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Friday, April 25, 2008

**Neal Rubin**

### Lemmons not alone in trying to fix city hall



We're talking about a passel of sleazebags on the Detroit City Council, caught taking bribes by investigators using the latest high-tech equipment.

We're talking entrenched corruption that outlasted even the most respected and honest mayor.

We're talking 1912, a good 16 years after fraud fighter Hazen Pingree left office, when a bribery scandal rocked Detroit. The response from outraged citizens ultimately changed the shape of the city's government -- so it's a bunch of oily aldermen from 96 years ago who we can thank for the ineffectual arrangement we have today.

Former state Rep. Lamar Lemmons III has become the latest voice calling for city council members to be elected by district, rather than at large. It's a sensible and frequently floated notion that never gets anywhere, at least partly because it would force a bunch of current council members to either move or lose their jobs.

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Lemmons says he hopes to collect 57,000 signatures and put his proposal on the ballot. It makes perfect sense, so don't bet on it succeeding.

The problem with electing nine council members at large, the way it's done now, is that there's no one whose job it is to bang heads together when the streetlights don't work in Brightmoor. And there's no one whose job depends on banging heads, lest the voters in Brightmoor get tired of living in the dark.

Back in 1912, the body known as the Common Council had 36 members, two from each of 18 city wards. They tended to be political hacks or bar owners, or quite possibly both, and they were not averse to payoffs, favors and other underhandedness.

Using primordial recording devices called dictographs, local businessman Andrew Green bugged an office in the Ford Building and paid private detectives to offer bribes to the aldermen, one at a time. Each of the 26 members who took the cash was arrested as he left the room.

Green laid out \$10,000 to bankroll the sting, and The Detroit News was so impressed it suggested that readers send contributions to repay him. As often happens, punishment ran well behind public outrage, and the only alderman brought to trial was acquitted on the grounds that he was entrapped.

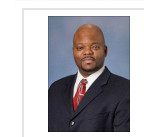
After a city charter revision failed in 1914, another was passed four years later, doing away with ward bosses and replacing them with the current system of nine council members elected from all over the place and wielding no particular authority. Instead, most of the power rests with the mayor, an arrangement that didn't seem to be working out even before the current mayor was charged with a bunch of felonies.

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Lemmons

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University of Detroit Mercy professor Mike Whitty, whose academic pursuits include labor relations and city government, points out that the mayor's situation should not be the catalyst for changing the charter. It'll stay changed long after the current occupants of the big offices have moved on.

Having said that, he likes the idea of a "vigorous, more grass-roots-oriented council," chosen by area and more attuned to public involvement and accountability.

One plan being bandied about calls for 10 council members chosen from districts, plus one elected at large. But it's still up to the voters, Whitty notes, to choose "high-caliber candidates who bring real competence and commitment."

Or, failing that, to track down some dictographs.

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