

The Case for Philadelphia Self Determination

Testimony of Inja Coates, Community Activist, Candidate for Philadelphia Traffic Court Judge

Friday, March 22, 2013

Honorable Rep. Ron Marsico, Honorable Rep. Thomas Caltagirone, and Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee today on Senate Bills 333 and 334 which would eliminate the existence of Traffic Court and transfer its functions to Philadelphia Municipal Court.

I am speaking to oppose these bills as drafted, and would like to speak to several concerns raised in these bills.

Transferring Traffic Court to Municipal Court:

Will Municipal Court have the capacity to handle to the case load in a timely way if configured the way proposed in Bill 334? Philadelphians have a right to a fair and speedy trial; it would not serve the residents of Philadelphia well to have either the regular Municipal or Traffic Court functions slowed down at all.

Will the venue of Municipal Court intimidate citizens from contesting wrongfully issued tickets? A supporter of mine raised the concern that "having to go to municipal court (which sounds more like 'real and official' court to me) will lead people to not contest out of fear." I think this is a valid concern. A few years ago I tried to contest a ticket but received no information about when to appear for my hearing so I had to appeal it in "real" court. It was quite intimidating to walk into the court room and have no idea who to talk to or what the process was. I was given almost no time to speak, as the whole room bustled around me with other unrelated activity. I can imagine that more than a few people might decide to forego that experience and just pay the ticket. That is not justice.

Number and qualifications of Judges:

Will the proposed TWO judges going forward be adequate to handle cases at Traffic Court until it moves to Municipal Court? And will FOUR judges be adequate there, when historically this work has been split between SEVEN? What is the math that makes that possible? It is also unfortunate to be REDUCING well-paying jobs at a time when so many are looking for work outside of the service sector.

It appears that the bill does still allow for non-attorneys to serve upon the completion of set training and examination, which I support. I do not believe it requires a law degree to do a good job as a Traffic Court Judge. My view is that it is possible for responsible citizens to rise to the call and offer voters valid candidates who cannot be corrupted nor bought. We have certainly seen instances where a law degree has been no guarantee against corruption.

If we are concerned about addressing corruption, we need to look at how judges are elected and how staff are hired. The situation at Philadelphia Traffic Court is a result of insider politics and favoritism for those with connections. It might be possible to institute some basic job qualifications as would be expected with most any professional position. It might also be prudent to add a requirement for ongoing ethics training, similar to how some fields require current CPR certification that is renewed every few years. Mandatory ethics training could help shift the attitudes of those in Traffic Court and it seems what steps they've taken in that direction have begun to help.

State action:

My understanding after reading the Chadwick investigation report was that some such measures had already been implemented and, together with the leadership of Judge Glazer, were yielding noticeable improvements.

That leads me to wonder why we are in need of such drastic action as eliminating the court outright, when steps taken to address the dysfunction have begun to work. And the remedy offered by the State Senate does little to address the root causes of corruption. It is unclear how—and perhaps naïve to assume that—moving the Traffic Court into Municipal Court will stop the rampant corruption that led to this problem, since it is quite clear that it extends to the whole field of politics in Philly, and that requests for ticket-fixing are still being made.

Those requesting political favor have to bear at least some of the responsibility for the problems in Traffic Court. It was interesting to note in the report it said “The present federal investigation and possible prosecution, which may punish targeted individuals and will likely shed more light on activities external to the Traffic Court, **will stop short of broad-based reform.**” (Emphasis mine). And while it mentioned several names of powerful politicians who had made requests for favors, I have not heard that any of them are being investigated.

There's no doubt that politics in the region has been fraught with corruption. But why has the State chosen to act so eagerly and swiftly on this particular instance? Is this another instance of a Republican-controlled legislature trying to strip Philadelphia of its autonomy?

The decision of the State Senate embodied in these two bills seems to pick on Philadelphia and its residents. Just because there is corruption in one institution, it does not mean that institution should disappear from the map. The same week the indictments were unsealed by the Justice Department, the Bensalem School District had several of its employees indicted for embezzling more than \$1 million. However, we did not see the State Senate move swiftly to eliminate the Bensalem School District! Similarly, if we follow the logic of the Senate, the House and Senate in Pennsylvania should equally be abolished since corruption costing the taxpayers millions of dollars was uncovered by then Attorney General Tom Corbett.

We, living in a democratic society, have to believe these problems are fixable. The way we do that is by running and electing candidates who are honest, transparent, law-abiding and accountable to the citizens.

I am Inja Coates and I am a candidate for Philadelphia Traffic Court because I believe there is an opportunity here to run a campaign that is clean, community-based and a beacon for change. I have talked to countless voters who express weariness at how politics is conducted in our city and who want something different.

I am running for Traffic Court of Philadelphia because I believe voters in this city have the capacity and the courage to elect leaders who have integrity and whose main purpose is to serve the public, and—just like the members of this Committee—take their responsibilities seriously.

I am running for Traffic Court because I believe Philadelphia institutions should remain in the hands of Philadelphians. We cannot expect, nor should we allow, the State to be shepherding our affairs. Yes, Philadelphia Traffic Court is broken, but we don't need Harrisburg to fix it for us. We need to fix it ourselves.

I urge this Committee to reject Senate Bills 333 and 334, and instead embark on a project to reform the way judges are elected, or find funding for schools, protecting public health and environment, or any other urgent and worthwhile matter.

Thank you very much.

