

## Let's stick with autonomous appointees for citizen boards

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Separate oversight, political interests

I spent some time with Eli **Cooper** a while back and came away impressed. The city's transportation program manager knows his stuff, is honest about how painfully long projects like passenger rail could take to come to fruition, and chooses not to take credit for things that - by chance - have fallen into his lap.

That's a lot to like.

I've been acquainted with Sue McCormick for much longer. And, like a lot of folks who've seen her first as Ann Arbor's water-utilities boss and then as administrator of the broader "public service area" at city hall, I know she's an asset.

But I can't imagine why either of them should serve on the Ann Arbor Transportation Authority board.

OK. I can imagine why.

But I can't believe it's a good idea.

Although all seven members of the board of directors are appointed by the mayor, with the City Council's blessing, the idea of a citizen board is to create a structure that's a step removed from elected officials and political interests.

Yes, political appointees are presumably in sync with the folks who select them. However, their livelihoods typically aren't dependent on pleasing the mayor, or the city council, or the city administrator, who - of course - has an interest in keeping elected officials happy and everything to do with the financial security of these employees.

Put another way: These are not appointments that promote independence.

But clearly independence is not a sought-after trait on city

boards and commissions at the moment.

Indeed, folks who've exercised their own judgment are regularly dropped from such positions. And while that's the prerogative - or even the responsibility - of the elected officials who make those appointments, filling the slots with city employees is another matter.

When it was just **Cooper** , it was cause for some qualms.

After all, the **AATA** bylaws allow for the appointment of ex-officio board members. That option would have allowed for coordination between city hall's transportation guru and the community's public-transit agency without the messy autonomy issue.

But McCormick's appointment, made just this past week, leaves little doubt that Mayor John Hieftje wants his thumb on the **AATA** . And that he has the City Council's consent.

With 100,000-plus people in the city - and no compunction about appointing people who don't contribute to the \$9 million the **AATA** takes in local taxes each year - city officials could have found other savvy, qualified candidates to serve on the board.

Instead, they chose tighter control.

If you don't think citizen boards are a good idea - and not everyone does - then change the structure.

This isn't a solution, it's an invitation to new problems.

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