

COMMISSIONER DRIEHAUS AND COUNCILMAN MANN REFLECT ON ISSUES CONFRONTING COUNTY AND CITY GOVERNMENT IN 2019 AT THE FIRST COMMUNITY ISSUES FORUM OF THE NEW YEAR by Bill Woods for StreetVibes, January 25, 2019

What are the important issues confronting City Council and the Hamilton County Commission in 2019 and beyond? Councilman David Mann and County Commissioner Denise Driehaus addressed this question as well as assessing how they see local government's role in future developments and plans at the first Community Issues Forum of the new year. Instead of speaking separately, the two elected officials informally talked in tandem and responded to the many questions of Forum attendees.

Budget issues, according to both Mann and Driehaus, are the first big hurdles facing both the City and the County. Driehaus explained that the County confronted a \$28-million deficit that must be dealt with. At the moment a hiring freeze is in place, and cuts have been made to basic services. She indicated that a hike in the sales tax might well be necessary.

Although the projected City deficit is not as high as the County's, it still adds up to millions of dollars. Traditionally, noted Mann, the Police and Fire budgets are held harmless, and these services take a huge percentage of the City's revenue. That means that other services and departments must absorb the cuts. Mann, who chairs the Finance Committee, was critical that too much revenue has been lost in recent years due to the City's cutting of a large portion of its share of the property tax.

Driehaus and Mann talked about the negative impacts on their budgets due to the major loss of money from the State Local Government Fund. They told Forum attendees to tell Governor DeWine that this funding needs to be restored. Both implied that

the long standing mantra of "no new taxes" is making government at all levels unworkable.

Several members of the audience asked the speakers about tax abatements and their impacts on revenue for public services. They questioned whether these abatements were really needed to bring in businesses and spur development. Mann defended tax abatements as a tool that had been necessary to broker developments that had improved the city's economic climate. However, he said that the City's abatement policies were under review, and that stiffer requirements were now being written into abatement agreements. He mentioned a proposal being considered by Council to require major housing projects to include a percentage of affordable units in their developments in order to qualify for an abatement.

Staying with the theme of housing, Mann said the City has established a fund to help tenants who are evicted from housing to survive the crisis of suddenly having no place to live. Citing the book, "Evicted," he acknowledged that evictions create a myriad of problems including homelessness. Mann also noted his support for the recent establishment of an affordable housing trust fund, but he admitted that this fund still lacked a funding base.

Attendees pressed Driehaus about the Sheriff's cooperation with ICE in terms of contacting ICE officials when an undocumented immigrant is being held by the County. This policy, they declared, has brought about some tragic deportations. Driehaus agreed to meet with advocates of immigrant rights to further discuss this ongoing issue.

Both Driehaus and Mann voiced their support for improving the declining bus service. They said that SORTA needed to put forward a plan with an adequate tax proposal, and they

mentioned growing grassroots support for having a public transit system that connects city residents with the suburban job base.

Mann and Driehaus told Forum attendees they had enjoyed this informal give and take with them. They promised to come back in the fall. The Forum on January 31st will feature Josh Spring, Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, providing an update on homelessness in Greater Cincinnati.