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Community groups still mulling over coalition's aims

Columbus Community Coalition members have yet to settle on the group's structure and function.

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They came together, but can their priorities do the same?

Those who attended the premiere meeting of the Columbus Community Coalition on Thursday, Jan. 31, share a passion for civic action, but struggled to come to an accord on the group's purpose and structure.

The coalition was created at the recommendation of the Columbus Area Commission/Civic Association Work Group, which aimed to improve the relationship civic associations and other civic advisory bodies share with the city of Columbus, said Gary Baker, who led the work group and served as facilitator at the coalition's meeting.

Areas of focus

One of the work group's recommendations, presented in December, was that the coalition be formed in order to ensure its recommendations concerning items such as area commission boundaries and educational opportunities for the civic groups were implemented.

"Members of the work group are certainly hoping this list will become the basis of some of the topics we will be discussing," said Chris Gawronski, chairman of the Clintonville Area Commission and a former work group member.

Other areas of concern attendees said they would like to see the coalition address included matters such as graffiti, city infrastructure, the alteration of area commission boundaries and zoning.

The focus could be expanded for the coalition also to impact school district, county and state issues, said Mike Wiles, former president of the Council of Southside Organizations.

"It can be done, if it's done in unison," he said.

But Mariellen Miller of the Clinton Estates Civic Association suggested the group follow the lead of the faith-based group Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity, better known as B.R.E.A.D., to limit its focus to a handful of issues, such as transportation, schools and safety.

"B.R.E.A.D. was a huge organization, but it only took on three issues at a time," she said.

Organization structure

Work group members also said the format of a regular meeting, which gave members of civic bodies across the city an opportunity to meet and discuss common issues, had proved beneficial and was a concept they would like to see extended beyond the group's life.

Thanks to such connections, "I know someone I can call and say, 'How did you deal with that?'" said Gawronski.

Indeed, "we are going to have a lot more force if all of us come together and force the city to get things done," said D Searcy of the CAC.

In that regard, the group could function as an "instrument for putting some serious pressure on politicians," said Ellen Peterson of the Eastmoor Civic Association and Block Watch.

But what is the proper lifespan for such an organization?

"You asked me to make a commitment -- what is that commitment?" asked Debera Diggs of SouthSide Community Action Network and a former work group member.

Perhaps the structure could be one where the group meets quarterly, with committees on a particular topic functioning on an as-needed basis, said Catherine Girves of the University Area Commission.

Baker said he envisioned an organization that would "exist in perpetuity."

"It would be an independent entity that I see outliving all of us, that will serve many purposes over many years," he said.

"I think when we're talking about this organization, I think the hope is ... that our bodies, our civic associations and area commissions will be members of this group," not necessarily the attendees themselves, said Dave Paul, president of the Northland Community Council and a former work group member.

Perhaps the best tack to take is for those who need to think about their potential membership in the coalition take the time to do so, while those who are interested and ready to act and are willing to take part in the steering committee should do that, said Girves.

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