

Columbus

Area Commission/Civic Association

Work Group

Final report

September 2007

Final report of the Columbus Area Commission/Civic Association Work Group

In May 2007, Columbus City Council President Michael C. Mentel and Columbus City Council Development Committee Chair Maryellen O'Shaughnessy issued a discussion paper regarding updating area commissions and community participation. Under their leadership, a work group was empanelled to examine the function and status and potential improvement of the function of Area Commissions and civic advisory bodies. Members of the work group included representatives from each Area Commission, a small civic association, a large civic association, and a community council.

The first meeting of the historic work group was held 23-May-07. Subsequent meetings were held on second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at Columbus City Hall. The Work Group held a retreat to formulate final recommendations on 25-Aug-07. The last meeting of the Work Group was held on 12-Sep-07.

Through the months of thoughtful, spirited, and deliberative debate on issues outlined in the discussion paper and others, members of the Work Group endeavored to hammer out common sense recommendations to present to Columbus City Council. City Council requested a final report from the Work Group be presented in September 2007.

As the entire process was conducted in a public and transparent fashion, public comment was taken throughout and meetings of the Work Group were extensively covered by local media. Agendas, minutes, and other pertinent documents from meetings were posted on the City of Columbus web site.

Each member of the Work Group as well as other stakeholders and city staff who participated in the process is to be thanked for their service to the city of Columbus. The community leaders and others who participated proved themselves to be outstanding advocates of their communities as well as the city as a whole. The passion and commitment exhibited by Work Group members was impressive.

Recommendations

The mission of the Work Group was to examine and evaluate the function and status of Area Commissions and civic advisory bodies and to recommend ways to improve the effectiveness of these organizations. The issues in the discussion paper were used to organize the group's discussion. The recommendations presented below are grouped by issue area and some are accompanied by examples of how they might be put into action.

Status of Non-Residents

Recommendation 1: The City shall allow each individual area commission to define its own residency requirements subject to the requirements of City Code Section 3109.

Staffing and Financial Support

Recommendation 2: The City is requested to establish and maintain websites for area commissions in which content can be updated locally and to continue to provide links to civic advisory body websites from the City website.

Recommendation 3: The City is requested to simplify finance-related paperwork and provide annual area commission stipends closer to the beginning of the year.

- Simplification may be accomplished by electronic transfer/handling of funds between city and area commissions.
- Stipends may be provided sooner if unspent funds can be carried forward and deducted from the following year rather than requiring refund of unspent balance.

Recommendation 4: The City is requested to reduce restrictions on how area commission stipends are spent and to increase funding for area commissions to \$5,000 annually in order to provide additional funding to areas with fewer local resources.

Recommendation 5: The City is requested to provide permanent physical and electronic storage for area commission records and permanent archives and provide reasonable access thereto.

Training and Education

Recommendation 6: The City shall provide training on meeting management and zoning issues which members of area commissions and civic advisory bodies shall be required to attend. Discretionary training for development or enrichment should also be provided for both types of organizations.

Recommendation 7: City staff shall receive training on the role of area commissions and civic advisory bodies during their orientation if their job involves regular or required contact with local groups.

Status of Community Councils and Civic Associations

Recommendation 8: The City shall create a formal process for recognizing civic advisory bodies.

- A “civic advisory body” is a community group that conducts public hearings, collects public input, and provides formal recommendations to the City in areas not covered by area commissions. This type of group may be a civic association, coalition, council or similar organization.
- There should be a “one-stop” contact point at the city for a resident to identify local development issues and the representative neighborhood organization.
- Education should be provided to the public and area commissions on the nature and role of civic advisory bodies.

Community Planning Areas and Commission Boundaries

Recommendation 9: There shall be a mechanism to amend area commission boundaries that shall include high but achievable standards through a fair process. That mechanism shall be determined by a committee of the new community coalition which will include area commissioners and other civic leaders.

Dispute Resolution

Recommendation 10: The City shall provide a template good neighbor agreement for use by all areas of the city.

Recommendation 11: The City shall provide mediation training for all area commission members and civic advisory bodies.

- There may be different subsets of mediation needed:
- For disputes between neighbors
- For disputes between neighborhoods
- For disputes between neighborhood and AC/CA

Encouraging Participation in City Service Delivery

Recommendation 12: City Council shall provide a speaker slot at City Council meetings for area commissions and civic advisory bodies on issues specific to their area.

Recommendation 13: The City shall send full and final results of decisions from city departments and agencies to affected area commissions and civic advisory bodies within seven business days.

Recommendation 14: The City shall formally notify area commissions and civic advisory bodies for *all* city infrastructure projects and policy issues particular to an area.

- Allow area commissions and civic advisory bodies to help engage the public. Remember this is a specific role of area commissions in CCC 3109.15(D)(3).
- Area commissions need more input into development decisions/city services, esp. demolitions.
- Provide for consistent notification from each agency on all city activities.

Recommendation 15: The City shall support area commissions and civic advisory bodies by requiring area code enforcement officers, police liaison officers, neighborhood liaisons, and zone attorneys to formally report on their respective activities at every monthly meeting.

- Reports needed on code issues filed through 311.
- Police liaison to provide crime statistics.
- Infrastructure updates should be provided by neighborhood liaison.

