

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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## **Citywide Public Statement Registered Community Organization Legislation**

In 2017, the Department of City Planning completed a two-year community engagement process which led to the introduction of a city-wide ordinance that establishes requirements and benefits for community organizations. The stated purpose of the Ordinance is to “obtain informed and inclusive participation from as many neighborhood stakeholders as possible.” Despite serious concerns expressed by community organizations effected by the Ordinance, the City passed § 178E titled “Registered Community Organizations” in September 2018. This vote amended the Pittsburgh Code Title One: Administrative, Article IX: Boards, Commissions and Authorities, thereby creating a Registered Community Organization (“RCO”) status.

Unfortunately, many community concerns submitted to City Planning have remained largely unaddressed. In addition, during the legislative process even more stringent requirements were introduced and approved without any community input. **It is the position of the undersigned organizations that the RCO ordinance, in its current form, does not serve its intended purpose, but instead may limit the voices of community organizations and residents of the City of Pittsburgh.**

On November 14, 2018 the Hill CDC issued a letter to City Council and the Mayor's Office expressing disappointment, outlining concerns, and inviting elected officials to attend a **Citywide Discussion on the RCO Ordinance**. That meeting was held on **November 19, 2018** at Arnold's Tea on the North Side. Approximately 40 community representatives and residents attended. Neighborhoods including Manchester, Homewood, East Liberty, Beltzhoover, Carrick, the Hill District, California-Kirkbride, Fineview, Perry Hilltop, Mt. Washington, and others were represented.

At the November meeting, the following concerns with the legislation were discussed:

- There is a lack of clear intent or need for the legislation. This legislation was passed quickly with little notification to organizations that it would affect.
- The legislation strongly discourages overlapping RCOs, but the language is vague and the legislation does not outline exception or definitions for “strongly discourages” or “overlapping”. This proves challenging for organizations that provide different services within the same geographical boundaries. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter §178E.01 – “Registration of organizations with overlapping boundaries is allowed but the formation of numerous overlapping community organizations is strongly discouraged.”

- The City of Pittsburgh Planning Department is empowered to decide whose application is approved or disapproved, which gives the City undue and inappropriate levels of control over community input.
- For community organizations and freely formed groups of residents, RCO requirements will create an unfair burden on those that don't have the high level of capacity necessary to meet the stated standards of approval on a biannual basis. The high eligibility and registration requirements will be a financial and administrative barrier to meet and maintain, even with the one-time technical and funding support offered by the City.<sup>2</sup>
- The legislation gives unclear definitions about "meeting minutes" and website publication.<sup>1</sup>
- Forcing communities to speak with one voice that is hand selected by a government apparatus can inadvertently cause division within communities. Neighborhoods generally have a natural ecosystem that can be disrupted by artificially imposed requirements.<sup>3</sup>
- A required letter from the organization's City Council representative will discourage free speech and advocacy in an effort to maintain support from that elected official. This requirement creates an environment in which community organizations may feel restricted in their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of their residents for fear that their RCO status will be jeopardized. In its current state, the Ordinance does not explicitly state requirements necessary to obtain the letter nor does it state reasons that a letter can be denied.<sup>2</sup>
- Outside of a public hearing, it is unclear how RCO status will be used in funding, government and policy related decisions in the future. For example, the Land Bank Policies & Procedures already preference RCOs.
- The legislation places high requirements on community organizations, but only the minimum requirement on private developers. A developer is only required to hold a public meeting 30 days prior to a City hearing. This will be an improvement in some communities, but in others it will be regressive. There is no requirement that the developer actually work with the RCO or community to align with the neighborhood's vision and/or pre-existing community-endorsed plan. This is an insufficient standard for a community engagement process for private developers.<sup>4</sup>
- Although Section 178E.07 vests the responsibility of establishing "orderly and democratic means" for forming community input on a development activity, and a "clear method" for reporting said input and position of the RCO, it is not clear how existing community review processes will be folded into these requirements and how the City will weigh that input in their decision whether to approve an activity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter §178E.03

<sup>3</sup> Chapter §178E.01

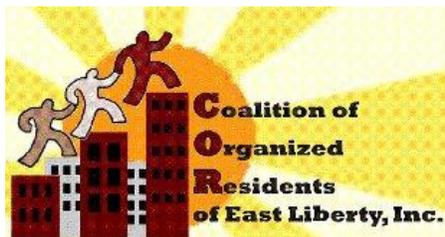
<sup>4</sup> Chapter §178E.08 – "If there are two or more RCO's...the Dept. of City Planning shall schedule...a public meeting...with the applicable RCOs...at least thirty days prior to the first public hearing."

- The legislation requires a certain standard of conduct from the RCO and community, but is vague on how violations are determined.
- The legislation is silent on how RCO and community input will be evaluated and used in decision making relative to public funding and regulatory approvals.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we are disappointed that the RCO Ordinance does not center Pittsburgh's most vulnerable and challenged residents and communities. Due to the substantial eligibility and registration requirements, the RCO ordinance will disproportionately impact African American and/or working class neighborhoods that have a high concentration of under-resourced community organizations and low-income residents. These issues are counter to at least three goals of the City of Pittsburgh's stated objective of creating an "All in Pittsburgh", the City's equitable development agenda unveiled in 2016. The Agenda promises five goals, three of which include: (1) building community power, voice, and capacity; (2) embedding racial equity throughout Pittsburgh's institutions and businesses; and (3) raising the bar for new development. The promise to "raise the bar" for our communities and neighborhoods requires a greater focus on listening to those who are most impacted.

The undersigned here request that (1) Councilwoman Deb Gross reintroduce the bill following an adequate community engagement process, including a public hearing, to amend the legislation so that it is fair and equitable to our most impacted communities and (2) Mayor Peduto issue an executive order in support of conducting a community process to amend the legislation.

Sincerely,



THE COMMUNITY TABLE