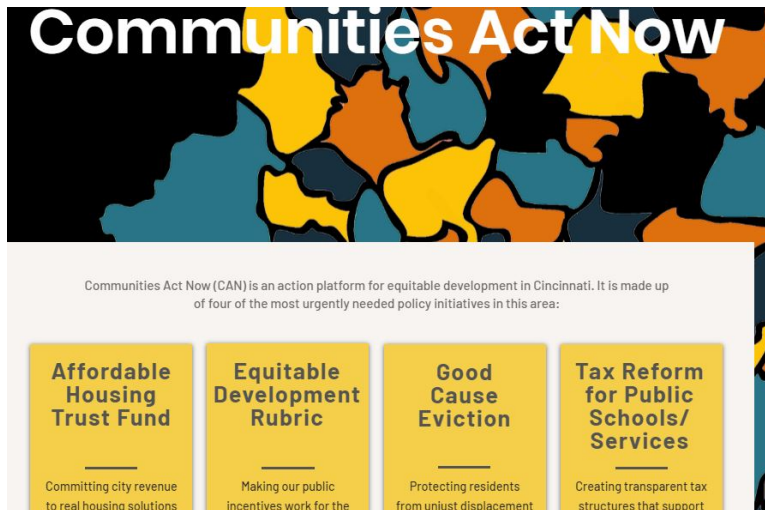


Communities Act Now "CAN" Seeks To Promote Equitable Policies In Cincinnati's Neighborhoods

By Bill Woods

The Peaslee Neighborhood Center recently announced the launching of "Communities Act Now" (CAN). Described as "an action strategy for equitable development in Cincinnati," CAN includes at least four policies designed to achieve this goal. At the Zoom Community Issues Forum on August 6th, Jenn Arens, Peaslee's Education Coordinator, Amanda Barker of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, and Marche Gendrew, Coordinator of the the Cincinnati Educational Justice Coalition discussed what CAN is all about.



Jenn Arens began by explaining why the CAN-platform is so important. Cincinnati, she noted, lags behind many other cities in developing policies that counter trends that have led to gentrification, displacement, evictions, a lack of affordable housing, and other inequities in many inner-city neighborhoods. As a late starter in combatting these inequitable developments and policies, Cincinnati needs something like CAN that brings

together the effective counter measures under one tent.

One of CAN's action-policies is the Equitable Development Rubric. Developed by the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, the Rubric emerged after Peaslee's organizing efforts with Over-the-Rhine residents to stop outside developments that threatened to hurt their quality of life. One such project was an upper-income condominium development that would have removed public land used as a children's play area and for gardening, and that included the last outdoor basketball court in the neighborhood. This grassroots organizing inspired the Peaslee staff to concoct a rubric with ways to grade a proposed project by evaluating the negative and positive impacts that it would have on a community.

Jenn Arens briefly described the elements in the rubric, and Peaslee's efforts to date to have other neighborhoods endorse it. The rubric, she explained, "is designed to score development projects on their contribution to equity across class and race." Specifically, projects are graded on whether they improve housing affordability in the neighborhood, the job opportunities they would provide to residents, the amount of neighborhood involvement in planning projects, and their potential negative and positive impacts on a neighborhood's quality of life. She acknowledged that



both the Over-the-Rhine and the Walnut Hills Community Councils have endorsed the rubric, and she believes Evanston will soon follow suit.

A second action-policy in CAN's action-strategy is achieving adequate funding for the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Following months of advocacy by Advocates For Affordable Housing and the Homeless Coalition, City Council established an Affordable Housing Trust fund in 2019. However, with only minimal City dollars allocated to it, the Fund is unable to have any impact on lessening the affordable housing crisis. Since the purpose of the Fund was to fill a revenue void at the local level to build or rehab affordable housing for a growing number of families and individuals without it, advocates decided to initiate a Charter Amendment proposal to establish proper funding.

Amanda Barker, the lead organizer for the Charter Amendment campaign explained the current status of this effort. The pandemic, she noted, required postponing when the proposal would be on the ballot. Instead of the November election, the Charter Amendment proposal to require the City to allocate \$50-million a year to the Trust Fund will face the voters next May. This postponement will allow added time to collect the needed signatures of registered voters in order to qualify the Amendment for the ballot.

Since traditional methods of gathering signatures on street corners or at large events are not now possible, the campaign is in the process of setting up special times and places where people can feel safe signing the petition with proper social distancing and masks. Barker pointed to two such events at First United Church of Christ in College Hill on Monday August 17th and Monday August 24th (both at 5:00 to 8:00 P.M.).

During this period, noted Barker, the campaign is refining its campaign message, building its on-line presence, and continuing to recruit organizations and individuals to be part of its informal coalition. She invited people who were part of the Zoom Forum to join up. (Go to www.actionforhousingnow.com)

Marche Gendrew of the Cincinnati Educational Justice Coalition then talked about the equity issue of tax reform that is part of the CAN-action platform. The goal, she emphasized, is to reform local tax policies so that more revenue goes to assist our schools and neighborhoods in need. Her Coalition focuses especially on reforming the City's tax abatement policies. In the past, these abatements were given without any built in provisions that the developers needed to provide some assistance to the public institutions that would be deprived of abated property tax revenues. She emphasized that the City's Public Schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods, are suffering during the pandemic with no money to pay for basic services to keep children safe. She hopes that the development of CAN will provide the added information and neighborhood collaboration to build a grassroots effort that will convince City Council that equitable tax reforms must be passed.

After the question and answer period, Jenn Arens asked Forum participants to support CAN's policy platform. She invited them to go to its new Website at CincyCAN.org. and sign in. The next Zoom Forum on Thursday August 20th at noon will focus on LISC's recently released report, "Housing Our Future - Strategies for Addressing Our Affordable Housing Crisis."