

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## Editorial: Charter amendment to repeal ticket fees should be rejected

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By the end of this month, Columbus City Council likely will be asked to officially place an issue on the general election ballot to effectively repeal two 5% ticket fees enacted earlier this year.

Our view: If petitions for the charter amendment are found to be valid and the council certifies it for the ballot, Columbus voters should take the opportunity to reject this harmful referendum and put the issue to rest.

By now, The Dispatch editorial board's position on this topic should be well known.

Since the idea of placing a small fee on tickets for various forms of entertainment was initially floated by the Greater Columbus Arts Council in early 2018, we have expressed support for the concept in editorials on these pages no fewer than five times.

It is, after all, a user fee and a reasonable one at that. It adds 50 cents to a \$10 movie ticket or \$2 to a \$40 concert tab. Eventgoers will drop much more at the concession stand.

On Feb. 2, 2018, before the proposal had fully taken shape, we lent support to the notion of enacting a user fee to provide more-stable funding for the arts as well as generating some funds for capital improvements to maintain Nationwide Arena.

That view did not change as the concept was shared and discussed throughout most of 2018 in various forums.

On Oct. 21, after more specifics were put forth by GCAC to city council, we continued to support the concept but with some recommendations for changes.

The Dispatch recognized the lightning rod that Nationwide Arena is for some ticket fee opponents but noted that, as then proposed, user fees charged on tickets for sporting events and concerts at the arena would contribute more to supporting the arts in Columbus than for arena upkeep.

However, we expressed concern that the 7% user fee then proposed was too high and that the fee should not exclude Ohio State University football tickets, arguably the biggest game in town.

And just to drive home the point, on Nov. 17 we reiterated our conviction that city council should approve the ticket fee and cited, as an example, a decision made that week by OSU trustees to raise the cost of Buckeye football tickets by 8%.

As city council prepared to take action on GCAC's request for a ticket fee to fund the arts and cultural events in Columbus, we weighed in again on Dec. 3 with an endorsement of the plan that ultimately was approved.

Wisely, the council had reduced the user fee from 7% to 5% and, in a concession to some arena-obsessed opponents, it had revised the concept to enact two separate 5% fees — one for tickets to sports and concerts held in Nationwide Arena and the other for events in other venues.

The council still declined to impose the fee on OSU football tickets but it came up with an alternative, persuading the university to pledge \$1 million a year to help support the arts in Columbus.

The evolution of the ticket fee from initial concept to enactment — effective as of July 1 — was a good example of a government agency giving careful consideration to addressing a clear community need, offering plenty of opportunity for citizens to be heard and then revising the proposed solution to reflect the feedback it received.

It was precisely in response to the council's responsible handling of this issue that we expressed exasperation on Jan. 21 with the unyielding opposition of the primary opponents to the two 5% user fees that are now in place.

While failing to offer alternatives for supporting the arts or undergirding upkeep for the arena, steadfast opponents — largely in the persons of Bret Adams and Mike Gonidakis — have now made good on earlier threats to fight the ticket fees at the ballot.

The pair delivered petitions on Monday to the Columbus city clerk's office to request a Nov. 5 vote on an amendment to the city charter that would prohibit "any tax or fee" to be charged for attending events at "theaters, festivals, auditoriums, stadiums, arenas, fields, conventions, fairs, expositions, clubs, parks, entertainment venues or other similar places."

There are many reasons for Columbus voters to vote no, if they are given that opportunity, not the least of which is that this kind of prohibition does not belong in the city charter. If enacted as a charter amendment, it would forever preclude any future user fee, no matter how reasonable.

Keep in mind that more than five dozen other municipalities across the state already have ticket fees in place, according to the Ohio Department of Taxation.

It is also concerning that those supporting the new user fees include numerous arts organizations, small businesses and community leaders while Adams and Gonidakis relied largely on out-of-state paid circulators to gather 22,152 signatures on their charter amendment petition.

According to documents filed with the clerk, of 31 persons paid to circulate the petition, 19 were from other states while just seven were from Columbus. The remaining five were from other Ohio cities.

The Franklin County Board of Elections has until the end of this week to determine whether the opponents secured the required number of 11,030 valid signatures to place the charter amendment before voters this fall. City council is then expected to act either July 22 or July 29 to officially put the issue on the ballot.

Columbus voters should welcome the chance to support local arts with a well-reasoned user fee and reject the ill-conceived charter amendment.