

■ MORE THAN 200 FLOOD HEARING

Service agencies protest city rules dispersing them

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New rules proposed for Cincinnati's social-service agencies drew more than 200 people Tuesday night to a debate over protecting neighborhoods from too many agencies and troubled clients.

Opponents say the rules would unfairly crack down on groups trying to help the city's least fortunate.

The 32 zoning changes would require human service facilities to file "good neighbor" plans with the city, detailing the number of clients to be served weekly and how agency officials would control litter, security, loitering, noise and crime. Facilities also would have to be separated from any other facility by at

least 50 feet and install landscaping buffers if they abut single-family housing.

Objections to the changes came from representatives of many major agencies — the Interfaith Hospitality Network, Legal Aid Society, Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, Prospect House, the Drop Inn Center shelter and Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition. Church members expressed concern the proposals would stop them from doing outreach work, such as offering meals to homeless people or counseling pregnant women.

Elizabeth Brown, executive director of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, said the rules would discriminate

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against people with disabilities.

Scott Gehring of Volunteers of America testified that the changes would dismantle Cincinnati's social-services network. Agency officials are concerned about neighborhood crime, too, he said, but "the social-service agencies are not the source" of crime.

Current facilities would be affected if they wanted to offer new programs or expand. City Manager Milton Dohoney said he got a lot of e-mails from people who didn't seem to understand that current facilities were "grandfathered."

Margaret Wuerstle, the city's chief planner, said the changes were proposed after a court decision in 2007 pointed out voids in the city's zoning code. That lawsuit was filed over CityLink, the social-service agency planned in the West End. The city tried to stop CityLink in court, but lost when the Ohio Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal.

City Council voted in June to order Dohoney to implement a policy that social-service agencies can't be concentrated in a single area and can't locate in an area deemed to already have too many

facilities. That vote prompted the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless and 13 other agencies to sue the city in federal court, alleging the policy violates the constitution because it's vague, too broad, restricts free speech and tries to harm a politically unpopular group. That suit is pending.

"There simply isn't a simple solution," Wuerstle said.

The hearing, called by the city planning commission, drew the biggest crowd to City Council chambers in months, with standing room only on the main floor (capacity 179) and half the 121-seat balcony filled. More than 70 people signed up to speak. City Council meetings generally draw a few speakers, sometimes none.

Commission members did not make a decision. Another hearing likely will be scheduled for more comment before the commission makes its final recommendation.

David Logan, executive director of Prospect House in Price Hill, quoted Buddy Gray. Gray was the director of the Drop Inn Center in Over-the-Rhine, where he was shot to death by a mentally ill client more than a decade ago.

"Please don't leave us worse off than you found us," he said.

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