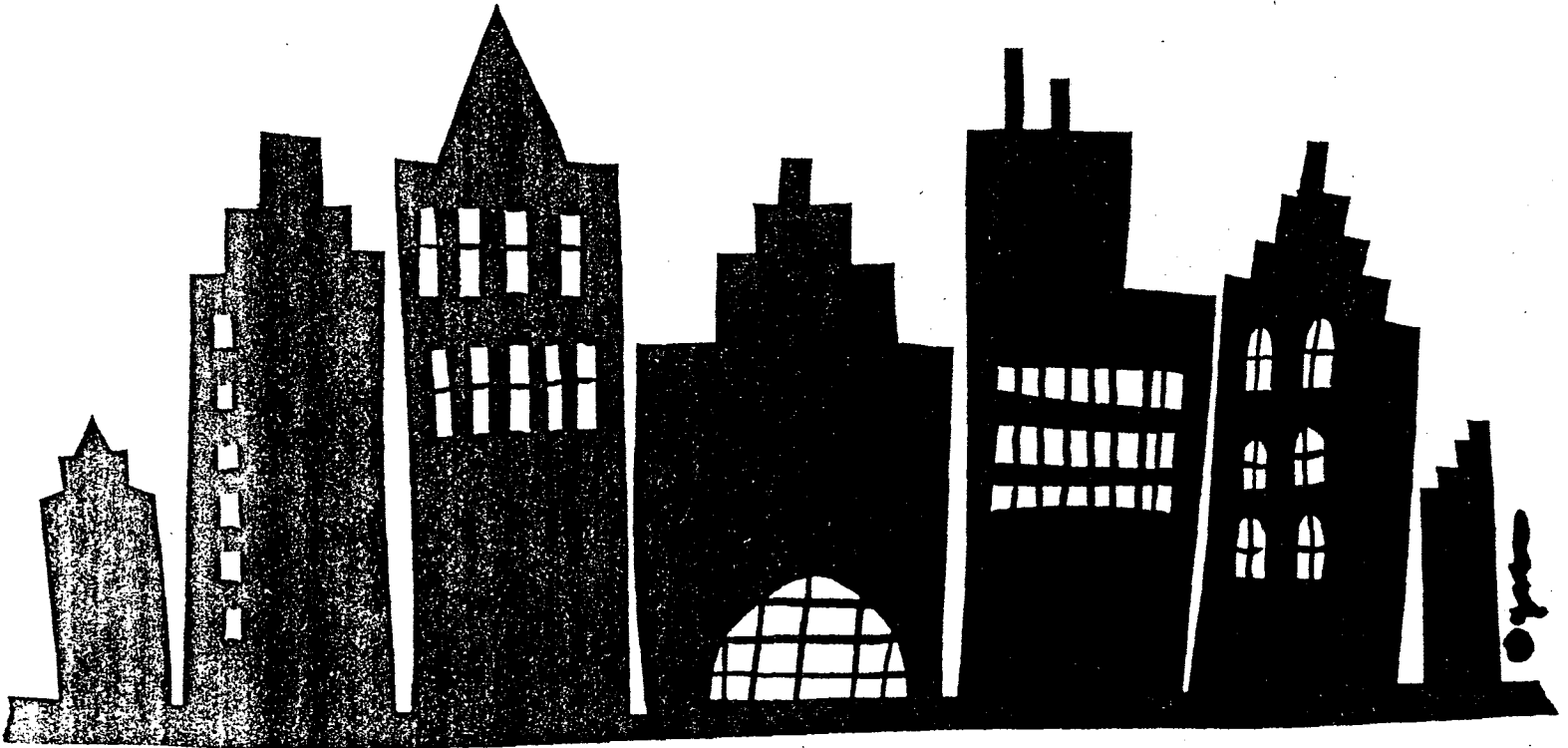


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Cleveland: Back up and start over

By Pete Jedick

Happy birthday, Cleveland. On New Year's Day, our city began a yearlong celebration of its 200th birthday with a float in the Rose Parade.

