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Let's Bring Dayton Together

Dan Foley, Montgomery County Commissioner

Paul Leonard, former Dayton Mayor and Lt. Governor, State of Ohio

In the aftermath of the disastrous 1913 Great Flood, Daytonians reacted as you may expect: they embraced an innovative solution to meet the daunting challenges that lay ahead. Shortly thereafter, Dayton voted on a new Charter to become the first large city in the United States to adopt the Council-Manager form of government. This model of professional management was key to rebuilding the City. Soon, cities across the nation followed Dayton's lead.

The challenges facing us today are not as dramatic as rising flood waters, but they are every bit as serious. We now face a crisis that demands changes in the very way we govern ourselves. Just as our city did a century ago, we must turn to a new model requiring an innovative Charter. Consider:

- **Fewer people paying for critical services.** Montgomery County's population peaked at 606,000 in 1970, but has fallen to 535,000 today. Ohio's population grew over 8% during this period, our county's population declined 12%. According to official state estimates, we will fall another 10% by 2040, to 480,000.
- **Less state support. More local tax levies.** A shrinking population, an eroding tax base caused by the Great Recession, and the loss of state and federal dollars: for Montgomery County, this is a perfect storm. As a result, many local governments have cut services and

raised taxes and fees. The Cleveland Plain Dealer recently reported that Montgomery County residents pay the **second highest property tax rate** in Ohio, just behind Cuyahoga County. This is unsustainable. And unless we act soon, these trends will lead to more cutbacks, higher taxes, and prevent us from determining our own future.

For many years, community leaders have often questioned whether the fragmented nature of local government is holding us back. We run things using a 200 year-old system of cities, villages, townships, and a county government— 32 in all – which together serve an interconnected metropolitan area our founders could not have imagined.

We're fortunate to have excellent public servants in Montgomery County, but even as we work together, this 200 year-old patchwork system means services are needlessly duplicated and we sometimes compete, rather than cooperate, to attract jobs. These divisions cause us to talk past each other, something we can ill afford in the face of our common challenges.

It doesn't have to be this way. Other cities and counties around the nation have come together, forming "metro governments." This includes neighbors like Indianapolis and Louisville. In the Miami Valley, however, this idea has not gone beyond the talking stage. Until now.

Our organization, Dayton Together, is pushing for changes to our local government structure-- not just for the sake of change--but because it's a better way to compete for jobs, tackle poverty, and face shared challenges as one body, seated around one table.

Last July we announced an effort to create a model for a new government, but one that would make no changes to school districts.

Thanks to fifteen community volunteers who worked, debated, and brainstormed on the Dayton Together Charter Development Committee, we are releasing a draft charter—the Dayton Metro government. Our model is a Council-Manager government, incorporating professional management that has served our communities well for a century. It includes a mayor voted on by all 535,000 residents, one at-large countywide council seat, and 9 geographic districts, with the mission of bringing the community together to tackle shared opportunities and challenges.

Not everyone on our committee supported a metro government. But to their credit, even those committee members who oppose this idea stayed at the table and helped craft the model we are presenting today.

Many community leaders and elected officials have voiced opposition to our work. Some expressed concern that metro government would disenfranchise minority communities. This is far from our intent, so we hired Dr. Mark Salling, a Cleveland State University demographer, to determine if county council districts could be designed to actually increase minority representation.

Through Dr. Salling's work, three council districts in the metro structure are majority minority districts—meaning, new opportunities for countywide minority policy makers. In a county that has **never in its history elected a minority citizen** to the Montgomery County Commission, we see this as a big step for greater inclusion.

Some have also pointed out that, under our initial proposal of a city/county merger, there is no new developable land to benefit the core City of Dayton. This is fair criticism. Our model can support a merger of the city and county but also include as many other local governments as current law allows. The question of how many governments to include on a ballot is one that will need to be decided prior to any vote. But we agree there is a **strong argument** for a bolder proposal.

Finally, we need new solutions for equitable growth in areas of the community that have been left behind. We can boost these communities as we work countywide. The daily operations, in our model, would be run by a non-elected professional manager. The council structure would encourage not only job-growth strategies in each of the nine council districts, but a political partnership to support each other's opportunities across the whole county. Investment in places like West and East Dayton, Trotwood, Jefferson Township, and Riverside-which have not grown as quickly in recent decades-raises job and revenue opportunities for everyone. This does not mean disinvesting in prosperous regions. It does mean council members who want something done in their own districts will have to work to strengthen somebody else's district. Our Council-manager model can, with political will, generate more balanced, broad-based growth to all areas of Montgomery County.

Our Charter and voting district maps are available at www.DaytonTogether.com. Please take a look and consider that, as voters did in 1913, it's time again to choose innovation by working together to help our community achieve our full potential.