

Editorial: Multilingual signs show city's best

A plan to put up multilingual signs in downtown Cincinnati is meeting with hostile reactions from some quarters. But the proposal by Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls, which City Council passed Thursday, is not an attack on the English language or an endorsement of illegal immigration. It is a gesture to welcome visitors, help people understand the city's basic features, and show Cincinnati's openness to the world around us.

It will be good for business, for tourism, for jobs and for our image among those who come here from other countries. And with Cincinnati as an international showcase with the World Choir Games here in July, it's just common sense.

Proposed nearly two years ago by Qualls, the initiative on signs actually has two parts:

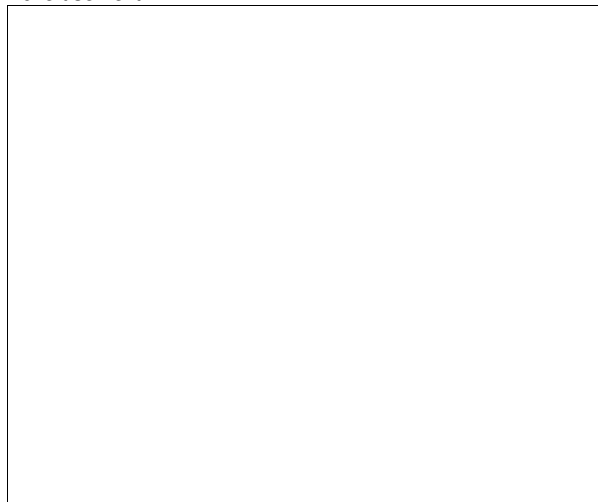
- Multi-language informational signs around Fountain Square for World Choir Game participants, convention visitors and those here on business from other nations. Signs would be in the most common half-dozen of the 30-plus languages expected at the Games. The specific languages won't be decided until registrations for the event are complete in a month or so.

- Emergency and directional signs downtown to help people find shelters, hospitals and the like. They could be in English and Spanish. Or they could use universal symbols without languages, Qualls said. The idea is to help people "understand the basics of the city."

By catering to an increasingly international mix of visitors to our city, the signs would pay dividends for years to come. Yet this week, comments and letters on The Enquirer's online story about the signs criticized the idea, some with thinly-veiled anti-immigrant sentiments.

Some were more thoughtful. Mauro E. Mujica, chairman/CEO of U.S. English Inc. in Washington, D.C., an immigrant himself, wrote that multilingual signs send a message that immigrants "do not need to learn English to succeed in America." His point about English as a needed common bond is well taken. Still, what we're really talking about here is not a question of succeeding in America, but of finding your way to Music Hall.

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Such critics may be overlooking our history as a city of immigrants. Cincinnati's early years saw a robust mix of languages, signs and cultures, particularly German.

But during the anti-German hysteria in the World War I era, German-language signs were obliterated and street names were changed wholesale: Berlin Street became Woodrow Street. German Street became English Street.

This drive to enforce English purity rightly seems ludicrous to us when a half-million people come downtown each fall to celebrate our mash-up of language and culture with "Oktoberfest Zinzinnati."

That ought to make Cincinnatians of all origins a bit more sensitive about the language reflected in public signs, which aren't merely symbolic.

They can be solid evidence of our commitment to openness and diversity, our readiness to participate in world culture and commerce.

Just ask officials of Chiquita, which is moving its headquarters to Charlotte. As Qualls noted, Cincinnatians' "lack of awareness that we are globally connected" was a factor in the firm's decision.

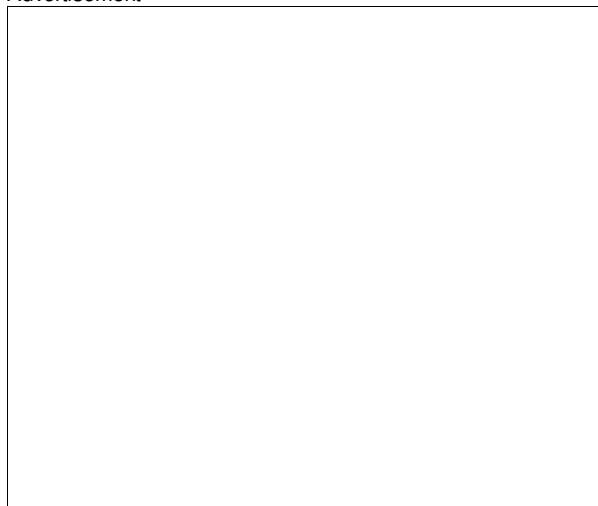
The signs will "show we appreciate and value other languages," Qualls said. As she might well have added, they'll also show we appreciate and value other *people*.

This summer, Cincinnati will have 20,000 international visitors downtown at the same

time. Fountain Square is our civic front porch. We should make that front porch as welcoming as we can to those who will be here to enjoy what our region has to offer, boost our economy and leave a richness of experience with us.

These aren't signs of a weakening culture. They are signs of respect. They are signs of welcome. They are signs of maturity and strength.

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