



October 23, 2009

Citizens offer ideas for improving city

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Ask and they will answer.

That's what Cincinnati city planners discovered in four public meetings they held in the past few weeks to solicit citizens' ideas for improving the city over the next 10 to 20 years.

The suggestions gushed forth: Get guns off the street. Build an incline for Mount Adams and Price Hill. Build light rail and streetcar lines. Preserve historic buildings. Raze Over-the-Rhine and rebuild. Finish the Banks project.

Use the abandoned subway for nightlife. Merge city and county governments. Improve public schools. Bring in an NBA team. Attract businesses and jobs. Build on the arts and promote them. Bury utility wires. Attract the next Microsoft/Bill Gates.

The four meetings marked the beginning of a process to revise Cincinnati's 30-year-old comprehensive plan by the early 2011. The comprehensive plan is one of the city's main methods of setting long-term goals and establishing strategies for achieving them.

The four meetings, held in Corryville, Price Hill, College Hill and Madisonville, drew a total of 430 people. The last meeting was held in Madisonville last Thursday.

"We've been really pleased with the attendance," said Charles Graves, director of the Cincinnati Department of Planning and Buildings. "Citizen participation is the most important aspect of developing the plan."

The heart of these meetings were small-group discussions that yielded thousands of ideas. Many of them focused on expanding mass transportation, reducing crime, eradicating blight, enlivening downtown, improving public schools, building more middle-income housing, creating more jobs, and making the city more of a regional destination.

Pat McKenrick, a Madisonville resident who has 10 grown children, said it's essential for Cincinnati to create an environment that retains its young people.

"You need to have the opportunity to raise your children so that they want to stay in the city and continue to make it great when you're gone," he said.

Bob Lane of Madisonville said Cincinnati needs first to consider ways to correct its most serious problems.

"You have to think about those things that cause people to leave the city, such as crime," he said. "Then you can concentrate on a plan to create an environment that makes people want to stay where they are."

One of the most frequently mentioned themes was the need for Cincinnatians to develop a more positive attitude about their city.

"There's nothing wrong with Cincinnati," Tom Schuermann of College Hill said at one of the community meetings. "We need to promote the assets we have."

Mary Bowers, who lived in San Francisco before moving to Cincinnati, nodded in agreement.

"We need to realize this is a great city," said Bowers, who lives in Mount Auburn. "We need to do a better job of promoting Cincinnati so more businesses come here and provide jobs that keep people here."

Graves assured everyone at each of the four meetings that the new comprehensive plan won't sit on a shelf gathering cobwebs.

The plan will contain specific goals to achieve in one to three years, three to five years and five to 10 years.

"It will be an active plan," Graves said. "We'll issue a report every year on what goals have been accomplished and what haven't and what we can do to improve."

"For the last 20 years or so, we've done a lot of small plans for individual neighborhoods," said Caleb Faux, chairman of the Cincinnati Planning Commission. "This is our opportunity to look at the city as a whole."

Additional Facts

What's next

There will be plenty of opportunities over the next year for citizens to make suggestions for the next Cincinnati comprehensive plan. Anyone can submit ideas by visiting the Web site, www.plancincinnati.org.

On Wednesday, a survey will go on the Web site that will allow anyone to say which ideas they think are the most important.

At Cincinnati's annual Neighborhood Summit on Feb. 26 and 27 at Xavier University's Cintas Center, working groups will help develop ideas that have been submitted and offer new ideas.

In the fall of 2010, those attending a large public meeting similar to the Neighborhood Summit will vote on hand-held devices on which ideas should take priority.

A first draft of the new comprehensive plan will be written later that fall and during the winter. That draft will be reviewed at public hearings and at Cincinnati Planning Commission meetings.

In early 2011, the final plan will be submitted to City Council for approval.
