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Community Coalition gathers for first time Thursday

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Members of Columbus civic associations, block watches, area commissions and other neighborhood organizations are invited to take part in the premier meeting of the Columbus Community Coalition Thursday, Jan. 31.

The coalition is an outgrowth of Columbus Area Commission-Civic Association Work Group initiated by City Council last year. It will meet at 6:30 p.m. at the J. Ashburn Jr. Youth Center, 85 S. Clarendon Ave.

The work group sought to develop an independent group which would ensure the enactment of their recommendations on ways the relationship between neighborhood organizations and council could be improved. It's also interested in improving how the civic groups operate.

"The idea is to get together the neighborhood leadership, essentially," said Clintonville Area Commission Chairman Chris Gawronski, who served as secretary of the work group.

"The main thing, the first thing, the primary focus is working with ... the city of Columbus and City Council to implement the recommendations," said Gary Baker. He's former chairman of the Hilltop Area Commission, president of the work group and current Columbus City Schools board member.

"That's sort of our main charge, as I see it at this point. And that's a big job -- we could spend a couple of years just doing that," he said.

The coalition will help its members be proactive in addressing their individual neighborhoods' concerns by helping them form connections with other groups who have had success dealing with similar issues, Gawronski said.

"We'll be identifying the different groups that have strengths in different areas ... and we'll rely on each other for assistance," he said.

Ultimately, by bringing together community leaders from across the city, "it allows us all to better understand the sort of activities and issues and assets we have in the neighborhoods around the city," Gawronski said.

"Some of them might feel like they're out there on their own, but they're not. ... We're all very good resources for each other," Baker said.

In creating the coalition, the goal is to be "as inclusive as possible" in its membership, he said.

"We hope to develop stronger ties among the various civic groups in the city, be they area commissions, civic associations, block watches or something else," Gawronski said.

From a long-term perspective, "I really see the coalition acting like the old Community Congress, standing in perpetuity to weigh in on important policy matters," Baker said.

"I hope it builds the type of credibility it will need in order to advocate effectively with the council and the mayor," he said.

The coalition also could build connections with other advocacy groups, such as the Central Ohio Bicycle Advocacy Coalition, to work on issues common to both organizations. One example would be the city's Complete Streets program, which designs streets with pedestrians and bicyclists in mind, Baker said.

"I really see the coalition, hopefully, as an independent advocacy group for neighborhoods across the city," Baker said.

Baker said the group's creation is particularly timely given the upcoming celebration and citywide improvements planned as a part of Columbus' bicentennial in 2012.

The bicentennial, "is the start of our city's renaissance, our city's golden age, and I really see ourselves as part of that," he said.

"We just really want folks who are in a position of leadership in our community to consider attending the initial convening of our group," Baker said. "I think it could be a watershed sort of moment."

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