



# Board of Commissioners of Cook County

118 North Clark Street  
Chicago, IL

## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 18-2069, **Version:** 1

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### PROPOSED RESOLUTION

#### IN MEMORY OF THE HONORABLE JUDGE WILLIAM COUSINS JR.

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins Jr, former Justice of the Illinois Appellate Court, Cook County Prosecutor, trial attorney, Alderman of the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward, community leader and a man who spent his life deeply devoted to faith, family and public service died January 20<sup>th</sup> at the age of 90. He left behind countless friends, family and a community deeply enriched for having known him; and

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins was born a small Mississippi community within a stone's throw of the place where Emmett Till was killed. At an early age he confronted issues of racism and violence and was an eye-witness to many of the social pathologies and lack of opportunity associated with poverty. Neither of his parents had much schooling but they were tireless in securing an education for their son. The family moved to Memphis and later to Chicago in 1938. His exceptional academic talent revealed itself early in life; he graduated from DuSable High School where he earned top grades, ran track, and served as president of his senior class; and

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1948. While there, he excelled both academically and as a cadet in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He starred on the school's debate team, never losing a debate. For his bachelor's degree in political science, he wrote a thesis on *stare decisis et non quieta movere*--Latin for "to adhere to precedent and not disturb settled principles." He concluded that adhering to precedent was essential for a stable system of justice in a society, even though it meant that societal injustices would only be corrected "with provoking slowness." Precedent need not be abandoned to make society more fair, he wrote; instead, "the quality of our judges should be improved." Nearly three decades before he would become one himself, Cousins wrote, "While judges are men, they must of necessity be more than ordinary men;" and

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins received his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1951. After law school, he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Army and served in the Pacific Theater during the Korean War. He was a second lieutenant in the infantry, where he was the leader of a predominately all-white unit. While in Japan, he met his future wife, Hiroko Ogawa. The couple married in Japan in 1953 and raised four children and remained together until she died in 2005; and

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins began his legal career as an examining attorney for Chicago Title & Trust Company. Later, he served as an assistant state's attorney and then formed his own law firm along with three other African-American attorneys and Harvard Law School graduates; and

**WHEREAS**, in 1967, William Cousins became alderman of the 8th Ward. He ran for alderman as an independent Democrat, using the slogan "Unbowed, Unbossed and Unbought" and was elected three times. While an alderman, his main contributions were the extension of rapid transit south. He opposed the creation of the Crosstown Expressway and sought to add new schools and parks to the ward. He also fought to keep open commuter rail stations on the Illinois Central at the 79th, 82nd and 87th Street stations. One highlight of his ten years, was the citywide ordinance he sponsored that was approved by the council establishing Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a city holiday; and

**WHEREAS**, William Cousins left the City Council for the bench when he was elected to the Cook County Circuit Court. While there, he was known for his exceptional work ethic, fairness and formality. From the bench, he always referred to himself as "the court." His rulings were long and detailed in order to forestall reversals in higher courts. He will long be

remembered for this relentless attention to detail which often kept him late into the evening at the courthouse, a habit for which he became known as "The Prince of Darkness"; and

**WHEREAS**, Judge Cousins was a jurist who was decades ahead of his time. While a sitting judge in Circuit Court, he courageously challenged the constitutionality of Illinois' death penalty. In a case in which the state sought the death penalty, he ruled that Illinois' Death Sentence Act was, in his words "wantonly and freakishly imposed." Though his ruling was reversed by the Illinois Supreme Court it was often described by many as courageous and compassionate. He was proud of his ruling that found Illinois' death penalty unconstitutional in 1979, over two decades before then Governor George Ryan declared a moratorium on capital punishment; and

**WHEREAS**, in 1992, William Cousins won the Democratic primary for a 10-year term as a justice on the Illinois Appellate Court. He went on to win the general election with no opposition. Decades ahead of others he publicly noted that the population of Illinois' prisons has almost doubled since he had joined the bench, from 12,000 to more than 20,000. He often lamented the growing dependency on incarceration as the cure for crime. He stated that "They are building new prisons, but not fast enough--they fill almost before they complete them. Obviously, we're fighting a losing battle; "and

**WHEREAS**, Justice Cousins chose not to seek re-election to the appellate court in 2002. After he retired from the bench he was requested by Mayor Richard M. Daley to co-chair a panel to investigate code enforcement policies and possible communication breakdowns among city agencies in the wake of the E2 nightclub disaster that killed twenty-one people. He was later named to the panel, known as the Mikva commission by Cook County Board President John Stroger to conduct an independent investigation into the deadly fire at the Cook County Administration building; and

**WHEREAS**, in addition to his stellar legal career, William Cousins was also a well-respected volunteer leader in the community. He led the Chatham-Avalon Park Community Council, where he worked to oppose high-rise housing in the neighborhood and was an active member of Trinity United Church of Christ and Kappa Alpha Psi and Sigma Pi Phi, his college fraternity where he participated in student sit-ins; and

**WHEREAS**, throughout his long exceptional life, Cousins faced prejudice and lost opportunities because he was African-American; he fought back against racism as deliberately and methodically as he ruled in court and the community has lost a great friend; he will be missed. He will be missed by his many friends, neighbors and colleagues. His loss will be felt most acutely by his children Gail Yoshiko Cousins, Cheryl Akiko Cousins; two sons, Yul Cousins and Noel Cousins; and four grandchildren; and

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, on behalf of the 5.2 million residents of Cook County who he served dutifully, commemorates the extraordinary life of the Honorable Justice William Cousins Jr., and herewith expresses its sincere gratitude for the invaluable and innumerable contributions he has made to the Citizens of Cook County, Illinois; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that a suitable copy of this Resolution be spread upon the official proceedings of this Honorable Body and that an official copy of the same be tendered to the family of the Honorable Justice William Cousins Jr.