

## Hispanics weigh county reform: Forum hears competing plans

JOHN HORTON  
*Plain Dealer Reporter*

Viva reform for Cuyahoga County government. The question is, which of two restructuring plans offers the best opportunity for a Hispanic community craving more clout in Northeast Ohio?

The answer went unanswered Monday for many of the more than 50 people who attended a town hall meeting organized by the Hispanic Roundtable to hear about the proposals.

"Skepticism is definitely an underlying theme," said Camila Negret, 25, of University Heights.

The small crowd at Emmanuel Church listened to a pair of pitches to overturn a 200-year-old county government structure deemed outdated and inefficient for Cuyahoga. The movement comes amidst a sweeping corruption probe that's still shining light on many county offices.

One reform plan calls for replacing the three county commissioners with an elected executive and 11-member council; the other seeks

to create a charter commission to develop a new county government format for voters to consider in 2010.

Either could deliver Hispanics a greater voice in the political process, said Jose Feliciano, head of the Hispanic Roundtable. Only one Hispanic — Common Pleas Judge Jose Villanueva — holds countywide office. No Hispanic has ever held a policy-molding elected seat in Cuyahoga.

The community's numbers and influence, however, keep growing in Northeast Ohio. Hispanics represented 4 percent of the county's population in 2007, U.S. Census records show.

"We need somebody at the table," Feliciano said.

The county council plan — known as "New Cuyahoga Now" — could deliver that, said Parma Heights Mayor Martin Zanotti, who helped draft the proposal. One of the 11 proposed districts encompasses several West Side Cleveland neighborhoods spiced with a decidedly Hispanic flavor.

SEE CLOUT | B3

## CLOUT

FROM B1

### Hispanics weigh restructuring plans

Two additional districts also offer the potential of more influence, Zanotti told the crowd.

A disbeliever spoke out Monday.

"If you look at the way it was cut out, I don't see it happening in the near future," said Adrian Maldonado, 49, of Strongsville. The retired county director estimated it would take 25 years for a Hispanic candidate to win a district.

Others questioned why Zanotti's group didn't seek out Hispanic leaders while forming their plan. Zanotti admitted that organizers "did not do a good job in getting Hispanic leaders to the table" but asked that the community not condemn the proposal over it.

The omission raises doubts, said Gus Hoyas, 40, of Strongsville, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Com-

merce for Ohio.

But Carlos Fuentes, 38, of Bay Village, said he could overlook the slight given the potential for gains.

Cuyahoga County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones said the charter commission plan wants to involve all segments of the community from the start of the process. The slate of commission candidates backed by the "Real Reform Done Right" proponents includes attorney Jazmin Torres-Lugo, a Hispanic.

But several audience members said they weren't sold on the wait-and-see approach of the commission plan.

Feliciano said the Hispanic Roundtable intends to offer an endorsement regarding the reform movements. He said the fact Zanotti and Jones attended the Town Hall meeting to debate the issue represented a "historic first" for the community.

"It shows we belong in the process," Feliciano said. "That's something to build on."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:  
jhorton@plained.com, 800-962-1167