

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

A GOOD YIELD FOR BREAD

Officials to consider land bank, stopping truancy suspensions, social activists told

TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2010 2:53 AM

BY MEREDITH HEAGNEY

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The religious social-activism group BREAD pulled a few promises out of public officials yesterday in front of a crowd of 2,500 at Veterans Memorial.

County officials agreed to consider establishing a county land-reutilization corporation (CLRC), a land bank through which the county would acquire and either demolish or rehabilitate vacant and blighted properties.

Columbus City Schools Superintendent Gene Harris agreed to stop suspending children for truancy, although she wouldn't promise to ask the board for \$200,000 to expand an anti-truancy program.

The organization also heard that two Ohio House members will encourage their colleagues to support House Bill 486, which would put limits on payday-lending practices.

BREAD (Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity), led by a group of interfaith clergy members, held its annual Nehemiah Action meeting last night.



WILL FIGG | DISPATCH

Richard McKenzie, a member of BREAD (Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity), holds up a sign saying "Our Voice" at the group's annual Nehemiah Action meeting in Veterans Memorial. About 2,500 people attended last night.

The Rev. Eric Meter of the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Clintonville said that last year, Columbus schools issued more than 4,000 suspensions for truancy and more than 15,000 for disruptive behavior.

Before Harris was called to the stage, Vickie Patterson said her grandson, whom she is raising, was suspended for 10 days for being part of a fight.

Her grandson is a handful, but needs support, she said.

"I am doing everything I can to provide that. I only hope the school would meet me halfway before it's too late."

BREAD asked Harris to expand Project KEY (Keep Engaging Youth), an initiative started in 2007, from six schools to 28. The program uses mediation with a KEY advocate, parents and the student, with the goal of improving attendance.

The program has reduced chronic truancy in six pilot schools by 55 percent, county Prosecutor Ron O'Brien said.

Harris said she cannot promise the school board will come up with \$200,000 of the \$900,000 that BREAD said is needed to expand KEY. However, she promised to report back by mid-June.

On the topic of the land bank, BREAD asked county Treasurer Ed Leonard, Columbus Development Director Boyce Safford III and a representative of county Commissioner John O'Grady to begin a study into a land bank and report the results in November.

Eric Janice, O'Grady's representative, and Safford agreed to study the issue, but were hesitant to promise results in six months.

Leonard said he's willing to "study whether the CLRC is the right tool for Franklin County," but said it took years for Cuyahoga County to assess the potential of a land bank.

He then noted that resources dedicated to a land bank could mean revenue is diverted from schools and services, such as Franklin County Children Services and the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board of Franklin County.

A CLRC would guarantee that tax revenue lost on vacant properties

would stay in Franklin County to benefit the land bank and potentially other services, the Rev. Tim Ahrens, pastor of First Congregational Church Downtown, countered after the meeting.

State Rep. Dan Stewart, a Democrat from Columbus, and fellow Democrat Ted Celeste of Grandview Heights, affirmed their support for HB 486, which would close loopholes in Ohio's payday-lending laws. The bill is in committee.

mheagney@dispatch.com