

Community Issues Forum Focuses On The Need For Issue 3 - Part II Of Cincinnati's Affordable Housing Crisis

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

The campaign to pass Issue 3 is coming down to the wire. When this issue of StreetVibes goes to press only a few days will be left until Primary Election Day on May 4th. At the Zoom Community Issues Forum on April 22nd, Josh Spring, Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, and Peg Fox, Executive Director of MARCC (Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati) presented persuasive arguments why this City Charter Amendment Proposal to fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund is so badly needed.

Josh Spring began the Forum by both discussing the critical need for Issue 3 and explaining the basic elements of the proposed Amendment. He noted Cincinnati at present has a need for 28,000 affordable housing units, and that this need did not emerge out nowhere. This crisis has grown worse for years, and the City's economic policies have contributed to it. While the City and private developers invested \$1.5-billion in Over-the-Rhine during the last fifteen years, 2,300 affordable units were lost in this neighborhood alone.

These numbers add up to tragic situations for real people. This lack of permanent housing, according to Josh Spring, has made it very difficult to assist the homeless. Because people in shelters remain for much longer periods of time, approximately 90-percent of new homeless individuals and families with children cannot find a place to stay at a shelter on an average day. He also cited that "on any given day approximately three thousand Cincinnati Public School children do not have a permanent place to live."

This growing crisis, according to Josh Spring and Peg Fox, finally prompted Advocates for Affordable Housing, MARCC, and the Homeless Coalition to initiate the current Charter Amendment proposal that the City fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund with \$50-million annually. In 2019, these groups had successfully lobbied the City to establish the Trust Fund, but it has never received more than token funding from the Administration and Council. Discouraged by their negotiations with City Council, the coalition pushed forward even during the pandemic and collected over 9,000 petition signatures to qualify their proposal for the May 4th ballot.

Peg Fox described how MARCC organized a drive-by collection of signatures involving its interfaith members. She noted that addressing the affordable housing crisis has been a top MARCC priority for a number of years, and that its Christian, Jewish, and Muslim judicatories see Issue 3 as a reasonable response to this crisis. Passage of this Proposal will provide sufficient funding for rehabbing and building five-hundred units of affordable units a year.

Josh Spring explained the details of the proposed Amendment including the citizen board established to oversee the projects of the Trust Fund. He then took on some of the anti-Issue 3 rhetoric that is currently circulating in flyers mailed to Cincinnati residents. In lurid detail, these flyers proclaim that basic City services such as trash collection and emergency services provided by the Fire and Police Departments will be cut to the bone if Issue 3 passes.

Spring refuted these scare threats about the gutting of regular City services. For one thing, the

Amendment says that the \$50-million can be drawn from both the City's general and capital budgets, and this allocation represents approximately 3.8-percent of those combined budgets. Furthermore, the Amendment language suggests other ways of raising the money. One source suggested is the \$17-million annual revenue that the City receives due to its ownership of the Southern Railroad. A user fee for major commercial or residential developments is another suggestion, and other user fees are also possible. Although the City is now saying that it cannot use these revenue sources for the Trust Fund, Josh Spring declared that it has already used money from the Railroad and the capital budget for its token funding of the Fund. He emphasized: "The last thing advocates of Issue 3 want to happen is the slashing of basic City services."

From the beginning, Issue 3 has been a grassroots initiative supported by the human service agencies, religious groups, and neighborhood and civic organizations that comprise the Homeless Coalition, MARCC, and Advocates for Affordable Housing. Recently, the NAACP and the Urban League also endorsed this proposal. A modest campaign budget to date of \$38,000, that includes \$25,830 in in-kind contributions, was reported last week by the Issue 3 proponents. Counting primarily on a well-organized volunteer effort, Issue 3 leaders urge citizens to go to the "Cincinnati Action For Housing Now" website to volunteer or to read about the proposed Amendment.

Meanwhile, opponents of Issue 3 reported donations of \$90,000 to defeat the proposal. Contributed primarily by the AFL-CIO and various public employee unions, this money is paying for the slick flyers filled with misinformation that Cincinnati residents are currently receiving in their mail boxes.