

March 22, 2006

The Honorable Robert W. Ney, Chairman
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Financial Services
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Testimony to be presented at the "Strengthening Rural Ohio: A Review of the Community Development Block Grant Program" Hearing, Guernsey County Commission Conference Room, 627 Wheeling Avenue, Cambridge, Ohio; hearing date Friday, March 24, 2006

Dear Congressman Ney:

While we realize that the Congress and the President have a shared responsibility as stewards of the nation's financial resources, it is difficult to imagine any other federal program that touches as many lives as the Community Development Block Grant Program. It must be understood that there is no local revenue source to replace the proposed 27% cut in the CDBG appropriation. The FY 2007 budget plan that would "require tightening of low-income targeting to communities with little funding resources" would necessarily channel those reduced CDBG funds to the lowest of the low income communities, even though those projects may not dramatically affect as many people. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where funds best used to develop infrastructure to support housing and/or an economic development project in one community would need to be diverted to a community with less development

potential just to meet a CDBG program guideline. We feel that our county and other CDBG recipients across the nation are best qualified to determine the proper use of these funds under current guidelines and would like to share with you our experience with the CDBG Program.

The CDBG Program has been an integral part of all phases of community development within Tuscarawas County for close to three decades. The program is unique in that it allows and, in fact, requires county government to assist in the planning and development of projects that have been identified by local political subdivision officials as important to the growth, stability and well being of their communities. The opportunity for communities to share in the benefits of the program is guaranteed by a mandatory and closely monitored citizens' participation plan and a series of public hearings. It is perhaps the best example of direct citizen involvement in the expenditure of tax dollars.

The program can be used for many things. In our county the most pressing need is for improvements to existing or the construction of new infrastructure. This could be something as basic as street and sidewalk improvements or could involve more important health issues such as safe drinking water or the proper treatment and disposal of sanitary sewage. The CDBG program makes these improvements possible by leveraging very limited local funds with federal dollars. We can also achieve maximum effect from both federal and local dollars by combining similar projects (such as paving) into one large project thereby insuring more cost effective bids on these projects. The end result of these efforts goes beyond the mere infrastructure improvements—they bring about a sense of community pride and, with reliable infrastructure in place, often lead to more housing and economic development opportunities.

Perhaps the key to the success of the program is in the word "community." Over the years we have completed a number of projects that have become the focal point of a community. One of the best examples in our county started with the drilling of a water well for one of

our rural townships. In times of drought that well became the only public source of potable water available to the residents of the township. A few years later, right next to that well, we built a senior center/community center and it quickly became a source of pride for the people of the community and a place where residents of all ages come together. Today, in addition to its original purposes, that center is used for food distribution, medical screenings, educational instruction, voting, and it is a distribution center for the Tuscarawas County Public Library bookmobile. The facility is now supported by a special tax levy. The "seed" that was planted here by the Community Development Block Grant Program has germinated and the fruit that has developed helps feed a community.

This is only one of many success stories in our CBDG experience. Unfortunately, we believe such dramatic results will become an exception, rather than the norm, under the proposed budget cuts and tightened guidelines.

Sincerely,

Kerry Metzger, President
Tuscarawas County Commissioners