

Background Information on English-only

The proposed Metro Charter amendment reads: "English is the official language of the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee. Official actions which bind or commit the government shall be taken only in the English language, and all official government communications and publications shall be in English. No person shall have a right to government services in any other language. All meetings of the Metro Council, Boards, and Commissions of the Metropolitan Government shall be conducted in English. The Metro Council *may* make specific exceptions to protect public health and safety. Nothing in this measure shall be interpreted to conflict with federal or state law."

- **The proposed charter amendment is "English-only," not "English-first."** The initiative is an attempt to eliminate the use of all non-English languages by Metro government. The word "only" appears in the proposed language, and not the word "first." People are understandably less supportive of English-*only* measures because an outright prohibition against non-English languages is excessive and dangerous.
- **English-only laws are not about the importance of learning English; they are about how we treat immigrants in transition.** Many people who express support for this type of initiative really just want to affirm the importance of the English language in times of cultural change and insecurity. The truth is, immigrants understand the importance of learning English better than anyone, and they are learning just like our grandparents did. It serves everyone's interests that they be able to interact with the government in the meantime.
- **City leaders have decided overwhelmingly that English-only is bad for Nashville.** On August 7th, 2008, the Metro Council voted 25-8 urging voters to oppose an English-only charter amendment. Mayor Dean himself addressed the council: "I wanted to take this time, this opportunity to make sure my voice, as mayor of this city, is heard on this issue, and to assure that everyone fully understands the consequences of passing a law that will tie our hands in the global economy, that will detract from our appeal as an international tourist destination, and that will damage our reputation as a welcoming and friendly city."

The proposed English-only charter amendment is:

Unnecessary, and Actually Bad for English

- English is already the "official and legal language" of Tennessee. In November of 2006, the Nashville Metro Council passed resolution RS2006-1650, clarifying that TN state law already establishes English as the official language, and expressing concern that further English-only legislation could actually be bad for English acquisition.
- Today's immigrants are learning English the same way our grandparents did – by getting out into the community and interacting with native speakers of the language. This proposed charter amendment seeks to further isolate immigrants, making it much more difficult to learn English. If the concern is that immigrants are not learning English quickly enough, we should create more opportunities for them to learn.
- Research indicates that 98% of Latinos think it is "essential" that their children learn English. In fact, 80% of foreign-born children from Mexico learn English "well" or "very well," and 92 percent of second-generation Latinos are fully fluent in English. By the third generation, only 28% of Latinos are still proficient in Spanish (Migration Policy Institute).
- Immigrants are required to demonstrate English proficiency before they become U.S. citizens, with only a few exceptions for older people. However, the citizenship process is long and arduous, and immigrants must interact with government agencies while they are still learning English. When refugees come to Tennessee from Sudan, they don't learn English in a refugee camp in Chad. They learn English once they get here. There are over 45,000 foreign-born individuals in Davidson County who are still working towards their citizenship.
- When the Metro Council passed its pro-English resolution in 2006, it found that English-only legislation has a "potentially detrimental impact on those who are already linguistically isolated; and...increased linguistic isolation for LEP individuals may have the unintended consequence of slowing their rate of English acquisition."

Costly to Taxpayers

- This unnecessary ballot initiative will cost Nashville taxpayers approximately \$500,000, during a time when the nation is facing a financial crisis and local governments are being forced to cut essential services.

- The wording of the ballot initiative is sloppy and overly broad, and will almost certainly be found to violate federal law. The city will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars defending this misguided ballot initiative, only to see it struck down in court.

Dangerous and Inefficient

- The ability of Nashville government to communicate with all city residents is essential for public safety. Imposing an artificial language barrier will create confusion and make all Nashvillians less safe. Prohibiting communication in languages other than English will shut out individuals who have important information to share with government officials. Will new immigrants no longer be able to contact a 911 operator if they are victims of a crime, have information to prevent a crime, or need to report a serious accident? How many crimes, fallen electrical lines, or broken streetlights will go unreported?
- Metro agencies translate essential documents because it makes Metro government more efficient. Imposing an artificial language barrier will slow down customer service lines, create confusion and misinformation, and degrade the quality of Metro services for all residents. Metro government should encourage, not discourage, communication between its residents and government employees.

Bad for Nashville's Economy

- Nashville has always been known as an open and inclusive city, a factor that leads many companies to move here. However, the English-only effort positions Nashville as unwelcoming and un-inclusive to immigrant populations and businesses with large numbers of foreign-born workers, including locally headquartered companies such as Bridgestone Americas, Caterpillar Financial and Nissan.
- This English-only initiative tells new businesses and students considering Nashville, 'foreign people will not be accommodated and are not welcome.' According to the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, Japanese investment alone in Tennessee exceeded \$9.4 billion in 2004, creating over 40,000 jobs.

Bad for the Nashville's Reputation

- This initiative targets and discriminates against all foreign-born people in Nashville, including refugees who have come to this country to escape discrimination and persecution. (Saddam Hussein prohibited Kurds living in Northern Iraq from speaking Kurdish in their own homes, banned and burned Kurdish books, and forcibly gave Kurdish children names in Arabic).
- At a time when Nashville is enjoying tremendous success recruiting international companies – and thousands of high-paying jobs that grow our tax base – the English-only effort divides our community and projects a negative and inaccurate perception of our city to the world.
- The English-only initiative in Nashville has already received negative press on a national scale, with publications as far-reaching as USA Today, the Florida Times-Union, the Houston Chronicle, the Las Vegas Sun, the Pittsburgh Tribune Review and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer describing Nashville as a tourist-driven city on the verge of taking an unwelcoming stance toward its visitors and out of touch with the city's one in six foreign-born residents.

Illegal and Unconstitutional

- English-only laws are inconsistent with the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. For example, laws that have the effect of eliminating courtroom translation severely jeopardize the ability of people on trial to follow and comprehend the proceedings.
- English-only legislation also denies U.S. citizens with limited English proficiency some of their basic rights. For example, naturalization for U.S. citizenship does not require English literacy for people over 50, or people who have been in the U.S. for over 20 years. An "English only" standard prevents legal residents and United States citizens from obtaining important information from their government, and prevents such persons from effectively communicating with or expressing grievances to their elected officials, impinging on First Amendment and Equal Protection rights. The right to receive ideas is essential to an individual's rights of speech, press and political freedom.
- The initiative limits the free speech rights of city officials and city employees as well. By requiring all communication to be in English employees and elected officials will be prohibited from communication and receiving information non-English speaking residents, who make up a significant portion of the community and contribute greatly to the community's social and economic fabric.