

DeKalb County's Form of Government

DeKalb County's form of government is not an alien concept. It is based upon the construct of ***Separation of Powers*** in which there is an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. This construct is designed to help ensure that all powers and responsibilities are not concentrated in the hands of one person or one governmental entity. It is indeed a very sound construct. This is the basic structure of our federal government, all of our state governments, and many cities throughout this country.

In DeKalb County we have an elected executive (CEO), an elected legislative branch (County Commissioners), and a separate judicial system. This is a standard concept.

There are 20 states in America which have counties that have some form of a County Executive form or government. The state of New York has 19 counties that have some form of a County Executive. In the state of Kentucky, all counties are headed by an elected executive known as the County Judge/Executive. This further underscores that the DeKalb County form of government is an accepted concept.

Yet, in last year's convening of the Georgia General Assembly, House Bill 961 was introduced. It proposed to eliminate the DeKalb County CEO position. This bill did not gain any serious traction. Since that time one of the bill's principal sponsors, Rep. Megan Hanson was not re-elected to the state house seat that she occupied. In the wake of these developments, one would hope that such maneuvering would cease and desist. But I learned long ago that hope is not a strategy. The Georgia General Assembly is scheduled to reconvene next week. Therefore, I think we have arrived at a place where at least one other member of this county's governing authority should weigh in on this subject, for the record.

I have long been supportive of the concept of a Charter Review Commission to take a comprehensive look at DeKalb County's Organizational Act which spells out the roles and responsibilities within this government. Such a review has not taken place in quite some time and therefore seems appropriate. However, a push to simply eliminate the CEO position strikes me as a knee jerk proposition that causes me to question the actual motivations behind it.

I have not heard anyone suggest that we eliminate the office of President of the United States and have those duties and powers pass to the Speaker of the House of Representatives. I have not heard anyone suggest that we eliminate the office of Governor and have the General Assembly decide all state matters. I have not heard anyone suggest that we eliminate the office of Mayor.

DeKalb County is very diverse in a macro view. Based upon 2017 GIS data the demographics for the county as a whole are as follows: 53.7% Black, 32.6% White, 8.9% Hispanic and 6.5% Asian.

However, the breakdown of demographics by county commission district paints a different picture.

District 1

15.7% Black
58.7% White
19.2% Hispanic
12.7% Asian

District 2

12.7% Black
66.7% White
16.3% Hispanic
8.5% Asian

District 3

84.6% Black
12.1% White
1.9% Hispanic
0.7% Asian

District 4

67.1% Black
18.4% White
3.8% Hispanic
9.4% Asian

District 5

92.0% Black
4.1% White
2.6% Hispanic
0.8% Asian

District 6

33.8% Black
48.1% White
11.2% Hispanic
9.2% Asian

District 7

74.4% Black
16.4% White
6.6% Hispanic
3.6% Asian

While this current iteration of the Board of Commissioners seems to be working together better than those of the recent past, each of us is still ultimately accountable to the constituencies who elect us. Therefore, I think it is imperative that we have one elected official who represents ALL of DeKalb County and who has to seek votes from ALL parts of the county: *north, central, and south, incorporated and un-incorporated*. The DeKalb County CEO is in a unique position to help bridge divides across the county, both real and perceived.

I will acknowledge that DeKalb is the only county in Georgia with this form of government. So what? No organizational structure is perfect. Mistakes, mismanagement, and corruption can and does happen under every form of government. How the boxes are arranged on the

organizational chart is far less important than who occupies those boxes. That is ultimately in the hands of the electorate. Frankly, sometimes the people get it wrong. Elections are for making the necessary course corrections to get it right.

In my opinion, calls to eliminate the DeKalb CEO position are not about water bills or sewer spills. Those who make those claims are being disingenuous at best. Likewise, the argument that the day-to-day management of DeKalb County's government requires some technocrat is equally suspect. No President of the United States arrives in office as a technical expert on defense policy, healthcare policy, energy policy, transportation policy, labor policy, education policy, or any of the myriad operations that the federal government is engaged in. Yet the ultimate responsibility for all of these functions resides with him. Likewise, the CEO of DeKalb County does not need to be a technical expert in the various functions of this government.

I assert that a leadership position of this type is primarily about character. Experience and managerial prowess are also very important. I certainly would not want a total neophyte in such a position of authority. But, no one individual has the bandwidth to be an expert in all functions. For that matter, neither does any group of individuals. Good leadership is about surrounding yourself with the right people, deploying resources properly, exercising good judgement, driving toward defined objectives, acknowledging mistakes when they occur but not dwelling on them, and striving for transparency.

Such loose talk about eliminating the DeKalb CEO position is about power, plain and simple. The DeKalb County CEO position is vested with a significant amount of power. Simply stated, I believe there are those who covet that power and want some of it for themselves. Running in a county-wide election just to achieve that end is a pretty tall order. Cutting some sort of deal in the back rooms of the state capital is not as difficult. Moreover, such maneuvering does not serve the people well.

The bottom line for me is this: our current form of government is appropriate. Should we take a hard look at some fine tuning? YES. Should we undertake some radical change in structure? NO.

It all distills to this: power placed in the wrong hands can lead to negative results, while power placed in the right hands can lead to positive results. This can be said of anyone who occupies the role of DeKalb County CEO. Likewise, it can be said of any of us who hold positions of elective office throughout this county. It is ultimately the voters who decide these matters. I learned this in civics class a long time ago.

If someday the position of DeKalb County CEO is ever to change (and to me that is a very big IF) it should be done so by a referendum of the citizens of DeKalb County. ALL of DeKalb County.

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