



City of Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission

Fifth Interview – Bonnie Caplan, Former Member of Council Tuesday 27 March 2018

This is the first interview of former members of Council. Additional questions were sent to some as part of having the draft of the interview reviewed. All interview reports were submitted to those interviewed before sharing them with the Commission.

Bonnie and I met at J Pistone Café and Marketing Place. (As an aside, I am getting to know some of the very appealing small businesses in the city. Easy to see why the Heights is such a desirable location.) We talked for an hour about both her experiences and current politics. Bonnie no longer lives in Cleveland Heights but is very involved in recruiting and assisting candidates for office in several communities. As an aside, the search for and recruiting council candidates in particular is a crucial issue. How successfully that is done goes a long way to determining the quality of the politics and success in governing. Parties are not often sufficiently engaged in recruiting and less focused on quality of governance. She is also active in the mental health field.

She started her Cleveland Heights career with the Planning Commission. She also served on campaign staff and found, and still finds, campaigns exciting. As noted above, she is still involved with campaigns in several communities.

Bonnie served on City Council for twenty years, from 1993 to 2012. She enjoyed serving on council and though the city had serious problems, the system worked well. She found the Council well informed, both then and now, as it meets in both committees and as a group. She believes that a council can address economic development as well as a mayor. She pointed out that 60% of Cleveland Heights residents face economic issues.

She directly addressed several issues the Commission is dealing with. The City manager is definitely accountable as the Council can fire the manager at any time. The manager is seriously reviewed annually. A major part of the annual review is goal setting. Council sets priorities for the manager to focus on and the timing of actions. She liked the recent use of 360 evaluation process.

Council keeps up to date and involved as it meets frequently, both as council and in committees. She noted that about 100 citizens pay serious attention to the Council and its activities. This provides feedback and information to the Council.

She is concerned with the election of a mayor. This can make the City Manager vulnerable. Mayors often have political ambitions and thus have personal agendas. This can complicate council setting agendas and priorities for the manager. She noted the example of the mayor of Beachwood and his actions. Despite allegations of ambition driven behavior mayors can have name recognition and be re-elected. In fact, the former mayor in Beachwood whom she referenced, and whose salary was over \$200,000, lost to the council president in a very close, highly contested race. See <https://patch.com/ohio/beachwood/new-mayor-beachwood-its-official-almost> for the story.

She has concerns over use of wards for council representation. She thought wards could have value where it is difficult and costly to run at-large and focus on the city as a whole. In Cleveland Heights campaign costs are negligible with time and energy more important. Getting a party endorsement can also bring in resources to a campaign. She fears that with wards city funds would not be invested in the most needed areas but sent to wards with a politically active councilmember. She perceived this as happening to areas like Noble Road where stores are lacking. She spoke of a personal incident where she had helped create an opportunity for a major mental health capital investment in Cleveland which was vetoed by a ward councilmember. The investment would have not only have addressed mental health issues but also provided jobs and additional city revenues in a ward that needed them.

She answered a later inquiry about the outcome of having seven bosses with:

Perhaps 7 people are not as quick to respond as one might be. But that, of course, assumes that the one person is not overwhelmed, and is interested in the issue. If that one person chooses to ignore an issue - then too bad. At least with 7 there is the possibility that someone might care about whatever the issue is. And when it works, and the seven can have a real discussion, then one has an idea, and the others can build on that idea. So innovation is better with many folks providing input.

Another later inquiry asked the lack of a “point person” where the “buck stops.” Her response was:

In terms of where does the buck stop, the same thing applies. If the one doesn't care, then that is it. Perhaps, with seven, then one of the group might be willing to stand up and take responsibility for dealing with an issue.

I have seen many different modes of City Government, and I remain convinced that the City Manager form is the least "political" and has the best chance of accomplishing the good work of government with the least cronyism and highest level of integrity.

She emphasized having rules for integrity. In that regard, she teaches value-based behavior. As a side note, the interviewer published a jointly authored article that argues professional is defined by enacting values more than just using a particular body of knowledge. Value based behavior defines professionalism in politics. Bonnie's exit from politics is unfortunate for the community.