

Getting busy on local housing

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Guest Columnist

When the idea first surfaced after the recent city council election to have a neighborhood housing committee, I must admit I was as skeptical as many others. This committee, the Neighborhood Development, Housing and Zoning Committee, has been created, and I have been selected to serve as chairman. The skepticism probably came from a number of reasons, only a few of which follow.

First, I certainly have been one of the most vocal critics of the Neighborhood Housing and Conservation Department as to meeting its goals and whether in fact the department has taken an active role in fostering low-income housing, and housing generally, as effectively as it should.

Secondly, although many council candidates talked about a "Smale commission" for housing, few actually knew the extent to which the new housing blueprint would address some of the concerns a Smale-type commission would address.

Federal floundering

Thirdly, we candidates spoke about setting up housing trust funds and/or linkages with downtown development projects. I, along with many others, knew of little if any buy-in from the corporate community with respect to housing for low-income citizens. There also seems to be a floundering around at the federal level, both from the standpoint of passing the housing bill dealing with safe and affordable housing for low-income citizens and funding same (this is primarily due to housing scandals we have seen at the federal level in the last six months).

Having said all that, much has changed my mind in the last few weeks. There now appears to be a collective will on council to devote the kind of energy and resources that were devoted to infrastructure in the last term to housing in this term. We obviously have not resolved all the infrastructure backlog, but we have put the pieces together to do the job that the Smale commission recommended for us. Because of that use of energy and resources for infrastructure, the job will be done as promised.

Secondly, we now have a "Blueprint for Housing Production in Cincinnati." This document defines the underserved housing markets in the city and how to produce housing for these markets. It will



Vice Mayor Strauss
... Hope, at last, for housing

be a useful, working document for our housing committee. The blueprint indicates the market segments which the city has to do something about. It also defines two objectives. First we need to provide decent, safe, sanitary and affordable housing to the estimated 28,000 households currently living in substandard housing. The second objective is 1,500 new housing units a year for the next 10 years.

Thirdly, there is collective resolve to assist in the passage of a state constitutional amendment to make housing a public purpose. Under current law, housing is not a public purpose, so we cannot use state or local public monies for housing. Hopefully, this amendment will be on the ballot in May. Passage is a critical step in meeting our goals for housing production. We can also allow for the issuance of bonds just as State Issue 2 allowed for the issuance of bonds for infrastructure a few years ago.

What are the things we can do to make sure that the goals of the housing blueprint are met? The answers to this question are many:

■ We have to do our best to bring the corporate sector into the low-income housing market. There seems to be a great deal of positive interest among Cincinnati corporations to reduce profit margins, while at the same time create an equity pool which could go a long way toward increasing the supply of low-

come housing in this community. The city needs to stand ready to develop loan packages, limited partnerships, non-profit corporations or whatever is necessary to take advantage of this window of opportunity.

■ The city needs to reach out to the churches, non-profit corporations and other organizations that have been in the low-income housing business for a long time and ask what we can do for them, not just what they can do for us. We have to be part of the solution to new or rehabbed housing units, not part of the problem, and make it easier for these groups to get through the bureaucracy.

■ We also need to work with the community councils to inventory abandoned buildings and potential housing sites. The city needs to develop a legal and financial strategy to reduce the enormous inventory of vacant or abandoned buildings in the city. The amount of current speculation in buildings, which once housed low-income citizens but have since fallen into such disrepair that they are close to being condemned, is shocking. We have to find legal remedies to get landlords to fix up properties or sell to other investors who are willing to put these buildings on the market as low-income housing units.

Reducing overhead

■ We need to explore the possibility of increasing the amount of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds actually used for housing. We should make every effort to move administrative costs, currently being taken out of the CDBG, into the operating budget, and to increase the hard dollars for housing and decrease the administrative costs.

We all need to rededicate ourselves to low- and moderate-income housing and take a hands-on approach in seeing that this happens in Cincinnati. This will be the work of the Neighborhood Development, Housing and Zoning Committee, and we look forward to a lot of support, suggestions and assistance. There is a will; we just have to find the way, and I think we can.

Peter Strauss is vice mayor of Cincinnati and chairman of city council's new Neighborhood Development, Housing and Zoning Committee.