



## City of Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission

### **First Interview – Alan Rapoport, former Councilmember/Mayor Monday 5 March 2018**

This is the first of several interviews of former councilmembers and Mayors of Cleveland Heights. The interviews were broad ranging and covered both the history and views on current issues. The interviews varied in length but all these summaries are focused on concerns of the Charter Review Commission. All interview reports were submitted to those interviewed before submitting them to the Commission.

Alan presently works out of his house and was interviewed in his often office of choice, the Stone Oven Bakery and Café. The setting had both ambiance and healthy as well as tasty food.

During the 1970s, while in his 20's, Alan served as President of Coventry Neighbors. Many in this period had been active at the neighborhood level, based on elementary school boundaries. Planning Department sought input at that level. The Planning Department offered the opportunity to visit other neighborhood organizations and Alan did so. Interestingly, he found that each neighborhood thought it was getting less in services than it deserved.

Alan later served on Council and as Council President/Mayor during the 1980s. As is often the case, an issue such as inadequate public parking helped spur his public participation. Once on Council, Alan became fully engaged with governing the city. When a majority of Democrats were elected to Council, Alan became one of three Democrat candidates for mayor. Alan won by appealing to the two Republican members of Council by promising every important matter would be discussed by the Committee of the Whole. He received their votes because they feared they would otherwise not be active in the proceedings. As a result, Alan was elected Mayor by a vote of 4 to 3. He was reelected twice by unanimous votes.

In governing, Alan met with the City Manager on Fridays. The City Manager then wrote and distributed a memo to councilmembers on Saturday, creating an agenda for a Monday meeting of the Committee of the Whole. This coordinated the council and manager as well as holding the manager accountable to the council. City Manager did not get his or her way necessarily. Once the manager did not want to provide certain block grant funding to the Heights Community Congress. Alan pointed out that Council considered the Congress as being a vital part of the fabric of the community. The City Manager followed Council direction as he was urged to do by Alan and it was funded.

The CM during Alan's mayoral tenure was good at many tasks, such as reorganizing fire stations, designing the then new city hall for improving administrative communication and action, and bringing about fiscal reform. But one particular City Manager was not a good spokesperson as his personality was one of not "tolerating fools." Alan believed the Mayor's primary responsibility was to act as spokesperson for the Council, even at times when she or he personally disagreed with that body's position. One example of this was a problem when people descending on Edgemoor Road down to Case Western were being assaulted by persons hiding in bushes along the road. Alan wanted a fence along the road to stop the assaults but the police chief at the time, a respected talented administrator, opposed the fence. The majority of Council supported the police chief in his decision. Alan had an interview with a Plain Dealer reporter who stated, "Why not a fence?" He elected to defend the Council's majority position as best he could even though this did not make him look good personally. Eventually, the fence was built anyhow when the police chief changed his mind.

Alan, somewhat tongue in cheek, mentioned advice he received from a former mayor about keeping a sense of humor and getting away with what you can.

Alan highlighted the relationship between mayor, council and manager and the citizens as a corporate model. The citizens are the "shareholders." Council members are on the "board of directors." The Mayor, as council president, is "chair of the board." Finally, the City Manager serves as "chief executive officer." (The concept of a corporation denotes a legal entity. Thus, cities in Ohio are municipal corporations. The term means a body and thus a city can be conceptualized as a body of citizens who "own" the corporation and design its governance.) This model allocates responsibility for administration and management to the manager and political decisions to the mayor and council. Council proposes and the manager disposes. Councils make policy, pass laws, and appropriate money. Managers implement policy, enforce laws, and spend money. Depending upon personal abilities and issues, roles such as who should speak to whom about what, could be determined strategically, that is, who had the most credibility with the intended audience and the ability to perform the speaking and interaction well. In essence, Alan believed all activities should be conducted in a team process. He was bothered for this reason that neither Cain Park or the Police presently use the city logo as he believes this creates a perception of them not being on the team.

As city managers always have been at-will appointments in Cleveland Heights, serving without contracts, Alan believes the managers have been accountable.. Each councilmember always had phone calls to the City Manager returned promptly. The City Manager always acted as if he had seven bosses. Alan emphasized that the mayor and council must not even approach a fineline between politics and administration. For him, what happened to governance in East Cleveland was an example of what happens when the line between the functions is not respected. Government then becomes unworkable. Functionally, in the current system, the mayor serves as "a weatherman" for the manager, keeping him or her informed of where the council and politics are heading. The mayor, and council, reasonably

should have the “bullseye” target on them as they are directly accountable to the public. This means they must be kept informed of what the community is thinking and doing.

Alan saw his responsibility as mayor to speak for and represent the group process. He seemed to grasp leadership in two dimensions, one within council and another between council and others. The former was pursued by trying to make decisions as close to unanimous as possible on all occasions, not just along party or factional lines. For him, this often required compromise to get extra votes even when a simple majority vote would be enough. To then deal with issues between council and others, such as the city manager or the public, the mayor needs to represent the group process and its outcomes. He noted that an art in providing this kind of leadership is knowing what “buttons to push.”

He perceived political messaging as involving what he calls “frosting on the cake,” stressing good government with fiscal responsibility but also stressing those programs and values that define Cleveland Heights as a special community. He seemed to have an intuitive sense of collaborative leadership and articulated it well. He had concerns that an elected and/or full-time mayor too easily would cross the present line between administration and politics. He also had concerns that while winning an election campaign does demand administrative ability, it does not prove a person has public management ability or experience. By comparison, city managers are chosen specifically because of their public management ability and experience and are expected to be as non-political as possible.

He had concerns with ward representation as it can lead to competition for resources. He saw the process of administrative decision making more sensible choices based upon community needs than political bargaining. To win in an at-large election, a Council candidate needs to gather votes from her or his political base while minimizing losses elsewhere. This demands campaigning in all parts of the city. Alan believes this helps councilmembers see the forest and not just individual trees.

In governing, he emphasized both habits and dynamics. The latter should reinforce the former. Political culture is formed over time and the need is to cultivate the culture while meeting contemporary problems. He saw the need to educate citizens more about how Cleveland Heights administrators handle complaints. He also wishes there was more education in Cleveland Heights schools about the city manager form of government and how it operates.