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## Evergreen issues in the coming ACE race

By Colin McNickle

The race is on for Allegheny County chief executive (ACE). And a number of evergreen public policy issues – some would argue nagging -- should dominate the coming debate, concludes an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“(W)hile aspects of those issues may have changed, over all there is still plenty of work to do on each,” reminds Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 9*).

County voters will choose a new chief executive in November by virtue of the current executive being term-limited after three four-year terms. So far, eight candidates say they’ll seek the office. The new ACE will take office in January 2024.

Indeed, past is prologue on the major issues facing the county 12 years after Rich Fitzgerald secured the chief executive post.

Those included strengthening the Home Rule Charter, implementing a new property reassessment policy, addressing problems at the Port Authority (now Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT)) and at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) and aggressively pursuing privatization and outsourcing.

To wit, while there is a very pricey (\$1.4 billion and counting) new terminal under construction at PIT, the passenger and flight counts remain below pre-pandemic levels.

That’s not much of an affirmation of the county Airport Authority board’s practice of rubber-stamping market-perverting public subsidies to a number of airlines, including British Airways.

Likewise, bus and light-rail ridership remain far below pre-pandemic levels.

The costs of PRT “are still near the highest of transit agencies in the country,” Montarti notes. “Low-performing routes have not been eliminated, smaller vehicles have not been utilized and

there have been no layoffs while federal, state and county subsidies have not been reduced, thereby driving per passenger costs to extremely high levels.”

Most unfortunately, PRT workers remain legally able to strike, holding a cudgel over taxpayers. And a new four-year labor contract severely hamstrung PRT’s ability to go to those smaller buses. It was a poison pill the size of a horse pill.

That said, one substantial change was made in the makeup of the mass-transit agency’s board of directors. A 2013 state law enlarged the board from nine to 11 members. But it did reduce the number appointed by the chief executive from nine to six (two are confirmed by County Council) and added five appointments by state officials.

Then there’s the property reassessment mess. There has not been a reassessment in more than a decade (and that one was court-ordered), which has only perpetuated severe inequities in the system.

In lieu of regular reassessments, legal wrangling has taken center stage. And while some in county government have perversely argued that the lack of reassessments somehow projects the aura of “stability” to outsiders looking to relocate to Allegheny County, it’s the exact opposite – instability (if not chaos) – that’s true.

Other critical issues facing the new county executive include retaining and attracting population and jobs to Allegheny County.

“To be sure a substantially more free market-oriented approach would be a break from the past and would improve the county’s long-term prospects,” Montarti says, adding this warning:

“If county government spending and employee headcount grow or the county takes on new functions beyond its core responsibilities, the prospect of a tax hike could be real,” the think tank scholar concludes.

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