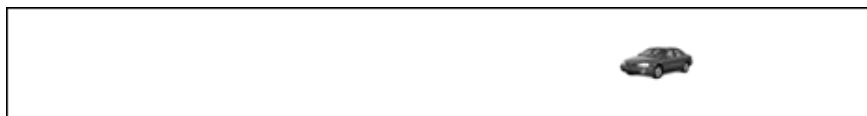



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Madisonville blasts City Hall

By Kevin Osborne
 Post staff reporter

A plan to redevelop a large section of Madisonville's mostly vacant business district is in trouble, the victim of City Hall red tape and taxpayer money being given to developers because of political connections, supporters say.

Mayor Charlie Luken and Cincinnati City Council have touted Madisonville's redevelopment for more than a year. They allocated \$2.83 million for the project in this year's municipal budget and assured the money would be available when needed.

But a neighborhood group said it's been stymied in efforts to get the initial \$561,000 needed to buy several of the buildings before a purchase option expires Sunday. If the money isn't received by then, the group doesn't believe the option can be extended.

Without the extension, the blighted city block at the intersection of Madison Road and Whetsel Avenue likely will remain home to boarded-up buildings and vacant storefronts for years to come, the group added.

"We've been talking to the city for nine months and getting the run-around," said Kathy Garrison, president of the Madisonville Community Council.

Lois Day, chairwoman of the Madisonville "Weed and Seed" restoration committee, said the city keeps changing the rules.

"We keep getting different answers from different people at the city," she said.

"When we give them the information they say they need to release the money, they change the conditions and ask for something else. No one seems to be in charge there."

City officials said allocating money for a project doesn't ensure it will be given to a specific group or disbursed in a specific timeframe if crucial questions persist. Before City Council began its two-month summer break on June 30, it gave City Manager Valerie Lemmie authorization to resolve the remaining issues before Sunday's deadline.

"I have been aware over the last several months there have been these issues with changing people (in the department) and so forth,"

The Alliance

• The Madisonville Revitalization Alliance was formed to redevelop several buildings at Madison Road and Whetsel Avenue into 75 condominiums and five street-level shops on top of an underground parking garage.



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Luken said.

Day and Garrison are involved with the nonprofit Madisonville Revitalization Alliance. The group was formed to redevelop several buildings at Madison and Whetsel into 75 condominiums and five street-level shops on top of an underground parking garage.

The alliance is working with Middle Earth Developers Inc., a private firm that has renovated more than 30 buildings into condos and apartments. Middle Earth's most prominent project is the Kinsey Flats apartment complex on West Fourth Street.

Of the proposed Madisonville project's cost, \$2.83 million would come from the city, with Middle Earth providing about \$9 million.

Boosting neighborhood development is among the city's top priorities, and Luken prefaced this year's State of the City address with a videotape of him touring various neighborhoods and talking about planned projects. Madisonville was the first stop, and Garrison was among those featured.

In fact, Madisonville was one of five neighborhoods singled out in the city's budget to receive development funds. One possible source for the money was the \$55 million the city made when it sold shares from its healthcare insurance provider, Anthem Inc.

But neighborhood activists said they began getting conflicting messages from city staffers shortly after formal discussions began in November. It wasn't until March that city officials assigned a staff person to the project and provided a list of information needed to get the process moving, the activists said.

City staffers are putting proposals through more scrutiny because of some high-profile development projects that failed in the past 18 months, costing the city money, Luken said.

Middle Earth executive Jay Voss doesn't buy that argument. People with no development experience did the failed projects, he said. By comparison, Middle Earth has developed more than 200 apartments and more than 40 condos, he said.

The problem, the neighborhood group maintains, is the city over committed its development funds.

They believe money intended for Madisonville was spent on two projects pushed this spring by Council members. They are \$13.7 million to develop single-family housing at the former Huntington Meadows site in Bond Hill, and \$2.5 million to build 25 condos at the corner of Vine Street and Central Parkway.

Far less information was required before those projects received city approval, and they were approved within weeks, the Madisonville group said.

The developer only put up \$450,000 in equity for the Bond Hill site, and none for the condos, they said.

More importantly, the city's money in those projects were grants, which won't be repaid. Under the Madisonville proposal, the city's portion is a loan, which would be partially or fully repaid.

"There should be one set of rules for everybody," said J.J. JioDucci,

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a former development officer at Key Bank who is part of the Madisonville group.

JioDucci served on the mayor's economic development task force that suggested overhauling the department.

Nearly 15 months later, that hasn't occurred.

"The development department is in shambles, and I am terrified by the lack of integrity and expertise there," JioDucci said.

Publication Date: 07-28-2004



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