

McKnight CDC

mcknightcdc@gmail.com

35 Florida Street
Springfield, MA 01109

February 2, 2012

Community Development Dept.

36 Court Street

Springfield, MA 01109

Re: Program Suggestions for FY 2013

Dear Sirs;

We have been working on community development since our inception in 1993, but recently we have started to reorganize in response to the outrageous practices of demolition and mutilation of historic houses we have seen in the past couple of years, including the present year, as well as the effects of the foreclosure crisis, and we are very interested in providing input as to appropriate funded activities for the coming year.

As a preface we note that in the past we have deferred to the "Elected council" to represent the neighborhood, but we have found that the "Citizen participation process" has become so corrupted by the conflict of interest with Community Development paying for close to 100% of the expenses of the McKnight Council, which is supposed to oversee its work, and racially exclusionary groups so dominating the Council, that no effective representation of the McKnight Community is taking place. Therefore we are submitting our own testimony, based on input from a diverse group of people including people who have been here for generations, not just new so-called urban "Pioneers".

We notice that in your flyer for the hearing last week "Code enforcement" was listed first. This is not appropriate.

As it happens the McKnight Community was one of the first groups to advocate for "Concentrated Code Enforcement" in the 1960s, but that was when it was to be coupled with FHA Section 312 loans and other support for rehabilitation of houses as an alternative to "Urban renewal" as it was practiced in the North End at that time.

As it is now being used "Code enforcement" has become destructive, and has often been used as a tool for exclusion of poor people and minorities from communities, as well as a political 'Enforcement tool' to penalize people who do not conform the local program of racial exclusion. This is an inexcusable use of HUD funds and should not be allowed.

We would advocate, and we have shared this idea with a number of others, that "Code enforcement" as a community development activity be abandoned, and that the Building Department should carry out those inspections needed to monitor construction activity based on permit fees. We would recommend that all of the State and Federal funds now being used to accuse people of being "Violators of Codes" be transferred to fund community-based programs for historic preservation and housing repairs in close coordination with fair housing efforts.

We have found that at present there are often no resources to assist low and moderate-income families to restore, repair and maintain their homes, and we have started to develop a cooperative program ourselves to fill this need in McKnight, with people volunteering to help neighbors, but with people agreeing to pay back the value of the help received into a revolving fund when they are able to in the future. However, we can only do a little with volunteers and private fund-raising. We would like to see this same kinds of work financed with CDBG and HOME funds and with loans repaid back into the revolving fund, when people can pay it back, so that there are resources to assist in saving the next house that has major damage like 69 Bowdoin Street.

We would also advocate that all "Demolition" funds be converted to restoration funds for use in this type of revolving fund program, and that historic houses should be restored, except where this is not practicable. We think this is not only

prudent but required to comply with Section 106 of the U.S. Code and the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Act (MEPA).

We would specifically suggest that the so-called "Structural Review Board" be authorized not only to evaluate whether structural flaws exist in buildings, which they often do, but also to evaluate whether they can be repaired for a reasonable cost. If this had been done we do not believe that the National Register-listed houses would have been demolished at 291 Bay Street or 113 Bay Street.

Further, we would again advocate that the auctions of City-owned properties be ended, since the terms of the auctions systematically promote low real estate prices, damaging the value of homes in the neighborhood, and exclude most low- and moderate-income families from home ownership opportunities. In addition, based on the practices now in pace, the program promotes mutilation of historic properties. The houses sold on Lincoln Street and at the corner of Bay Street and Girard Avenue are examples of this. These houses are an embarrassment to the City, in our view, and no more of this should be allowed.

Instead City-owned properties should be restored to marketable condition by community-based receivers, and then sold at full prices to owner-occupant families. This would earn the City more of its lost tax revenue back, reduce the damage to property values being done by the present auction program, and make more property accessible to ownership by low- and moderate-income families.

Finally, we would again strongly advocate that the City stop using development of LIHTC housing almost its sole housing rehabilitation program. This has created income and racial isolation in communities around the City, and appears to us to directly violate the Fair Housing Act, used in isolation as it has been at Bergen Circle, Worthington Commons, and many other projects in the City. Instead these programs should be geographically distributed throughout the region, and where used in inner city neighborhoods, should be deliberately combined with programs to support both middle-cost and high end market rate housing so that diverse communities are recreated and maintained.

As you know we have in the past, through the McKnight Homeowners Association, Inc., and the HUD conciliation process, attempted to work with the City to create a Housing Assistance Task Force to develop and implement these kinds of balanced housing programs, and we have been frustrated in those efforts. Despite this we remain willing to participate in this work, if it is pursued with genuine effort. We will not again participate in a sham proce

If you would like further elaboration of these ideas please do not hesitate to contact us. We would very much like to help improve Springfield's community development programs so that they more closely meet the needs of Springfield's people and communities.

Sincerely yours,

Elijah Colgram
President

Cc: MCDC Board
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