

FORUM

On this day: *In 1620, Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower sail for the New World*

A plan to save Cleveland: Divide it into 6 suburbs

PETER JEDICK

On July 22 the city of Cleveland was 207 years old. If there was a party, I missed it. Or maybe we did not celebrate because of all the bad news that dominated headlines this summer.

First there was the convention center fiasco, then the blackout. Now we have the Whiskey Island crisis and a projected \$62 million deficit. What next?

Let's face it, the city of Cleveland is showing her age. It is time to update her with a regional form of government.

The city is becoming woefully obsolete. Take the recent blackout as an example. Going overnight without electric power was an adventure. But early in the crisis there was talk of going four days without water. That's not an adventure; that's a tragedy.

It should be obvious to everyone that the city of Cleveland has no more business delivering water to the rest of Northeast Ohio than it does running Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

Take a hard look around Cuyahoga County. We have huge problems that our leaders cannot fix. It is not their fault. They are competent representatives trying to protect their turf in an archaic system. There is a plague upon us caused by decades of neglect and the city and county governments butting heads.

Here's a short list of the challenges facing our area. Yet it is only the tip of the iceberg facing the SS Cleveland:

The convention center and Hopkins Airport are obsolete. The downtown lakefront is inaccessible. The Flats are dead. Downtown is dying. The Cleveland schools' graduation rates resemble those of a third world country. Crime will not go away. Plans for a lakefront auto museum and aquarium are gathering dust. And the only thing holding the city's neighborhoods together are the city workers who are forced by law to live in them.

(City employees are petitioning the state for the freedom to flee to the suburbs; that fact says volumes about the city of Cleveland from the citizens who know it best.)

We need a radical solution to these problems or we are in danger of becoming a large doughnut of suburbs surrounding a sink hole of a city.

Here is my solution, and it is really quite simple. We dissect the city of Cleveland into six suburbs and replace the three Cuyahoga County Commissioners with a regional government that has one leader and a council made up of suburban representatives.

Then put Hopkins airport, the water department and Cleveland Public Power under independent regional authorities like the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, the Metroparks and RTA. Big projects like the convention center and lakefront development would be tackled

by the new regional government.

Why six suburbs? Because Cleveland is already cut into six police districts and six fire department battalions. Collinwood, Glenville and Slavic Village would be on the east side. Old Brooklyn and West Park on the west side. Downtown would be a suburb to be named later; let's call it Little Cleveland for now.

How does this solve our most pressing problems? Here's my scenario:

First of all, the Cleveland school system would no longer exist. It would be replaced by six smaller systems that could concentrate on education instead of lawsuits. Half the battle would be won.

The value of your home in Cleveland would begin to rise. There would be no reason to move to the suburbs because you'd already live in one. You may want to stay put and see how this experiment works out.

Little Cleveland would be the key. Free from the bickering Cleveland City Council it could be business friendly for the first time.

It could copy Independence, the suburb where Interstate 480 and Interstate 77 intersect. Independence has a mini-downtown that is a tax cow for the community and its school system.

Little Cleveland would become a similar attraction for its residents. Young people and families would flock to the new suburb. We would finally have a 24/7 downtown culture like Chicago and New York City.

We could configure Little Cleveland to include our poorest inner-ring housing in Tremont, Ohio City and Chinatown and use its wealth to immediately upgrade those areas. A domino effect would help heal the other five new suburbs. If done properly no one would have to lose his job. City employees, like me, would have the first choice to work in the six suburbs. There would be plenty of new mayoral and council slots for the politicians. In fact, the move would probably create many new positions.

Of course, there will be many objections raised. Change is always uncomfortable, especially for those in power. But if Cleveland does not act quickly, it is in danger of becoming a minor league city. Columbus, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, even Detroit, are all leaving us in their wake.

I propose we put together a blue ribbon panel to work out the kinks and put the issue on next fall's ballot. I'm sure our local brain trust can add many more creative ideas.

Maybe that way we can vote for a mayoral candidate in 2004 whose platform is that he or she wants to be Cleveland's last mayor.

Jedick, a city of Cleveland fire fighter and Cleveland historian, is the author of "Cleveland: Where the East Coast Meets the Midwest."