



## City of Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission

### Sixth Interview – Jimmie Hicks, Former Member of Council Tuesday 3 April 2018

This is the second interview of former members of Council. All interview reports were submitted to those interviewed before sharing them with the Commission.

Jimmie Hicks and I met in the Start Right Church on Caledonia Avenue in Cleveland Heights. A former Methodist Church built in 1925, Hicks purchased it as part of a ministry. The ministry, from which the name of the church is derived, focuses on helping youth successfully navigate the contemporary environment. The ministry is named from the statement, “If you start right and you grow right, you can stay right.” Hicks is the Pastor of the Church. He is deeply into service to people and the community. His interest in serving in government began with student government while at Kent State.

The church is located a few blocks from East Cleveland, in what is Ward 5 on the map of wards distributed to the Commission. Interestingly, an abandoned observatory is a few blocks away. Hicks thinks the wards were created based on elementary school boundaries at the time.

Another interesting fact about the area is that it is part of the East Cleveland School District. Hicks believes that at the time, unspecified but quite a while ago, the residents did not want to have their children attend schools with Jews. Thus, Caledonia Elementary School is part of the East Cleveland School District as both cities were “white” at the time. Mayor Kelley helped Hicks and others to try and get the area into the Cleveland Heights School District. The **Ohio Revised Code, ORC**, provides a process for moving properties to another school district. The Court of Appeals ruled against the change and the area remains part of the East Cleveland School District. *Hicks v. State Board of Education 2003 Ohio 4134*. (Alan Rapoport was the attorney for Cleveland Heights.)

He finds the current system engaging in honest politics that maintains the tax base and can fund amenities that keeps the middle class in the city. The Council can think of the city as a whole. The city built the recreation center as an example of a needed amenity. Dennison Park was also developed during his time on council and was used by the schools. SID’s were created. The city was marketed as the community of choice with diverse schools.

Hicks ran for city council four times before winning a seat in 1997. He served until 2005. He was the first, and perhaps the only, black male member of council. Hicks noted he could have won easily if he were the councilmember from Ward 5. However, he firmly believes in the value of running at large. He noted it does require more resources to run at-large but with modern technology and social media it is not that difficult to obtain sufficient resources. He enjoyed walking all of the city and getting involved with all of the city.

The current system permits a member of council to determine what kind of member they want to be. Hicks noted he answered all calls and had no problem not only informing the city manager of any concerns communicated to him but making sure there was a response. He saw the committees of council holding the city manager accountable. He even changed the Community Relations Committee he chaired, setting a different meeting time that facilitated its work.

Mayor Kelley had a policy of empowering the committees by promising to be the fourth vote if a committee had consensus. Four votes are a council majority and so any proposal from a committee with consensus was assured of passage. The system not only decentralized policy making it also held all administrators not just the city manager accountable. Everyone were held to the committee decisions that had consensus. Committees also responded to the proposals of administrators, such as Rick Wagner's policy of citing landlords for nuisances based on the behavior of tenants.

From his perspective, the system works. If it is not working that results from the people involved not the nature of the system. He had serious reservations about both an elected mayor and wards.

He fears the political dynamics of any wards as they localize concern to specific areas and can complicate addressing city-wide concerns, creating, in his words, "pork-barrel politics." In this type of politics, members of council from wards may seek a deal for their wards as part of approving any general program. The dynamics complicate having the city focus on its problems and bringing the necessary resources to resolve the problem.

The pork barrel politics would be intensified by an elected mayor. Such a mayor may be most interested in rewarding campaign staff with jobs, supporters with contracts and in dealing with council politically. This would promote deals with wards and greatly complicate policy implementation as well as policy making.

He concluded by stating he would be willing to talk to the Commission.