

The Peaslee Neighborhood Center And Its Allies Take On The Pandemic While Also Promoting An Equitable Development Rubric by Bill Woods for StreetVibes

How can community organizing make a difference in neighborhoods facing an immediate crisis like COVID-19 or in dealing with long term issues such as preventing the negative impacts of development projects on community residents? At the Community Issues Forum on February 25th, a panel described how the Peaslee Neighborhood Center and its allies like the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center are doing just that. Responding to the Forum's title, "An effective neighborhood response to the economic hardships of the pandemic," the speakers also talked about Peaslee's creation and advocacy for an equitable development rubric that would give neighborhoods like Over-the-Rhine critical information about the probable negative or positive results of a proposed project.

At a previous Forum on February 11th, Pastor Damon Lynch III put forward his thesis that economic community organizing by residents is the only way to bring success to African-American neighborhoods. The organizing now going on at the Peaslee Neighborhood Center fits that model. Effective grassroots organizing created this neighborhood center after Cincinnati Public Schools closed the building in the 1980s, and since that transformation it has provided an array of services for OTR-residents.

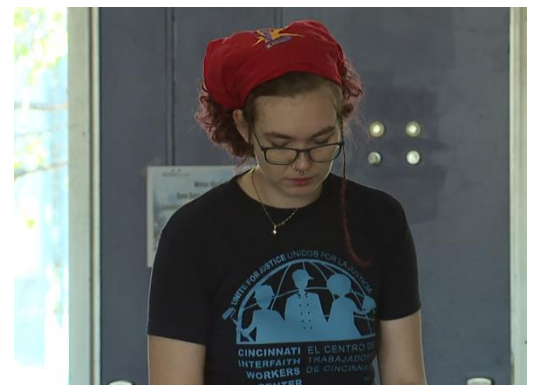
Megan Hague, Peaslee's Program Outreach Coordinator, opened the Forum by providing an overview of how the Neighborhood Center's emergency services were launched. Once the



COVID-19 pandemic took hold locally, it became apparent that Peaslee's normal operation of services within the building were going to be both disrupted or temporarily halted. It was also evident that this health crisis was creating new problems for OTR-residents who already lived with numerous economic inequities.

Food insecurity emerged as an immediate issue, and Megan and other Peaslee staff began to organize ways to provide food and basic supplies to residents. Since it already had close ties to Rothenberg School, Peaslee saw the school as a natural location for its food distribution efforts. When regular classes stopped, Rothenberg and other Public Schools remained committed to distributing the free food that would normally be served to qualified children as in-school breakfasts and lunches. Working with Rothenberg and the Free Store Food Bank, Peaslee devised a process of providing extra food and supplies to families that were already making food pickups at the school. When this model succeeded, Peaslee went on to establish two other school distribution points as well as several neighborhood locations.

Magda Orlander of the Interfaith Workers Center went on to describe her organization's involvement in emergency food distribution. Already an ally of Peaslee with its office in its building, the Workers Center joined forces and began setting



up other distribution centers. It found that its client base of low-income workers and immigrant families also confronted food insecurity and that food and other essential supplies were sorely needed. Although protecting and advocating for the rights of workers is the paramount goal of CIWC, it also felt compelled to assist clients who were often unemployed and without resources during this pandemic.

Panelists Manuel Perez and Paul Breidenbach of the Workers Center and Sergio Mata of the Free Store Food Bank depicted in detail the establishment of one vital distribution center at the Willows in Springdale. The Willows is currently a housing complex where many immigrant



families and individuals live, and this population was badly in need of food and other essentials during the last eleven months. Perez narrated a series of slides that portrayed both the need for and the smooth operations of the Willows' Distribution Center. Sergio Mata then emphasized that the Free Store Food Bank actively supported new sites like the Willows. Their creation, he declared, has been essential in serving the growing number of people who currently cannot afford buying food and basic supplies.

Time was set aside to hear about the current status of Peaslee's Equitable Development Rubric. With the support of several other neighborhoods, Peaslee has been promoting this process to the City as an effective way to screen proposed developments to expose their probable negative and positive impacts on community residents. City Council is currently reviewing Councilman Greg Landsman's draft of an economic development procedure that professes to accomplish these same goals. Megan Hague explained that Peaslee has determined that Landsman's initial draft falls far short of replicating the Peaslee Rubric, and the Center is asking Council to proceed more slowly while it sincerely listens to the ideas put forward by neighborhoods like OTR that have suffered from numerous, past development projects that received City support. She requested that Forum participants make this same plea to Council members in the next week with phone calls and emails.

EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT RUBRIC

RATIONALE

Public subsidies and incentives like tax abatements, zoning changes, and public land belong to the taxpayers and exist for the public good.

We believe that this kind of public investment in private development is only worth it if the project brings significant public good that is otherwise difficult to realize. We think that the careful, smart use of these tools can aid Cincinnati in addressing its well-documented equity problem across class and race.

DEMANDS

Our initiative calls upon the City of Cincinnati to take the following actions:

APPROACH

Solutions to inequities should be baked into how we do public business. The Rubric provides a path to leverage our incentives for real community benefits. It offers:

- a transparent way to **evaluate** development projects in areas like housing affordability, jobs and wages, and community input to help us **negotiate** the best return for the community
- a grassroots strategy to realize community gains and a policy framework to **demand change** of City decision-makers
- an opportunity to **raise the bar** city-wide, while allowing for flexibility in scoring to meet different neighborhood needs and facilitate more even development across the city.



REQUIRE

that projects meet neighborhood minimum Rubric scores in order to receive substantial tax breaks, public land, or zoning changes

For wealthy and quickly gentrifying neighborhoods, projects should earn a minimum score of 75%.

For other neighborhoods, the City should work with community councils to set



ENFORCE

compliance with the agreed-upon standards for the full duration of the subsidies offered

Failure to comply should result in termination and/or repayment of subsidies



RE-EVALUATE

the changing investment needs of each neighborhood, and adjust scores accordingly

This should be done in collaboration with each community council on an annual basis, and should be informed by relevant data provided by the City.