

Issue 3 is a distraction from critical work ahead

But remember message of restoring City Hall ethics

A city's charter, like a constitution, is intended as a framework for governing that should wear well over time. It is not intended to deal with the temporal or trendy.

Those are reasons enough to say 'no' to Issue 3, which has eight very different provisions, ranging from how much City Council members are paid to whether or not the mayor can be recalled. Any one of the eight provisions is worth a full public debate. This charter amendment doesn't invite that debate. Instead, it seeks a wholesale embrace of a package of divergent revisions and additions with the underlying assumption that City Hall is at least off course and at worst corrupt.

Issue 3's proponents see their amendment as a way to restore the integrity and balance. But voters this fall have a much more immediate way to do that. They need only study the records, character and proposals of the candidates for City Council and elect a mayor and nine council members capable of righting the ship.

It is likely that City Council will have many new or relatively new members who can chart a very different direction should they choose to do so. They may very well look at some of the provisions contained in Issue 3 and decide to pass ordinances proposing future charter amendments for some of these specific items. They can do that.

While Issue 3's proponents pitch their proposal as reform, which perhaps it is, the reality is that reform has its best chance in the hands of a City Council refashioned by an electorate that takes the time to consider the best candidates to guide Cincinnati forward.

The Cincinnati Association is a civic organization with 102 years of history in our city. It was born from a public-spirited movement to clean up City Hall and to improve governance. We remain committed to those causes. So, we applaud the thinking behind Issue 3 but disagree with this wholesale, all-or-nothing approach that invites little grassroots consideration of the merits of each of the eight provisions. There are better ways to judge the merits of these provisions than to rush them through a voter referendum.

This is not the place to take each of the provisions of Issue 3 item by item. But let's take just one of them as an example of the depth of consideration this process lacks: the right to recall the mayor. Cincinnati voters need look no further than last month's attempt in California to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom, barely more than a year from the regular gubernatorial election. It proved a colossal distraction as the state literally was going up in flames during a pandemic.

What happened in California would surely have been weighed in Cincinnati had the mayoral recall provision been a standalone charter amendment. As it is, voters are being asked to say 'yes' to that substantive change in the same breath that they say 'yes' to seven unrelated provisions. It's the wrong process.

Meanwhile, the provisions of Issue 3 do little to address the serious questions about City Hall operations that have arisen from the scandals related to undue influence from developers. Real reform, whether it comes as a charter amendment, a series of ethic ordinances passed by the newly elected council, or simply by the change in culture brought about by that same newly elected council, should tackle that crisis head on. In that sense, Issue 3 is a distraction from the pressing work at hand.

The Cincinnati Association urges voters to reject Issue 3, but not to reject its authors' message that City Hall needs a restoration of integrity and purpose.

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