Recommendation 16: The City shall provide city services equally to all areas and groups.

- Many areas do not have necessary local expertise.
- Need better follow-through from city on commitments, otherwise citizens are not encouraged to participate where service and response is not timely or adequate.

Common Committee Structure

Recommendation 17: The City shall allow each individual area commission to define its own committee structure.

Other – Graphics

Recommendation 18: The City shall permit area commissions and civic advisory bodies to review graphics issues with zoning cases.

- In particular, the City should rescind the March 27, 2000, policy memo that prohibits community groups from dealing with graphics in zoning cases.

Dissenting Opinions

Members of the Work Group were offered an opportunity to submit a statement if they dissented from the consensus of the group on an issue. One dissenting opinion was offered:

Recommendation 9 Dissenting Opinion, Ian MacConnell, University Area Commission

Area commissions are designed to give one voice on any issue a neighborhood may face. If a group within a commission's boundaries would like to change that voice, there is always a podium for public comment or an upcoming election to win a commission seat. It is democracy at its grassroots volunteer best when people are engaged, and at its worse when people are not.

There are a host of issues that will arise if a mechanism is put in place to allow for secession, none of them good. We can expect gerrymandered and more complex commission boundaries, splintered and competing groups within commissions; central areas within a commission left at a disadvantage and on and on. As this is issued is considered in the future, we must not forget who will this mechanism serve, and what good will such a mechanism create? My opinion is no one, and none.

Times and neighborhoods change and what was once a “good” neighborhood could fall on hard times. Should areas within an area commission that butt up against greener pastures be allowed to leave their current neighborhood to join another? Or should they run for commissioner through the democratic process and help bring their surrounding community out of hardship? Ultimately we are faced with which will create the greater good for the city and community as a whole. Area Commissions as community volunteer groups are only as strong as the people who show up to make a difference. If the option is available to switch area commissions rather than working to make yours a better one, the easier road will be traveled. It takes long-term commitment to change a community, but it will never happen if those who might care to make a change simply secede.

My experience in the matter suggests that the first line of attack on leaving an area commission is to withdraw your voice from the democratic process. This requires convincing your neighbors to do the same by not sharing their issues with an area commission, so that a claim can be made of lack of representation. This is the first crack in both an area commission and the community as a whole as residents begin to look across boundaries to see if there is more power or better reputation on the other side. Area commissions already have a hard time holding volunteer ranks without this added temptation to disengage.

Patrick Henry proclaimed in 1779, “United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy the union upon which our existence hangs.” These words are true to this day. If our voice as neighbors is to be one of separation and not unification around the issues that are relevant to making our neighborhood a better place to live, we will never find ourselves living in a better place.

It is important to remember that area commission boundaries are often the first issue a group must consider when creating a new area commission. Considerable time and energy is required in formulating consensus on these boundaries and in gathering the required signatures for the petition to ratify them and the commission. I am personally thankful and respectful of the commitment and hard work that the community leaders that came before me put into creating our area commission. It is a daunting task, and not one that should be easily excused or their efforts forgotten.

Next steps

The Work Group proposes the creation of an independent Community Coalition. This coalition will work with the City of Columbus to adopt and implement recommendations of the Work Group and address ongoing opportunities to improve the quality of life in the City of Columbus. The Community Coalition will be an independent organization that the Work Group hopes will continue in perpetuity so as to represent the area commissions, civic advisory bodies, and other similar entities to the City of Columbus.

Closing

Area commissions and civic advisory bodies serve the City of Columbus well. On a daily basis these organizations represent their constituents. They advocate for their communities through building and nurturing partnerships and other means. Improving the effectiveness of these organizations can only make Columbus an even greater city as we approach our bicentennial in 2012.

Represented area commissions and civic advisory bodies have been honored to serve on this Work Group and appreciate the attention City Council is giving to these recommendations. We appreciate the unique opportunity we were provided to serve the Columbus community through this historic undertaking.

Work Group participants attending the August 25, 2007 retreat meeting

Tiffany White, David Paul, Debra Diggs (Vice Chair), Catherine Girves, Rebecca Obester, Carol Stewart, Jennifer Adair, Ian MacConnell
Matt Vaccaro, Mike McKay, Danny Popp, Chris Gawronski (Secretary), George Holliman, Clyde Miller, Ralph Horn, Gary Baker (Chair)

Appendix: Record of Attendance for Participating Organizations

ATTENDANCE RECORD

✓ = Organization represented at this meeting
AC = Area Commission

| | May 9, 2007 Briefing with Council | May 23, 2007 Kickoff Meeting | June 13, 2007 | June 27, 2007 | July 11, 2007 | July 25, 2007 | August 8, 2007 | August 22, 2007 | August 25, 2007 Retreat Meeting | September 12, 2007 |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Clintonville AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Driving Park AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Fifth by Northwest AC | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Franklinton AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Greater Hilltop AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Milo-Grogan AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Near East AC | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | | |
| North Central AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| North Linden AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Northeast AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | |
| Northland Community Council | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Northwest Civic Association | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| South Linden AC | ✓ | | | | | | | | | |
| SouthSide Community Action Network | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Southwest AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| University AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Westland AC | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |