

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Columbus Compact Corporation to work on Columbus City Charter Change

(Columbus, OH) In 2010, the Compact, Olde Towne East Block Watch, and other stakeholders engaged in a series of meetings with City and County government officials to work on neighborhood drug and drug violence issues. One year ago, we were promised that council would work on the enhancements to current city law. It has been one year since Council and the City Attorney told this group of concerned Near East area residents and stakeholders that the City was ready to move forward with enhancements to the current city code to help our law enforcement officers proactively address illegal and often violent street drug markets.

Then in January 2011, council woman Michelle Mills was appointed to the Judiciary and Safety Committee – the committee with jurisdiction over this issue – and despite repeated entreaties from neighborhood leaders, nothing has happened.

Late last month, twenty neighborhood organizations on the Near East and Near South sides joined in the request for the Columbus City Council to take seriously the call to upgrade its current “Loitering in Aid of Drug Offenses: law (C.C. 2317.50), to make it constitutional and enforceable.

Even more disturbing than the lack of follow through on the commitment has been the utter unresponsiveness of council woman Mills when neighborhood representatives repeatedly addressed these issues to her. There was no promised follow up to a May 26th meeting, no response to multiple subsequent emails, no promised follow up to the 10 residents who addressed the issue at a July 12th hearing of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, and no promised follow up to a September 29 meeting with council members Mills and Ginther.

At the September 29th meeting, the neighborhoods had a simple meeting objective: to have council acknowledge that the neighborhoods had a drug and gun violence problem, and to have council commit to working with us in partnership to address those issues. Over previous weeks and months, we had shown Council videotape of drug transactions, drive by shootings, and even a gruesome murder in the middle of our city street. However, Mr. Ginther and Ms. Mills refused to acknowledge the problem, and refused to agree to partner with the neighborhoods to work on solutions (some of which were legislative and budget issues – both areas under council’s purview).

At that meeting, Councilman Ginther and Councilwoman Mills promised to talk with the Safety Director and get back to us with a response in two weeks. They have never gotten back to us – which has been the pattern of the past year – frustration, delays, and broken promises.

In the meantime, Council has bashed neighborhood leaders seeking to address illegal drug activity and its associated gun violence, dismissing our concerns as a political stunt. Apparently

20 neighborhood groups are collectively engaged in political gamesmanship, rather than seeking help from their elected representatives to the daily problems of their neighborhoods. When we showed video of a known drug dealer rolling marijuana joints on the city streets in the May 26th meeting in council's conference room, Ms. Mills stated that she didn't see criminal activity, she simply saw "bad choices." Three weeks later we showed her video of that same 19 year old man being shot in a drive-by shooting. His being shot -- for the third time in one year -- was yet another confirmation of those "bad choices." But those "bad choices" we watched on video in Council's conference room that day in late May, were indeed criminal activity, and came with the not unpredictable results. We need a Safety Committee Chair who understands what is happening on our streets, or who is willing to listen and learn from those of us who do.

The Compact has communicated clearly to Chairman Ginther and Council Member Mills our concern that the past year of inaction and unresponsiveness seems to stem from the fact that council member Mills was appointed to run an area of city government (judiciary and public safety) in which she had no prior experience, and for which she demonstrates no unique passion. We question whether the public safety committee, which controls 70% of the city's budget and oversees the primary duty of government -- to ensure the safety of her citizens -- is an appropriate position for a first-time councilmember running for election in a few months. The Compact believes strongly that our business investments and the quality of life in our neighborhood have been hurt by that inexperience over the past year.

Further conduct has amplified the concern that Ms. Mills was placed in that position primarily for personal and party political gain -- being able to campaign on safety issues, which stands in stark contrast to the Compact's experience over the past year in which she has actively resisted neighborhood calls for enhanced safety and security.

We are further concerned when we look at fundraising for the campaign, where Ms. Mills' fundraising totals have paled in comparison to some of her peers on council, and to some of the challengers, but the campaign is being propped up by support on TV and radio by Friends for Ginther. According to the Dispatch, Council incumbents have spent approximately \$692,000 on their campaigns through September 30th, compared to \$54,000 for challengers. With the high costs of running for a city-wide office, Ms. Mills lagging far behind others in fundraising, and the public commitments Mr. Ginther has made to support her, this leaves us wondering whether Ms. Mills has a primary duty of loyalty to her constituents -- the businesses and residents of the City of Columbus -- or to her financial and political benefactor, Council Chair Ginther. We question whether she has the independence to function as the Chair of the public safety committee, or whether her strings are being pulled by the Council President, who is financing her election bid and now appears to be speaking for her on matters concerning public safety that have been addressed to Ms. Mills.

The Compact believes we need a safety committee chair who understands her role and the issues, who is an independent voice and advocate for neighborhoods, and who also has a passion and demonstrated expertise in neighborhood public safety matters.

Last night, at an Executive Committee meeting of the Board of Directors, the Compact reviewed a communication from Ken Paul, of Council President Ginther's staff. We were uniformly discouraged that after all our efforts to interface, a communication addressed to Council member Mills was answered by a legislative aide to Council member Ginther. We were further discouraged that the answer was again, a non-answer to the specific questions asked of Council, and a deferral this time on issues concerning council to City Attorney Pfeiffer.

This issue, in particular to us, has highlighted how a bad system – even when populated by good people – yields bad results. The neighborhood initiative to amend the current loitering law was not seeking a change in city policy, it was seeking to support policy that had been in place nearly 20 years and that was already codified at CC 2317.50. We sought an initiative that would allow the police to engage in proactive community-based policing, based on obvious events taking place daily on our streets. We believe it enhances the work environment and safety of our peace officers: rather than having our officers respond to gun battles, we believe they could more safely and effectively prevent the conditions that create drive-by shootings and turf wars. We believe “the turf” belongs to the taxpayers and citizens of the City of Columbus, and not to small groups of thugs who sell drugs and shoot guns at each other.

We have shared with Council our concerns about the spate of gun violence in our neighborhoods over the last two months:

- 1) On September 9th, Dominique Johnson, age 22, was gunned down in the middle of Main Street, killed by a bullet from an assault rifle shot at short range.
- 2) On September 10th, 4 people were shot, with 2 in critical condition, at Main & Lilley
- 3) On September 12, Traelin Reed, 19 years old, was shot dead in the 1800 block of Oak Street
- 4) On September 28th, Aaron Baldwin, age 20, was shot dead at Mound and Lilley.
- 5) On September 29th, a house in the 700 block of Oakwood was shot up with over 50 rounds recovered in a one minute gun barrage that included use of AR-15 and/or AK-47 assault rifles
- 6) On October 10th, Julian Blakely, age 18, was shot dead at Wilson and Frebis
- 7) On October 14th, John Depp, 81 years old, was shot in the head at Mound and Wilson, later dying.

To the best of our knowledge, not a single one of these shootings or murders have been solved: we have murderers walking free on our streets today, and we have been unable to convince Council that our neighborhoods have a serious problem that needs systemic changes to address. Nobody can honestly say that the Compact and the neighborhoods have not been forthcoming partners who have provided reliable and consistent information and perspectives in this effort over the last year.

And as a serious stakeholder, we also submitted to Council the proposed Safe Neighborhoods Demonstration Project to deal with the specific issues of our neighborhoods, but we have not heard anything back in response to our proposal, which we hope to have funded in the 2012

City budget, and which we believe could certainly be funded – if not from current General Fund dollars – then from projected casino tax receipts.

The Compact has come to the conclusion that Columbus’s current model of at large governance is archaic, and needs to be changed. Columbus, Detroit, and Austin are the only cities among the twenty largest cities in America that have at-large councils. Every other city has some form of council governance that includes district representation. At 220 square miles in size, the size and form of government that was appropriate in the 1914 when the City Charter was adopted and Columbus was roughly 12 square miles, appears no longer appropriate for the current size of the city and issues of today.

As such, the Columbus Compact Corporation is now announcing its support for an amendment to Section 3 of the Charter of the City of Columbus, to replace the current 7 member at-large council with a larger council that includes a mix of at-large and district elected council members. We believe this approach encompasses the reality of today, and helps to manage the size of the city and the complexity of the various issues facing different neighborhoods. We believe that a district-based system of council governance will help grow a deeper bench of citizens who are involved in civic affairs, know their areas issues intimately, are accountable to their neighbors, and are ready and able to provide responsive leadership.

The Compact was formed 16 years ago when the community came together around a concept of empowerment – that people closes to the problems should be a part of the solution. That has been our operating philosophy and driving force of our work ever since. That philosophy was right then, and is right now. And we believe that by returning council seats to the neighborhoods, that concept is expressed concretely. We believe we can make no greater contribution to support our neighborhood development mission, then by creating systemic change in the governance of Columbus, Ohio.

The Compact will not “lead” or “own” this effort to amend the City Charter, but we will support and encourage it. We expect to talk with the large number of residents who have been interested in the concept of a larger and more neighborhood-responsive council over the coming week, and we expect to announce an informational meeting and its objectives within a week.

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