

## Clintonville Area Commission

Excerpts from a "White Paper" written by Grant Hilliker  
August, 1974

### History

Proposals for a Clintonville Area Commission emerged in 1973, in the wake of localized concerns about the increasing intensity of business and professional uses of certain properties on North High Street. These were accompanied by renewal of related controversies, some of them of much longer standing, such as commercial encroachments in the vulnerable residential ravines, protection of park areas, and general deterioration of the physical quality of properties along main arteries.

Clintonville Area Residents Association (CARA) was not unique in calling attention to these problems, nor was it in any way the first organization to be concerned, but CARA was able to mobilize considerable energy through its membership, to focus public attention on concrete and general physical defects in the area, and to get the attention of political and professional levels in the Columbus City government.

The excitement of 1973 culminated in the idea of the area commission. It posed the question: Can injury to the community be averted only at the stage of crisis? Some say yes, that people become aroused enough to make their opinions felt only when, or after, they are scared into it by some threatened calamity. If this happens, the concerns will often be merely localized, and their impacts blunted, because only the people immediately threatened will make their views known.

Another viewpoint has a longer and broader perspective. It says that most of the crises encountered can be foreseen, and that plans and prevention can reduce their likelihood, or at least their damage. Moreover, it should be possible to recognize that the effects of localized events are never as limited as they seem. Paving the ravines increases flooding for everyone downhill; extending Morse Road across the river will have impacts on other streets as well. If these and many other interests are shared in the whole area known as Clintonville, then its interests stand to benefit from any means of joining separate voices, when appropriate, into one forum. If consensus can be reached within the area, it will obviously speak convincingly to the outside.

Two meetings were held in Clintonville by CARA in the fall of 1973, both were attended by Mayor Moody and several department heads, as well as Council Members. Major attention was given to specific grievances, but the area commission idea was in the background. On Monday, July 29, 1974, Councilwoman Fran Ryan and Councilman Charles Petree introduced in the Columbus City Council an ordinance to create a Clintonville Area Commission. While it promoted the idea originally and encouraged Council to take up the area commission ordinance, CARA believed that its success will depend essentially on how widely and strongly it is supported by other organizations in Clintonville.

## The Nature of a Commission

The purposes of an area commission have often been assumed to be negative, that is that it will be largely concerned with preventing undesirable things from happening. This is a natural result of the origins of the idea, in situations that seemed always to require quick reactions to threatened damage. As has been said, however, the best way of dealing with crises is to avoid them by using foresight and planning. This perspective imparts to the commission idea a positive emphasis.

The origins of the commission idea also gave it the character of a body much concerned with zoning and other land-use decisions. It is true that the physical condition of the community is the base on which much of the reasoning behind the commission was built. In larger terms, physical conditions can be translated into a certain quality of life that is distinctive to Clintonville.

The emphasis on physical determinants of life quality need not be exclusive, however, nor limited to the residential character of a neighborhood. Slums and other unlovely surroundings have long been recognized as the environments, if not causes, of ignorance, poverty, crime, and other social problems. Conversely, these can often be symptoms by which the beginnings of a decline in the neighborhood quality are indicated. Therefore, while the area commission is not primarily conceived as an agency for social service, it should not ignore human problems as possible causes or effects of physical decay.

Residential character of a community may be key to its quality of life, but it cannot be isolated from commercial and institutional activities. First, the existence of shopping and working conveniences in Clintonville account for a part of its charm. Second, even if it were not for this, existing land uses are difficult to reverse, especially if the aim is restoration of single-family, detached residences. Finally, the larger metropolitan development surrounding Clintonville generally has more decisive influences on the viability of its business development than most of the measures that might be taken inside the community, for better or for worse.

Questions are also asked about the status and powers of an area commission. Each of the existing commissions in Columbus differs in some respects. What do the City Council and Mayor confer upon a commission by enacting an ordinance? As a minimum, they recognize its boundaries as constituting a more or less integral community, with common concerns and interactions. They do not give away to the commission any governing powers. At most, the commission acquires a kind of official advisory status. It is routinely notified of official actions to be considered, which are then occasions for consultation and adoption of postures, pro or con, in the commission. Its expressions of views to the Council and the Mayor presumably are treated with respect and are not rejected without serious study.

Whatever the formal status and powers of a commission might be, they can be enhanced or eroded by its standing in the community. If a choice had to be made, it could clearly be stated that the community standing of a commission is more crucial to its success than its formal relationships with city government. The body that is without support from its own constituents can easily be ignored by superior authorities, regardless of its formal status. But a commission that is the genuine forum of its community will have great power outside of it, even if it has no endorsement of its official status.

A further question exists, however, as to how a commission can be made most useful inside the community and most effective elsewhere. Some answers lie in the exploration of the kinds of problems and commission will have to face. It is normal in most cities for expert knowledge to be monopolized by officials and by special interests, while citizens speak only from the level of interests, or even of feelings and emotions. With skilled legal and technical help, citizens can sometimes redress the imbalance, but it is done at some cost and usually only in situations of crisis. To gain the position of foresight and anticipation, in contrast to crises, Clintonville would need access to professional talents going beyond those available from volunteers working parttime.

The situation calls for the use of professional talents that can view development from the special perspective of this community. Complexity is inherent in almost all problems of development planning these days. Not only are the sectors of land-use, transportation, environmental quality, etc. all interconnected, the instruments for dealing with them are similarly interlaced, with specialization multiplied horizontally and hierarchies pyramided at city, county, regional, state and federal levels.

How the commission speaks and listens to its community will be a blend of two influences. One depends on its store of trust among people. Reliance is normally placed on elections to achieve this kind of legitimacy, but elections can become routine, and non-elected figures or institutions are not precluded from generating community trust. Trust alone can fail if it is not backed up by knowledge. The other needed influence is professional expertise, capable of dealing equally with outside professionals but committed to the values of the community that it serves.

The arena in which the worth of a Clintonville Area Commission will be determined, therefore, is not City Hall, but Clintonville. And the ingredients of its success are both populist and professional.