County Government Threatens the American Dream in Cuyahoga County's Western Suburbs

By James M. Trutko

On Cleveland's West Shore, the fundamentals of a strong regional economy are already in place.

Bay Village, Rocky River, Westlake, Fairview Park, and North Olmsted represent one of Northeast Ohio's most stable concentrations of middle-class success. Homeownership approaches 76 percent across these communities, well above the national average. Median household income exceeds $100,000, with some communities far higher. Educational attainment is equally strong, with college degree rates nearly double the state average.

These are not abstract indicators. They are the building blocks of economic resilience: stable housing, a skilled workforce, and communities where people invest for the long term. Poverty rates remain low, public amenities are active and well maintained, and civic engagement is consistent.

In economic terms, the West Shore is not simply a collection of desirable suburbs. Nearly 40,000 West Side homeowners hold roughly $14 billion in home equity and spend thousands of dollars a year per household just to maintain and improve their biggest investment. Local and county government decisions on taxes, infrastructure, and schools directly affect local families' largest investment. The communities represent families living the American dream. They are a regional asset — one that contributes disproportionately to the county's tax base, workforce quality, and overall economic stability.

But that asset is under increasing pressure from policy choices that are weakening Cuyahoga County's competitive position.

The most immediate challenge is cost.

Cuyahoga County's property tax burden ranks among the highest in the nation. For a typical $350,000 home, annual taxes can exceed $7,000 — often several thousand dollars more than in neighboring counties such as Medina and Lorain. Recent reassessments have widened that gap, increasing costs for homeowners without corresponding improvements in services or infrastructure.

At the same time, the county's fiscal trajectory raises broader concerns. Cuyahoga County has had deficits in most of the past decade, including a $227 million shortfall in 2024. The current budget exceeded $2 billion, with rising personnel costs and major capital projects exceeding original estimates — most notably the county jail, which has nearly doubled in projected cost.

For businesses making location and expansion decisions, these signals matter. Cost structure, predictability, and government performance are central to regional competitiveness. When those factors move in the wrong direction, investment follows.

Infrastructure further illustrates the gap between spending and outcomes. More than one-third of county roads are in poor condition — more than double the statewide average. Congestion remains concentrated in key corridors, increasing commute times and logistics costs. These are not long-term risks; they are daily inefficiencies that affect productivity, vehicle costs, and quality of life.

At the same time, economic growth has lagged behind peer regions. Private-sector employment remains below pre-pandemic levels, and over the past decade, Cuyahoga County and Metro Cleveland have ranked near the bottom among comparable Midwest areas in job creation. Current projections suggest limited near-term improvement. As a result, many families see their children relocate to areas with faster economic growth.

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This underperformance is not due to a lack of assets. Cuyahoga County has significant, underutilized advantages, including major industrial and research facilities such as the I-X Center and NASA Glenn Research Center. With a coordinated, sustained strategy, these assets could support advanced manufacturing, aerospace, and technology-driven job growth. To date, that strategy has been fragmented and inconsistent and county economic development plans do not produce actual jobs.

The result is a gradual erosion of the county's competitive position.

Population loss has accelerated, with more than 30,000 residents leaving between 2020 and 2025 — the largest decline of any county in Ohio. Many are relocating to nearby counties offering lower taxes, newer housing, and more predictable cost structures. Even historically stable West Shore communities are beginning to see population decline.

This trend carries direct economic consequences. Population loss reduces labor force participation, weakens the tax base, and makes it more difficult to sustain both public services and private-sector growth. Over time, it creates a feedback loop that is difficult to reverse.

None of this diminishes what the West Shore has achieved. These communities remain among the strongest in Northeast Ohio. Their stability, workforce quality, and quality of life are real competitive advantages, and they continue to attract families and investment.

But they are not insulated from broader policy trends. If current conditions persist — high costs, uneven service delivery, and limited economic growth — the risk is not sudden decline, but steady erosion. Residents and businesses will continue to make rational decisions, and those decisions increasingly point toward lower-cost, higher-growth areas outside the county.

Reversing that trajectory does not require reinvention. It requires better plans and execution with a focus on real results. Fiscal discipline must be restored, with spending tied to measurable outcomes and long-term sustainability. Property tax policy should be more transparent, predictable, and competitive with peer counties. Infrastructure investment should focus on projects that deliver immediate improvements in road quality, mobility, and reliability.

Most importantly, economic development efforts must shift from a focus on process and a basket of fragmented initiatives to a coordinated strategy that leverages the county's existing assets and targets industries capable of generating sustained, high-quality job growth.

The West Shore already demonstrates what works: stable neighborhoods, long-term investment, and a workforce prepared to compete. The challenge is ensuring that county-level policy reinforces — rather than undermines — those strengths.

Cuyahoga County is not starting from a position of weakness. It has the people, location, and institutional assets to compete effectively in the Midwest and beyond. But maintaining that position will require Cuyahoga County government to have more disciplined budgeting and governance, clearer priorities, and a sustained focus on economic competitiveness. The West Shore communities are some of the region's strongest assets and should be one of the building blocks for the future.

The alternative is the gradual loss of one of the region's most important economic advantages and deterioration of the quality of life in Bay Village, Fairview Park, North Olmsted, Rocky River, and Westlake.