What a great time for the grand old town. Thanks to the Cleveland Indians and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, we're sitting on top of the world, basking in newfound fame and glory. We should enjoy the recognition for as long as we can.

But as a Cleveland historian looking over the last 200 years with an eye to the future, I have a radical suggestion for the next century.

It's time to put the old thoroughbred of a city out to pasture. What better time to call it quits than while you're on top of your game? Go out in a blaze of glory like another famous Clevelander, fullback Jim Brown.

Because beneath the surface, under all the glitz, are a bunch of tired old neighborhoods struggling to survive.

Every election year I hear the same old refrain: "So what if downtown's booming, what are you doing about the neighborhoods?" It's usually spouted by a disgruntled councilman or wannabe mayoral candidate.

Yet there is a great cause for concern. For every neighborhood success story there are many times more problems.

Take your pick: Crime, drugs, pollution, decay, poverty, gangs, dysfunctional schools. They're all out of control and growing worse daily.

It's time for the city of Cleveland to admit to itself that the urban problems of modern America are just too big to solve.

Despite massive influxes of federal dollars over the past few decades the neighborhoods have deteriorated, not improved.

Cleveland should follow the lead of big business and the federal government. Downsizing is all the rage.

The city already has six police districts and six fire battalions. It should prepare for the 21st century by breaking itself up into six brand new independent suburbs.

The West Side could become Ohio City, Old Brooklyn and West Park. The new East Side could be called Cleveland, Glenville and Mt. Pleasant. Or pick your own names.

Sound crazy? Maybe, but let me explain.

What do all city of Cleveland residents have in common? They all want to move to the suburbs but can't afford to upgrade.

Why do they want to move? Two big reasons: Better schools and police protection. Safety is the big issue of the 1990s, in both the schools and the neighborhoods.

Why do the suburbs do a better job of providing services than the big city? They are more responsive because there aren't layers of bureaucrats between their leaders and their citizens.

And just as importantly, the suburbs aren't hampered by social engineers who live in Washington, D.C., and think they know what's best for our nation's big cities, foisting experiments like school busing on them.

In one quick move, everyone in the city would now live in a suburb. The busing experiment would be over because it would no longer apply. Property values would immediately rise.

New school boards could actually promote education instead of stifling it. New local courts could back up the new police depart-

ments, administering justice swiftly, just the U.S. Constitution requires.

It almost sounds too easy. Of course there would be some resistance from vested interests. But I think it would be an opportunity for everyone.

The mayor and city councilmen may be afraid of losing their jobs. But now there would be six mayors and six new councils. Who better to fill those positions than those with previous government experience?

Likewise with other city employees. I'm a city worker myself, a firefighter. I'm sure there could be a provision to protect our jobs, giving us first priority in the new suburbs. Let the unions work out the details.

Some operations like the airport and water department may have to be taken over by the county. That's a bit tricky but not impossible.

It would force Cuyahoga County's government to make some long-overdue changes in its operation. It also needs a major overhaul. It has a \$750 million budget overseen by three commissioners. It reminds me of a Latin American military junta.

In case you're not a student of Latin American politics, those countries south of the border don't operate very efficiently. You can't run a football team, a corporation or a government by committee.

No one is ultimately responsible for the big decisions, like the SAFE debacle.

The other major obstacle to overcome is what to do with downtown. Those big office buildings generate an awful lot of tax revenue and everyone would like a piece of the pie.

I'm sure there's a solution. Maybe let the county distribute it like the U.S. block grants. Maybe change the taxation system. Maybe attach it to the poorest neighborhoods to create a golden inner city.

What we need is a blue ribbon committee to work out the details. Give it a year to bring back a plan for the voters.

Let's put Cleveland back on the cutting edge of modern thought, like it was back in its glory days around the turn of the last century. Let the nation watch in awe as we solve all our urban problems with one stroke of the pen.

It would be a birthday to remember.

Jedick is the author of "Cleveland: Where the East Coast Meets the Midwest."