



# AIR TIME

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Applied Information Resources is a non-profit, public policy research and community information organization dedicated to:

- Citizen education on public issues.
- Assisting human service organizations in evaluating their programs, and
- Providing the best possible information to decision makers responding to changing human and urban needs.

AIR TIME is published quarterly-Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall

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Applied Information Resources is in the process of developing an on-line publication called "Queen City Forum." Designed to focus on community issues of concern to citizens and the civic sector, "Queen City Forum" will feature brief but timely articles, a community calendar of events, and a blog. This concept emerged from "The Citizens' Voice," meetings of diverse citizens that AIR has hosted in recent months.

The articles included in this issue of AIR TIME are the initial pieces that can be found in Queen City Forum. Since QCF is a work in progress, we invite your suggestions, comments, and participation as an on-line journalist or blogger. Go to - [www.queencityforum.com](http://www.queencityforum.com)

## A Positive Voice For The Housing Choice Voucher

James Cunningham, Director of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for Southwestern Ohio, made a strong case for the Housing Choice Voucher Program in his keynote address at the MARCC annual meeting on February 10<sup>th</sup>. MARCC (Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati) voted last November to make affordable housing/homelessness one of its priority issues in 2009, and in light of this decision it chose Cunningham as its speaker and held its annual meeting at the Metropolitan Housing Authority office in the West End.

Usually referred to as Section-8, the

Housing Choice Voucher Program is the target of a lot of negative criticism. Low-income applicants who qualify for the program can secure rental housing from any private landlord who agrees to accept a voucher. Since more rental housing is usually available in neighborhoods that are in transition, residents who live in neighborhoods that are changing economically and socially often blame Section-8 tenants and landlords for any residential decline.

Cunningham refutes the claim that the Housing Choice Voucher Program is the culprit responsible for an area's decline. For one thing, a Section-8 unit is inspected by the Metropoli-

tan Housing Authority to insure that it is decent,

**Section 8 vouchers are currently dispersed in neighborhoods and residential areas throughout Cincinnati and Hamilton County.**

safe, and sanitary. Absentee and irresponsible landlords and abandoned and foreclosed properties are primary causes of neighborhood deterioration, and Cunningham says that these factors are often wrongly linked to Section-8.

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Cunningham also debunked another myth that Section-8 housing is concentrated in one or two neighborhoods in Cincinnati. In a chart he made available to MARCC annual meeting attendees, he showed how vouchers are currently dispersed in neighborhoods and residential areas throughout Cincinnati and Hamilton County.

Negative attitudes toward Section-8 held by many neighborhoods residents and some public officials must be challenged by affordable housing advocates. So great is the need for housing assistance in the Cincinnati area that a three year waiting list exists for Housing Choice Vouchers. Since units of Public Housing and other project-based programs

have declined in recent years, the Housing Choice Voucher Program is one of the only ways to expand housing opportunities for low-income families. Cunningham applauds coalitions like MARCC for taking on the critical issue of affordable housing.

## Community Forum Reflects Continued Concern About The Ramifications Of The Proposed Zoning Amendments

At a recent Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral, a diverse group comprised of concerned citizens and representatives of social service agencies heard a panel depict the impacts that a series of proposed zoning code amendments would have on social services in Cincinnati. The panel included Elizabeth Brown, Executive Director of Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), Roger Howell, President of the City Gospel Mission, and Trey Daley, an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati, and they offered different perspectives on the negative effects these zoning changes would create for agencies and religious institutions that operated human services.

Trey Daley provided some background when he explained how City Council established a policy last May that

would prevent the further impact of social services in a neighborhood such as Over-the-Rhine and would limit the concentration of social services in other areas of the city. The City Planning Department received the task of implementing this policy, and after a lengthy process that included input from working groups comprised of citizen/volunteers, the staff drafted the 32 zoning text amendments currently under review by the Planning Commission.

Elizabeth Brown noted that the zoning amendments as currently proposed have the potential of violating federal laws that prohibit discrimination against groups such as people with disabilities. Because the proposals change the definition of religious activities, Roger Howell explained that they would greatly restrict the services that churches and religious institutions provide as part of their ministries. Even though the zoning changes would be “grand fa-

thered,” the panelist concurred that they would still make it very difficult to either expand or create new services due to location and distant requirements.

A Forum attendee, Charles Graves, the Director of the City Planning Department, was invited to respond to the panel. He emphasized that the zoning proposals were not designed to make life difficult for churches or social service agencies, and he stipulated that the process was far from over. After the last two meetings of the Planning Commission, the zoning amendments were sent back to the Planning Department for further work, and a new draft will then come up for public comment and a review and a vote by the Planning Commission.

(To hear portions of the Forum panel discussion, go to [www.airinc.org/communityforum](http://www.airinc.org/communityforum)

## Citizens' Voice Confab Hears Issue Updates And Contemplates Setting A Citizen Agenda

A group of diverse citizens met at the Peaslee Neighborhood Center on February 27<sup>th</sup> to share information about recent events and policies and to begin a discussion about developing “a citizen agenda.” Known as “the Citizens' Voice,” these informal sessions have taken place in recent months to explore ways that civic activists representing different issues can share common ground while reinforcing each other's work.

Previous interest by the group in the proposed Environmental

Justice Ordinance led to an update from David Altman, the co-chair of the citizen task force that sponsored the proposal. Altman reported that a redraft of the ordinance had just been completed, and he had not yet had a chance to read it. He confided some concern that such a redraft may weaken environmental protection for neighborhoods, and he promised to provide a written evaluation once he reads the new version.

Next, Rick Dieringer, the Director of Invest in Neighborhoods, told attendees that the City Budget passed

by Council in December eliminated the funding for his organization to administer the Neighborhood Support Program. Dieringer believes that the City lacks the internal staff to run the Support Program and events such as the annual Neighborhood Summit, and he wonders how support for the City's Community Councils will fare without Invest in Neighborhoods' involvement. “Invest”, he said, will continue to work with the Greater Cincinnati Foundation on neighborhood initiatives such as

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*Public Policy and Research*

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the Youth Council in Avondale.

Georgine Getty and Josh Spring of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition then briefed the group on the City's proposed zoning amendments (see specific article). After the large public hearing and a second meeting by the Planning Commission, the 32 zoning text amendments were sent back to the Planning Department for further work. People will have to be ready for a second round of hearings, warned Getty and Spring, once the Department finishes its revisions and sends them back to the Commission.

The attendees finally turned to a discussion about establishing "a citizen agenda." Several people acknowledged that citizens spend way too much of their energy responding to plans and policies that public offi-

cial or other interests have developed without much public participation. Others declared how easy it is to isolate and defeat individual grassroots organizations. "The least we can do," offered Louise Spiegel, "is to do a better job of sharing information and news about our own initiatives through meetings list serves, and other on-line technology." Besides meeting to inform each other about particular issues and positions, the diverse citizens in attendance liked the idea of working on a citizen agenda. Representatives from AIR, Inc., who staff the Citizens' Voice Project, agreed to plan further meetings and informal communications on this concept.