

Written by Kathy  
Friday, 27 January 2023 07:10

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**Cleveland Mayor Justin M. Bibb, Council President Blaine Griffin, and Ward 9 Councilman Kevin Conwell**

[clevelandurbannews.com](http://clevelandurbannews.com) and [kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com](http://kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio- Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb and City Council President Blaine Griffin are publicly butting heads for the first time since Bibb took office a year ago in January and since Griffin, an east side Ward 6 councilman who supported Bibb's opponent for mayor, was chosen last January by his peers to lead the 17-member all Democratic city council.

Both Bibb, 35, and Griffin, a former community relations director under Bibb's predecessor, former longtime retired mayor Frank Jackson, are Black, and so is Jackson, who served four terms and is the city's longest serving mayor, and a former city council president himself. The second largest city in Ohio, behind Columbus, Cleveland is a majority Black city of some 372,000 people, and most of its residents live below the poverty line. It is the second most segregated city in the nation behind Boston, demographics show.

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At issue is Bibb's shared governance proposal, a proposed city ordinance under the participatory budgeting concept that gives the community authority to vote on parts of the city budget. The city's second youngest mayor has, in turn, met fallout from the new concept from seasoned members of city council who say that the mayor's proposal is nothing more than a back door approach to strip them of power. The mayor says his proposal is designed to engage the community in the city's governmental process and to give residents of Cleveland a greater say beyond their respective councilpersons as to the city's budget.

Whether the proposed initiative to give regular citizens governmental authority alongside duly elected officials in some instances and power over the city's budget in the absence of a ballot initiative is constitutional or not remains to be seen, if the proposal becomes a city ordinance and is later challenged in the courts. City council tabled the controversial measure at Monday's well-attended council meeting, though sources said that it is likely to be revised and revisited in due time, partly because powerful White people and business-types want control over the city governance of Cleveland and the city's budget.

In short, participatory budgeting gives residents access to vote on how some public money should be spent and has been used in cities, such as Chicago, New York and Atlanta. A major difference, however, is that in places such as Chicago the elected council person spearheads the process and uses funds allocated from the city budget for his or her specific territory. Mayor Bibb's proposal would put a paid steering committee in place that would have authority independent of city council in some instances on parts of the city budget. That is where the heart of the controversy lies with several members of city council opposing what they say would amount to a change in city governance without a vote of the people.

Cleveland's population is roughly 60 percent Black. and it is heavily Democratic like the county it sits in, Cuyahoga County, the second largest of Ohio's 88 counties, and a 29 percent Black county. City council members earn an average of \$85, 000 annually.

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Had city council passed the participatory budgeting measure, Mayor Bibb was proposing to allocate \$510,000 to implement the process and another \$5 million of American Rescue Plan monies for a host of associated projects such as a paid 21-member steering committee, and community outreach efforts. Participatory Budgeting Cleveland, a largely White group that has lobbied the mayor for what they say will be a shared form of governance that will enhance community participation, is the driving force behind the initiative.

The discussion around the topic is growing, and some Blacks are readily embracing the shared governance concept while others are weary of lessening the power of city council in lieu of a new city governance model that naysayers say could turn out to be a discrepancy model. One Ward 7 east side resident rushed to Monday night's council meeting saying that "they are trying to keep the community from sharing in city governance." Council, however, is divided over the multi-million dollar proposal that a majority of them, led by Council President Blaine Griffin, shot down without hesitation, Griffin publicly saying that he is against shared governance but will hold public hearings to seek public input.

A councilperson, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the monies Bibb wants to hand to the community to share via participatory budgeting should go to city council persons for community distribution, not a steering committee.

"We do not need to put a paid steering committee in place of elected officials to vote on any parts of the city budget and we do not need any public hearings. All we needed to do was to do

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what we did and that was to not support that nonsense," the council person said.

Council members Jenny Spenser, Rebecca Mauer, an attorney and west side councilwoman, and Stephanie Howse and Deborah Gray, the only Black women on city council, were vocal about their vote in support of the mayor's signature proposal for shared community governance. They are sponsoring the proposed participatory legislation with the mayor and are among a handful of new members of city council who were elected in 2021 when Bibb won for mayor. But seasoned council persons like Mike Polensek and Kevin Conwell, both eastside council persons like Howse and Gray, were adamant about their opposition to any such legislation as others privately whispered that Griffin, who succeeded former council president Kevin Kelley as city council head, should be more assertive on the subject.

A White former westside councilman, Kelley is now a common pleas judge He lost a mayoral runoff to the novel Bibb by a landslide in November of 2021, and in spite of support from former mayor Frank Jackson, Griffin, and most of city council.

One of eight Black council members, Councilman Conwell said that the mayor's proposal as it stands, and regardless of any support from the Cleveland branch of the NAACP, is not good for the Black community.

"I'm against it." the councilman said during a one-on-one interview Thursday evening with [clevelandurbannews.com](http://clevelandurbannews.com)

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, Ohio's Black digital news leader.

"It strips African American elected officials of Cleveland of power."

A popular longtime councilman, Conwell is one of six Black men out of the eight Blacks who sit on city council. which all includes eight Whites and one Hispanic, Ward 14 Councilwoman Jasmin Santana, who is purportedly among the council persons who oppose participatory budgeting. Conwell leads Ward 9 on the city's eastside, which includes the historic Glenville neighborhood. Like Council President Griffin, he was among the city council members who backed Kelley for mayor over Bibb in 2021, a campaign that became heated after Kelley's campaign team darkened Bibb's face in anti- Bibb campaign literature in an effort to make him less appealing to White west side voters The strategy backfired as he beat Kelley with 63 percent of the vote, nearly a mandate and no doubt a shake up of Cleveland's status quo.

Asked by [clevelandurbannews.com](http://clevelandurbannews.com) and [kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com](http://kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com) if he finds it odd that now that the city has a Black mayor and Black city council president for the first time in history suburbanites want to come in and drastically change Cleveland's form of city governance by giving authority to non elected people over elected council persons under the auspice of shared governance Councilman Conwell responded "yes."

The Black outspoken councilman said that Black people should be reminded of what happened with the Empowerment Zone impacting the Fairfax , Hough and Glenville neighborhoods when the Black community was promised support for inner city rehabilitation and a ton of other resources "and nothing significant has changed."

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Councilman Conwell went on to say that budgeting funds for community involvement can be done without stripping council members of governmental authority given to them by the voters of Cleveland. He said that he does not want Cleveland to become a guinea pig experiment that strips Black elected officials of power when they do not propose similar legislation regionally and in affluent suburban communities of Cleveland.

"City Council members were elected by the voters to represent them," said Conwell.

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(216) 659-0473. Email: [editor@clevelandurbannews.com](mailto:editor@clevelandurbannews.com). We interviewed former president Barack Obama one-on-one when he was campaigning for president. As to the Obama interview

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