

THE PLAIN DEALER

Here are 3 of the biggest challenges (and the 3 biggest opportunities) facing Armond Budish as Cuyahoga County executive



Armond Budish will have his work cut out for him when he assumes office in January as the next Cuyahoga County executive. *(Lisa DeJong, The Plain Dealer)*



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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Cuyahoga County Executive-elect Armond Budish has his work cut out for him.

Budish, 61, will have no shortage of issues competing for his attention when he assumes office on Jan. 1. But he also has an opportunity to shape a county government four years into a reform movement.

Here are just some of the issues he will face:

First, the challenges:

1. Establishing his leadership

Despite serving in one of the state's most high-profile political positions, the former Ohio House speaker remains a bit of an unknown in Northeast Ohio.

As the frontrunner, Budish ran a **relatively low-key campaign** that prevented him from being hemmed in by many campaign promises. His Republican challenger, County Councilman Jack Schron, meanwhile questioned whether Budish possessed the necessary experience to be an executive.

Budish also will likely inherit residual skepticism from some constituents who were turned off by outgoing executive Ed FitzGerald's decision to run for governor, which divided his attention for two of his four years as the county's first elected executive.

Budish has correctly pointed out that he has no track record of jumping from job to job. He also pledged to serve his full four-year term. But he hasn't ruled anything out in 2018.

Budish also will have to show he can lead. Although a former Ohio house speaker, the roles of a legislator and executive are different. Budish never has had as much control over the levers of government as he will in Cuyahoga County.

Finally, Budish won the election thanks in large part to **near-consensus from the county Democratic Party's entrenched political powers**. Budish will have to show he's not afraid to defy the wishes of his fellow Democrats and the labor unions which supported his campaign.

In short, in an area still stung by a corruption scandal that resulted in the convictions of dozens of contractors and public officials, including a former county commissioner, Budish must show he is above reproach and has the vision to move the county forward.

2. Operating within the county's fiscal constraints

Budish will have to weigh anything on his agenda against a couple of looming, hugely expensive construction projects.

The county likely will play a role in paying for an overhaul of the county-subsidized MetroHealth System's campus. Officials haven't offered an estimate, but it's generally understood that the project will cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Budish will need to decide whether to divert a \$40 million annual county subsidy for charity care to construction and renovation instead, **as MetroHealth has requested**.

Two, the county's aging and deteriorating Justice Center likewise needs work. Depending on the scope of the overhaul, that **could cost the county as much as \$318 million**. Budish will

have to decide how much to spend to maintain a building that is said to be approaching the end of its useful life.

Despite one rating agency downgrading the county's credit rating last year, ratings agencies still view the county's financial picture favorably, thanks to large reserves established by FitzGerald.

But the county's own financial consultant has said the county could only borrow another \$50 million, on top of \$168 million in borrowing that's already planned, before dipping into reserves.

In the background is a continuing decline in property value in Cuyahoga County, and the corresponding loss in property tax revenue.

3. Preserving – and completing – county reforms

FitzGerald wasted little time demonstrating his commitment to reform. Before he even took over four years ago, he put some county workers on notice that they would lose their jobs. And he followed through, slashing the county payroll and professionalizing a hiring process rife with patronage. He also helped create an inspector general position dedicated to rooting out corruption and waste in county government, and established the toughest ethics policy in the state.

Budish must now demonstrate that he, too, is committed to reform and is on guard against a return to the old ways that benefited many members of his own party.

FitzGerald already has done much of the heavy lifting – and suffered the political backlash. But Budish's transition will test whether the reforms under FitzGerald were personality-driven, or lasting.

Here are three opportunities Budish will have as the next county executive.

1. Offering a clean slate

Budish will have the advantage of not being FitzGerald. He will have the opportunity to build bridges with Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, with whom FitzGerald had an occasionally strained relationship, as well as with Republicans in Columbus.

Improved relations could pay off in preparing for the 2016 Republican National Convention and make the region more competitive for state and federal money.

In contrast to FitzGerald's hard-charging approach – which wasn't necessarily a bad thing – Budish universally is regarded as a careful listener who is solicitous of feedback.

Budish also will have the opportunity to improve relations with County Council. Some council members accused FitzGerald of not keeping them in the loop, and grumbled that his run for governor distracted him from the county's day-to-day operations. As a former House speaker, Budish likely will be better equipped to manage the egos of council members while remaining attuned to their concerns. A better relationship will lead to fewer distractions for Budish's agenda.

Budish has said county workers already have appreciated his interest in their work. This suggests they felt neglected by FitzGerald, affecting employee morale. Budish can show them he cares.

Finally, Budish might have better luck than FitzGerald at refereeing conflicts between County Prosecutor Timothy J. McGinty and the courts, while at the same time making his own inroads with all parties involved.

2. Enhancing county services

Budish has shown a keen interest in enhancing the county's social programs, which at almost \$500 million are the county budget's single largest expense. Among the clearest signals is his pick of chief of staff, Sharon Sobol Jordan, an executive with the Centers for Children and Families, a local social services nonprofit.

While Budish hasn't yet announced many specifics, he has suggested he might emulate a Pittsburgh program that gives college scholarships to graduates of city schools or offer scholarships to medical students who are willing to practice in poor areas.

He has also said he'd like to attempt to better unify the county's economic development and social services arms, so that people who receive government benefits are encouraged to also receive job training.

And, he's expressed support for creating an agency to generate capital for start-up businesses.

Generally, look for Budish to pursue a progressive agenda. An adviser to his campaign and director of his transition team is Keary McCarthy, who's also the executive director of Innovation Ohio, a left-leaning think-tank with ties to former Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland.

McCarthy has said he's interested in using the organization to encourage local governments to adopt progressive policies.

3. Promoting regionalism

With 59 communities, many of which are struggling financially, Cuyahoga County appears ripe for a regional approach to government. FitzGerald has made progress in regionalism, but the leaders of some of those communities have resisted efforts to consolidate services or talk of mergers.

Budish could - and should - get them together to talk and continue to make a persuasive pitch about the benefits of regional thinking. His experience in the state legislature uniquely prepares him for this task of wrangling the 59 municipalities and helping chart a coherent direction for the region.

As house speaker, and later, the minority leader, Budish managed Democrats from across the state and directed them toward a unified agenda. He also negotiated with Republicans and cut bipartisan deals.

Among Budish's first tasks will be to implement a \$50 million plan, started under FitzGerald, to **demolish vacant properties throughout the county**. In a recent interview with Northeast Ohio Media Group, Budish spoke of the desire to avoid dividing the money into insignificant sums in order for each community to get a share.

Budish has sold his diplomacy and experience as one of his strongest suits. As county executive, he will have the opportunity to put that into action.

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