

**Witness testimony for Field Hearing on
“Strengthening Rural Ohio:
A Review of the Community Development Block Grant Program”
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
Committee on Financial Services, U.S. House of Representatives
Friday, March 24, 2006 in Mount Vernon, Ohio**

Introduction

My name is Patrick L. “Pat” Crow Sr. I reside at 511 Richard St., Danville, Knox County, Ohio. I have been working in Knox County area community service and development positions since 1987. My wife, Sandra L. “Sandy” Crow, and I operate a family company, Downtown Options Corporation, through which we provide development, planning, and organizational consulting and management services to communities and organizations in the Knox County and surrounding areas. I also work part time as the Executive Director of the Knox County Convention & Visitors Bureau, a not-for-profit destination marketing and destination development organization accountable by contract to the Knox County Commissioners.

I am currently the Community Housing Improvement Program (CHIP) Inspector for Knox County and for Mount Vernon. CHIP is a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funded program, administered through the Ohio Department of Development’s Office of Housing and Community Partnerships.

I also work closely with the organization that promotes the restoration of the Woodward Opera House in downtown Mount Vernon - a social, cultural, and economic development project partially funded using CDBG dollars.

Previous to serving in these positions, I was the Downtown Project Manager for the City of Mount Vernon. I prepared the applications and implemented three CDBG funded downtown revitalization grant projects.

I was the Mayor of the Village of Danville for 12 years where numerous public waste water, storm water, and potable water projects were completed. Almost all were made possible through the assistance of CDBG funded grant programs.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today for the continued support of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program at the current funding

levels. I believe this support is particularly vital to the social and economic development of small rural communities throughout Ohio, and indeed throughout America. The infusion of this CDBG program money into these crucial projects stimulates economic growth, helps small communities preserve existing services, adds necessary infrastructure, eliminates community blight, and helps property owners save their property from eminent decay and dilapidation.

The benefits to our Knox County area communities have been enormous over the many years of the CDBG program. I will summarize four areas for which I have personal experience and the impact of the CDBG dollars therein:

Downtown Revitalization

In downtown Mount Vernon, three major CDBG revitalization projects were implemented and completed. The overall work utilized \$1.06 million in CDBG funds. This CDBG investment stimulated over \$4.18 million of other public and private investment. This programmatic approach encouraged the city, the local development organizations, and the individual property owners to work together, literally saving the economic fabric of this important central business district.

A community is never “done” with downtown revitalization, it is a perpetual and ongoing process. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s National Main Street Program, the model for central business district redevelopment efforts, is being implemented in Mount Vernon as a direct result of the CDBG downtown revitalization programs. These efforts have also resulted in heavy investment, by individuals and businesses, in our downtown building inventory. These “local” investors are committed to the “long haul” type efforts needed to assure the continued economic growth of the downtown well into the 21st century.

These profound local redevelopment investments were spawned by the CDBG contributions, and also resulted in Mount Vernon being awarded the Ohio Governor’s Award of Excellence for our downtown redevelopment efforts.

The Woodward Opera House

When you have “America’s Oldest Authentic 19th Century Theater” sitting in the middle of your county seat’s downtown, a community would be negligent if it did not put

its full efforts into restoring it to its original luster, thereby bringing it back into full utilization for the benefit of the community. And that is exactly what is happening. The initiative that started the project had its beginning with a Community Development Block Grant to replace the leaking Woodward roof.

Certainly donations, grants, and contributions from many will be required to bring this facility into full occupancy, but it may not have even started if the structure had not been preserved from eventual deterioration, largely because of CDBG dollars. CDBG money also helped stabilize a weak portion of the masonry walls to assure a solid structure for the new roof system.

Once the Woodward restoration is complete, it is projected that the programming and retail expansion will stimulate over \$1 million annually in increased economic benefit to the community. It will become the keystone for the future development in downtown Mount Vernon, thereby assuring a retail and restaurant based downtown economy, maximizing property use and assuring higher property values in this historic district of the community. Indeed, downtown Mount Vernon will become a model National Main Street program.

Local Community Grants

There are literally millions of dollars that have been invested in the aging and decaying infrastructure in every small town in Knox County and in Mount Vernon. These communities would never have been able to serve their constituent's needs without the investment the CDBG program.

CHIP – Ohio's Community Housing Improvement Program

I have been the inspector and construction coordinator on over 60 individual CHIP projects in Knox County and in Mount Vernon. These programs are planned and administered separately by the City and County, but the substance and implementation are the same. The program is designed to serve the needs of the client property owner to perform emergency repairs to their homes, as well as to completely bring selected homes up to current building codes.

This has been a most humbling experience for me. I often see folks in circumstance that cry out for relief. I found a hole in one roof so large you could stand

by the client's bed and see blue sky through the fallen down plaster ceiling and the gaping hole in the slate roof shingles. In several cases, we found ourselves contracting to clean up lead based paint contamination in homes where little children were potentially being poisoned by this harmful substance so plentiful in old houses. We have, for just a few dollars, moved appliances to the upstairs of houses so the elderly can continue to live at home and not burden their family or the government by moving to assisted living arrangements. We have replaced dangerous furnaces, leaking hot water heaters, and collapsing basement walls in homes with single mothers working full time to support their children. We have replaced and repaired countless roof leaks, fallen gutters, and installed new toppers - so the elderly would not have to climb ladders to remove the fallen leaves that plug the downspouts resulting in severe home deterioration.

We have helped young couples buy their first home and made certain that the current building standards are met to assure the longevity of their stay. We have helped the handicapped build ramps, constructed fire exits to assure the safety of children living in upstairs apartments, repaired plumbing, and replaced floors to eliminate the health hazards from dangerous sewage soup holes in deteriorated basements.

We have replaced frayed electrical wiring and electrical boxes hot from overloads, to bring clients homes up to safe living conditions. We have covered, contained, and re-sided a home that was shedding lead base paint particles all over a neighborhood full of children playing nearby. We replaced a furnace for a couple where the way-too-young wife was going thru the excruciating experience of chemotherapy treatments for her cancer.

Conclusion

Well, I could go on, but if you want to know how important this CDBG program is, just go talk to these folks. Almost without exception, they are the most grateful group of Americans that I have ever known, thankful for these seemingly small and insignificant grants. I am a taxpayer and a registered voter in this fine community. If I was able, I would cast my vote to have this CDBG program continue. It's one program that is really making a difference in the lives of thousands of Americans.

And it has made a difference to me. I have learned that the deteriorated circumstances that I find in many of these homes are really no one's fault, it is simply a

part of life that just happens. And I believe that we all have a responsibility to make a difference in these people's lives, in these kids' lives, in these grandmother's lives, in the lives of the sick, the ailing, and the frail.

Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, please campaign for the continued support of the Community Development Block Grant Program as it is currently funded. In addition, do not allow the dilution of CDBG funding through the inclusion of unrelated programs that have previously been funded otherwise. This important CDBG program has a huge impact on those that are being served and must continue.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today at this hearing.

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