

Hit 'delete' on the 1998 campaign finance amendment

Charter review panel promises a fresh start

At long last, a fix is in the works for Akron's campaign finance limits, embedded in the city charter by a deeply flawed amendment pushed to the ballot by a group called Dollars and Democracy and approved by voters in 1998 after a deeply deceptive campaign.

From the beginning, the limits have been a fiasco, a solution in search of a problem that never existed, generating legal battles while incumbentts seeking re-election would never face well-funded challengers.



STEVE HOFFMAN

The Charter Review Commission, appointed every decade to review the city's basic governing document, took a long, hard look at the mess created by what's left of the 1998 amendment, large parts of which were quickly tossed out in federal court.

The bipartisan commission, led by former council members Terry Albanese and John Frank, the last Republican to serve on the council, looked squarely at the fundamental question.

Which goes something like this:

What are very low dollar limits doing in the city charter, where they remain fixed unless changed by a subsequent amendment approved by the people?

That combined with other flaws in the poorly worded 1998 amendment, convinced the commission to recommend a bold step. At Frank's urging, the commission backed an amendment that would strip campaign finance limits from the charter and require the City Council to enact campaign finance and ethics standards, by ordinance, within 90 days after passage of the charter amendment. The standards would be reviewed every two years.

Howls of protest ensued from the same coalition of anti-Plusquellic Democrats who have used one ballot issue after another, even a recall campaign, to go after the city's longest serving mayor.

There never was evidence that big money was a problem in Akron city politics, but Dollars and Democracy manufactured a study before its 1998 campaign purporting to show links between campaign contributions and city contracts.

Trouble was, all but a tiny handful of the contracts went to the low bidders, as required by law, something Dollars and Democracy's leaders knew, but didn't reveal.

It was county government under



The city's current campaign finance rules favor incumbents over challengers.

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former Executive Tim Davis that generated scandals. Ironically, dissident Democrats then on City Council made headlines about what appeared to be small-scale scams, helping rally support for campaign finance limits.

Early in 1998, then-Councilman Enrie Tarle was indicted for handling a cash-filled envelope to Councilman Mike Parsons minutes before a meeting that included a vote on a controversial oil and gas well. The money had been given to Tarle by a representative of Everflow Eastern, a Canadian oil-well driller. Tarle was later acquitted.



Next month, at a special meeting, the City Council is likely to vote to put the charter amendment recommended by the review commission on the November ballot. Council members will continue to take heat from those involved with the 1998 campaign, but it appears there are enough votes to wipe the slate clean and start over, looking at what makes sense, as opposed to crafting a vehicle to contain a political vendetta against Mayor Plusquellic.

The new amendment contains no requirement that the City Council raise the present limits, \$100 for ward

candidates and \$300 for at-large and mayoral candidate, or to have any limits at all.

What is certain is that placing such limits in the charter, with no practical way of adjustment, places ever more severe limits on candidates as inflation rises, impeding the ability to fund basic campaign techniques such as mass mailings.

At the state and federal levels, lawmakers have recognized the need for flexibility, not only in dollar limits, but in other mechanisms, such as disclosure, responding to the never-ending cleverness of campaign consultants, interest groups and political parties.

That's why campaign finance limits aren't in the U.S. or Ohio constitutions. Most big cities in Ohio don't include limits in their charters.

Such issues will be aired more fully. The City Council plans public hearings, and will adopt a resolution before the November vote outlining in more detail what would be included in a new campaign finance ordinance should the amendment pass.

The hearings and resolution will help lay the groundwork for the fall campaign for the charter amendment, helping voters come to grips with the need for realistic, flexible regulations that give candidates the means to reach voters.

Hoffman is a Beacon Journal editorial writer; he can be reached at 330-996-3740 or e-mailed at shoffman@thebeaconjournal.com.