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## The Art of OTR Possibility

New city manager points to Over-the-Rhine's promise

By Margo Pierce

Enthusiastic applause followed City Manager Milton R. Dohoney Jr.'s remarks Sept. 21 at Memorial Hall after his remarks at the Over-the-Rhine Summit hosted by the University of Cincinnati.

In one of his first public appearances since taking office, Dohoney impressed participants with his focus on what he called the "art of possibility" for Over-the-Rhine.

"When you look at a vacant lot, what do you see? What can you imagine?" Dohoney said. "When you look at a child who maybe has dirt on her clothes, maybe their hair is unkempt, what are you looking at? Are you looking at an individual society might say will never make it, or are you looking at someone who in the future will be an astronaut?"

"In communities that I have worked in, we have had to deal with those kinds of realities: the art of possibility. In Over-the-Rhine, there are a number of vacant buildings today. I cannot stand here and tell you that all of them should stay, but at least with some of them you can see the art of possibility, what they could be in order to contribute to the fabric of this neighborhood.

"You seem to have a strong core of people who are committed to the area -- some people live here and some who work here. I would think, if you have disposable income that would enable you to go other places, it signals that you are here by choice.

"I want you to know that I am in Cincinnati, Ohio by choice. I didn't have to come here. I could have gone somewhere else."

### **'Never invited' to inclusion**

Dohoney, who moved here from Lexington, asked the audience to be permitted to work with them to advance the vision of Over-the-Rhine. Melissa Mosby, a "street writer" with the Word on the Street Program, reflected that vision in a poem that she read:

*The air pulses with life and energy.*

*We are.*

*We are.*

*We are.*

*Our pulse.*

*Our energy.*

*Our community.*

*Ours.*

*Our flow.*

The Over-the-Rhine Summit was a farewell celebration for the Niehoff Urban studio, a class offered by UC's College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning for students in various programs. For the past four years the class has met in the Emory Center on Central Parkway. The program moves to a location closer to campus in December.

Over-the-Rhine has been the focus for almost 75 percent of the student projects, ranging from the impossible to the practical (see "Raising the Roof," issue of June 14). The vision students brought is important to sustaining the hope of what could be in the neighborhood, touted for its potential for more than 30 years, according Frank Russell, director of the Community Design Center at UC.

"No community has suffered the deluge of planning that Over-the-Rhine has in the last half century," he said.

Describing the Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan as "widely recognized as the most inclusive, consensus-building exercise in recent memory," Russell said some activities have complied with the goals while others went forward "in denial."

Guests included 40 community-based organizations and highlighted individuals dedicated to furthering the vitality of Over-the-Rhine. During a formal presentation to a crowd of more than 100, successes and failures were reviewed.

Sister Monica McGloin, introduced as one of the architects of the comprehensive plan, highlighted what hasn't been done and how the residents have been excluded from the city's activities. She deemed the plan just another document gathering dust.

"I'm a Dominican sister, and our motto is 'Truth.' This is the truth," McGloin said. "We were never

invited to set up a planning committee, as the plan called for. There's not a sense of inclusion. We need to be one family."

### **'Imaginary barriers'**

Michael Cervay, director of the city's Department of Community Development and Planning, and his staff were eager to tally up the successes of the comprehensive plan. They talked about the compilation of projects organized in the plan according to 14 goals for housing, economic development, quality of life, transportation and safety. The 48-page document looks like an impressive summary of the activities identified as "planned," "underway" or "completed."

The one person from the city who seemed to comprehend the alienation felt by residents was the newcomer, Dohoney.

"In order for a holistic community development to take place, it has to be an engagement with City Hall and stakeholders in the private sector," he said. "We all have to work together in order to achieve results."

He thanked McGloin for her honesty.

"I was very taken with the comments that you made that imply that the process implemented over time has not always been as inclusive as it needed to be and that the end result of the plan was not the original vision," Dohoney said.

The projects he oversaw in Louisville and Lexington had the "same dynamic at the neighborhood level."

"The laundry list of projects is not as important as the process by which we undertook to get those things done," Dohoney said. "In many instances, the projects became unifiers of the community where they had always been divisions. In some cases, the divisions were physical barriers; in other cases, the divisions were imaginary barriers. I have been here for a short period of time, but I have been struck by the imaginary barriers that we work around.

"On my first day I was asked, 'Where do you live? Do you live East or do you live West?' I really wasn't savvy enough to know."

Dohoney said his response was, "In an apartment."

He went on to say he'll never talk in terms of East or West because his goal is to contribute to the community as a whole.

"Someone asked me yesterday if I was using Cincinnati as a stepping stone," Dohoney said. "There are easier places I could have gone if I was looking for that." ©

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