system. The fire department had workforce problems that led to a criminal investigation, and the mayor's expensive plan to create energy out of waste appeared beyond the horizon.

Finally, the city got its casino in the spring of 2012 and it became an immediate attraction in the old Higbee Co. building on Public Square. Businesses surrounding the casino experienced an immediate lift.

Late in his second term, Jackson began to focus on the agonizing problem of a broken school system. His efforts to confront the problems of a school system that long ago had been severely damaged were admirable. The question remained, though, how effective will the restructuring of the teaching system be? It desperately needed an operating levy passed.

The city seemed to be left to its own devices, no longer the political focal point it once was. It had been relegated to the status of another suburb.

In a sense, both the county and the city were at a cross roads. They shared similar problems and for both it was essential that they begin to think as a region rather than yet another subdivision.

The sprawl that had drained population from the central city since the 1920s, was now impacting the city and county in another critical way. By 2010 there were only 2,000 acres of agricultural land left in the county which soon would be the first in the state to be totally built upon.

On study tracing the migration away from cities showed that between 2000 and 2010 some 100,000 people moved from Cleveland, Akron and Lorain. Adjoining counties acquired 40,000 new residents.

The nature of government in some of these counties precluded the ability to levy income taxes making those areas attractive to those who want to leave areas of urban sprawl. Dismally, the study reported that by 2037 there will be another 75,000 houses abandoned in Cuyahoga County.

Ironically, the urban reported say that downtown Cleveland is the key to the region's salvation. It has to find ways to regenerate its economy and entice people back into the city, reversing the trend that sprawl caused which only resulted in a rolling decay across the region.

Every indicator for Northeastern Ohio shows the need for government to abandon the past reorganize itself and adopt new taxing policies, redevelopment strategies and inducements to revitalize the region's core.

The 21st century in the region has to be a time of innovation, leadership, and, above all, necessity.

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