

FORUM FOCUSES ON ISSUES COUNCIL AND MAYORAL CANDIDATES NEED TO ADDRESS

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

What are the issues that City Council and Mayoral candidates should be talking about in this year's campaign? A panel at the March 16th Community Issues Forum focused on this question. The clear theme that emerged from the three presentations is that Cincinnati's elected representatives must pay a lot more attention to the needs of the city's low-income residents and their neighborhoods.



Josh Spring,
Executive Director
of the Greater
Cincinnati
Homeless
Coalition, led off
the panel with a
factual and
troubling
description of the
City's homeless
population and the
lack of affordable

housing for thousand of residents. He cited that the four local family shelters were only able to take in approximately eleven percent of the families seeking shelter in the last year. Usually these shelters have less applicants during the warmer months, but this trend did not occur in 2016.

Meanwhile, the shelters for single adults remained at full capacity during this time frame, and they were forced to turn men and women away. More people have also been counted trying to eke out an existence outside, and the "cold shelter" took in more than four-hundred of them during the extreme winter weather. The shelters are doing their best to accommodate this increase in homelessness, noted Spring, but it all boils down to a lack of affordable housing in Cincinnati.

This local affordable housing shortage, declared Spring, can be summed up with two numbers. Fourteen thousand families that qualify for housing assistance are not receiving it, and a 40,000 affordable housing unit gap currently exists in Hamilton County. Spring pointed to cuts in federal housing programs over the years, gentrification, and the neglect of older units by absentee landlords as reasons for this growing gap. Furthermore, the current federal budget plan submitted to Congress by the Trump Administration calls for a further cut in housing programs of seven billion dollars.

What is needed locally, according to Spring, is a housing trust fund. It could be established by the City or regionally, and it could have multiple sources of funding. Currently, the Homeless Coalition is working with Affordable Housing Advocates to draft plans for such a trust while building community support to take the proposal to City Hall and other public entities. Spring concluded his remarks with these words: "It all comes down to housing!"

"This is a society that is not very good at solving problems." Prince Brown, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and African American Studies at Northern Kentucky University, opened

his remarks with this observation. Government exists to serve the people, he said, but too often it is focused on helping those with money make more money. He deplored the large donations of big donors to political campaigns, and he suggested that such donations should go to hire workers as community organizers to register people to vote.

"So what can we do?" asked Prince. "We have to think big!" He suggested a new social service model that emphasizes prevention rather than partial relief for huge problems. He agreed with Josh Spring that a local housing trust fund with sufficient money to provide affordable housing units fits this alternative model, and that it should be launched. He concluded that similar local initiatives are needed for major needs such as public transportation and health care.

Jennifer Summers, Executive Director of the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, then depicted how community organizing in low-income neighborhoods, can often turn things around. Her Center alone is an example of how residents in Over-the-Rhine battled against huge odds to transform a closed Public School into a thriving neighborhood resource. She pointed to the Center's recent effort to assist mothers and children in their fight to save public land across the street from Rothenberg School that houses a basketball court and a community garden. At the moment, they have successfully stopped a project to build expensive condominiums supported by the City's Development Department which was proceeding with no neighborhood input.

What needs to happen, says Summers, is a community organizing effort that moves from stopping things such as the Rothenberg project to supporting polices such as

"inclusionary zoning," a process that insures the inclusion of affordable housing units in any major new housing project. We need to effectively advocate at City Hall for private/public partnerships that insure that neighborhood residents reap some benefits from any City supported private development. Certainly, she added, a coalition of citizens should be able to persuade City Council to establish a housing trust fund. The trick, she concluded, "is getting civically involved wherever you are!"