

REMEMBERING BOBBIE STERNE

by Bill Woods for StreetVibes

Bobbie Sterne died the day before Thanksgiving. The first woman to be elected Mayor by Cincinnati's voters, her long Council career was distinguished by her leadership in support of progressive and reform policies. She must now be included in that small group of Charterite good government icons like Murray Seasongood, Charles P. Taft, and Theodore M. Berry.

I first met Bobbie Sterne in the summer of 1963. Fresh out of college, I had through a bit of luck landed a job with the Charter Committee writing press releases for several of its minor candidates. She was doing volunteer work in the Charter office, and I remember enjoying a number of conversations with her. Already very knowledgeable about city issues, she was focused on electing Dorothy Dolbey and Theodore Berry to join Charles Taft, the only Charterite then on Council.

Eight years later, she won a Council seat, and except for a few years off, she served on this body until 1998. Sterne soon became a recognized leader on Council, and in 1976, her Charter and Democratic Council colleagues elected her Mayor. At that time, the Mayor chaired City Council, and the members selected their chairperson.

I caught up with Bobbie Sterne's career when I returned to Cincinnati in 1977 after teaching at Wilmington College. Once again the Charter Committee put me to work developing issues and cultivating press coverage for Councilman Tom Brush, Charlie Taft's replacement who was seeking to win the seat on his own. Bobbie Sterne's City Hall office was next door to Brush's, and the Councilwoman and her staff served as invaluable mentors to our operation. Sterne was already known for initiating policies to establish health care clinics and services for low income residents, and she, Brush, and David Mann led the progressive wing of Council.

By 1979, a new process for selecting the Mayor was in place. The top vote getter of the Council candidates became the Mayor. Under this system, Sterne became the first woman to become Mayor by a popular vote.

A few years later, Applied Information Resources, the non-profit corporation I launched in 1980, found itself working on a project initiated by Bobbie Sterne. Concerned that the Appalachian population of Cincinnati comprised a sizable but usually overlooked minority, she asked for a report from the Administration to provide ways to better identify the needs and perspectives of this community. AIR was hired by the City Manager to draft this report.

Sterne should be recognized for another important City policy. Aware that a number of effective, non-profit groups

had emerged to assist poor and homeless Cincinnatians, She believed it was important for City Government to financially assist these essential services. She played a leadership role in getting Council to pass an ordinance establishing the policy that 1.3 percent of the City's general budget would be allocated to help finance human services. In effect from 1981 to 1994, this percentage was then cut drastically, and an ongoing grassroots campaign has continued to lobby for a return to the 1.3 percentage.

Even after her retirement from Council in 1998, Sterne remained active in city affairs. When I helped organize the Fair Elections Coalition to advocate for a campaign reform City Charter Amendment in 2000 and 2001, she enthusiastically supported this successful effort. Then when an initiative to bring back proportional representation took the form of a Charter Amendment proposal in 2008, she served as the campaign's honorary treasurer.

Vice Mayor David Mann served on Council with Bobbie Sterne for nine terms. He perhaps summed up her public career best. "The City has lost one of its great public servants."