

# 17 Ways To Reform Erie County

## Through A Charter Commission

### Democracy Proposals

- **Evening Meetings** – The legislature unlike other county legislatures and town boards, holds their meetings in the mornings or afternoons. This makes it difficult for the public to attend and it makes it difficult for people interested in serving as a part time County Legislator to do so.
- **Public Comment** – Other county legislatures and most town boards allow the public to speak at their meetings. The public is not allowed to speak at Erie County Legislature meetings. It's incredible but true.
- **Open Government Advisory Board** – There are a variety of County boards that focus on important issues but none focus on making County government open and transparent. A board of interested citizens dedicated to addressing open government issues should be created.
- **Citizen Ballot Initiative** – In NY State, voters are not allowed to file a petition with a required number of signatures to put on the ballot ideas for amending a county charter. Suffolk County is the one exception in the entire state. In 1978, due to pressure from the public, the County Legislature and the NY State Legislature passed a law that allows Suffolk County residents to bring forth new ideas through citizen ballot initiatives. We can do the same in Erie County.
- **Freedom of Information Law Tracking** – The County to its credit has an online portal for the submission and processing of Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests. The only way to improve the processing of FOIL requests is to track and publicly share on an annual basis the number of requests received, average response time, number of denials, denial reasons, number of appeals filed and appeal results. There is legislation pending in Albany to mandate this. Erie County can lead the way by sharing this important information with the public now.

## Good Government Proposals

- **Term Limits** – It is rare for an incumbent county official to lose an election. County service should not be a lifetime appointment until an elected official moves up the political ladder or takes a higher paying patronage job. There should be an 8 year term limit for all elected county offices. If 8 years is long enough for the President of the U.S. it should be long enough for a county position as well.
- **End Secret Meetings** – Did you know that Democratic legislators hold a secret meeting for their members only and the Republicans do the same? At these meetings, public business is discussed and they can even bring in department heads, etc. There should not be secret caucus meetings.
- **End Vacancy Appointments** – The most common way for a legislator to start their career is to be selected by a party boss to fill a vacant seat when their predecessor is rewarded by a party boss and moves up. Being appointed allows the party bosses to control who runs as an incumbent and because incumbents rarely lose it is a huge advantage. Instead of appointments there should be a special election for the voters to decide. For any special elections, there should be a petition process for candidates to get on the ballot and not a process where the party bosses select the candidates.
- **Independent Redistricting Commission** - Legislators like to choose who their voters are by drawing district lines in a manner that makes it easier for them to win. Districts are frequently created so that it is easier for one political party to win. Many communities utilize an independent process that takes the drawing of lines away from self interested legislators.
- **Independent Charter Revision Commission** – Charter Commission members are appointed by members of the County Legislature, County Clerk, County Comptroller and the County Executive. The Commission proposals to become effective have to be approved by the Legislature and the County Executive. The process is controlled too much by politicians who will resist adopting reforms as much as they can. Commission members should be selected through an independent application process that is not controlled by politicians.

- **Allow the Public to Vote on All Charter Commission Proposals** – It should not be up to self interested legislators or the County Executive to approve Charter Commission proposals. It should be up the public to approve or deny Commission proposals, which is the process utilized in New York City.
- **Utilize a Professional County Manager to run day to day operations** – Twenty-eight counties in NY State utilize a professional manager or administrator to run their county operations. A professional manager can help to decrease the influence of political party bosses.

### **Ethics Proposals**

- **Update & Post Financial Disclosure Forms** – The annual financial disclosure form that county officials are required to complete is in need of updating. Many local governments utilize a better form. The disclosure forms completed by state elected officials are posted online and county forms are not. The public should not have to file a FOIL request to see these forms.
- **All County Jobs Should Be Posted Online** – The County Charter requires that the County Executive prior to appointing the head of any department shall prominently display a notice on the county's webpage that there is an opening for such position for at least 5 business days. All available county jobs should be posted on the county website and on free sites such as linkedin and Indeed. All too often political insiders, friends and family know about job openings and the general public does not.
- **Limit County Contractor Campaign Contributions** – Candidates for County Executive are legally allowed to receive up to \$30,000 in campaign contributions from one person for the general election and \$14,000 for the primary election. All too often, the biggest contributors to county campaigns are companies and individuals with county contracts. It's a cesspool of pay to play politics. Campaign contributions from county contractors should be completely prohibited or greatly limited.
- **Prohibit Political Party Chairs From Serving as Erie County Board of Elections Commissioners** – The NY State Board of Elections does not allow any of their commissioners to also serve as a political party chair. It is a

tremendous conflict of interest for a political party chair to also serve as one of two commissioners at the County Board of Elections. Commissioners run county elections and make important decisions on who gets to remain on the ballot and who does not.

- **Enact a Nepotism Law** - The Erie County Ethics Board has called for Legislators to pass a nepotism law regarding the hiring and supervising of relatives in county employment positions. This request has been made and ignored for years by the Erie County Legislature and County Executive.