

## Missing the Point – The City Government That Isn't

Wednesday, November 23, 2022



The official group photograph of the Baltimore City Council.  
It's the nineteenth slide at <https://www.baltimorecitycouncil.com>.

Hey. Happy Thanksgiving, everybody. Enjoy the holiday. Thanks for reading my op/eds. Keep your feedback coming. And please take care of yourselves.

**Wondering why those people in the header image are smiling?** They're your City Council and City Council President. You elected them two years ago and they're happy about that. The question is, are you as happy with the job they've been doing for you and your family?

As you may have heard, [the Baltimore City Council has just approved a bill](#) that makes elected officials eligible for their pensions after only eight years in office – retrospectively to when these Council members first took office. Previously, you had to be on the job for at least 12 years.

FYI, annual salaries for Council Members are currently \$76,660 plus benefits for what is, at the very least, a job with very flexible hours. And a staff.

Oh, sure. Ask Council members if their jobs are part-time and they'll tell you they're available to their constituents twenty-four/seven. You'll have to take their word for it. Believe it or don't believe it. If I were you, I'd withhold judgement until one of them shows you his or her timecard. What I do know is that, according to [a 2015 study by the Baltimore Sun](#), "On average, council members miss about a quarter of their committee votes." For some members whose records were studied, the no-show rate was much higher. That study was a few years ago. Hopefully, the current Council is more engaged. If not, maybe the city should save money and pay them by the hour.

To the credit of some Council members, the vote was eight to five opposed, plus two abstentions. That's a total of fifteen votes, one for each council district, plus the Council President. To no one's credit, the Council scheduled the vote on its pension during Thanksgiving week when fewer people and media are paying attention.

Motivation for the bill was the recent approval of ballot Question K, a charter amendment limiting Council members to just two four-year terms in office beginning with elections in 2024. With term limits that short, the Council felt that it had to reduce the time it needs to vest from twelve to eight years, otherwise newly elected Members would never qualify for their pensions. In fact, the bill they just passed gives the current Council credit toward vesting for years they've already served.

*"Makes sense."*

Actually, they're right. It makes perfectly good sense. Sort of. **What doesn't make sense is why the Council thinks it has a right to a pension in the first place.** And they don't, for two reasons. One is that part-time jobs – staffed, in many cases, by people with other sources of income – don't usually have pensions. At least eight members of the Council – the ones who voted for the bill – are apparently unaware of this problem with part-time employment. Maybe they should ask their constituents, the ones working two or three jobs to support their families, if any of *their* part-time jobs have pensions.

*"And the other reason?"*

The other reason is that the City Council hasn't done anything to earn their city government income, let alone a pension. Sure, they've passed bills here and there about this and that, but nothing nearly powerful enough to change the future of the great, but troubled city they represent. And do they even care as much as you do? Unbelievably, for example, the Council approved this change in the law to protect their pensions at the same time the city passed the 300 homicides mark for the eighth consecutive year. Three hundred murders so far this year and yet protecting their pensions was the most important item on the Council's agenda?

This isn't about chump change or couch money that falls out of your pockets while you're bouncing up and down, cheering for the Ravens. Not even close. What the Council of part-time elected officials has done is protect pension payments *for life* amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars for each Council member.

The nerve of the Council spending even a second thinking about its own compensation when two-thirds of the city struggles every day to get by – financially, of course, and without getting shot or being the victim of some other crime. Living in housing that's problematic, without access to a grocery store, whose children attend public schools ranked worst in the state.

So, let's not quibble about how long it should take for Council members to qualify for their pensions or even how much those pensions should be. What the people of Baltimore should be asking themselves is what the Council, Council President Nick Mosby and Mayor Brandon Scott have done to make the city of Baltimore a better place to live and work since any of these elected officials took office.

More specifically, how are you and your family better off today because of any of the elected officials who run your government? If you don't have a good answer for that question, hold on to that feeling. You're in charge. Your elected officials – from the Mayor on down – are your employees. Two years from now in 2024, fire their tushes the heck out of City Hall by electing better people with the intelligence, creativity, initiative and commitment to do what you have every right to require of them.

In the process, you might want to reduce the number of city districts from fourteen down to six which is roughly 100,000 people per district. Raise Council salaries and make the remaining six positions *full-time* with government agency supervision to make sure they're attending committee meetings and putting in the other hours that are supposed to be part of the job.

The city's a mess and, understandably, still losing population at an alarming rate. Unfortunately, your senior elected officials don't have the time to fix any of that, but plenty of time to pad their own wallets at your expense.

It's Thanksgiving. As you go around the dinner table, each of you telling the others what you're thankful for, are any of you really going to mention your City Councilman or woman, Council President Mosby or Mayor Scott?

*"Probably not and for good reason."*

You've got to wonder, if the Mayor, President of the City Council and the City Council itself were to take the year off, leaving city government to their various staffs to run, would it make any difference? Would anybody notice? Or could the city, left in the hands of generally capable professionals, actually be better off?

*"Good talk. Now would you please pass the gravy? Reading your stuff makes me hungry."*

-Les Cohen

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