



To the Candidates for Cuyahoga County Executive and County Council:

Across our communities, a growing chorus of voices demands that the next County Executive and County Council embrace the powers of the 2009 County Charter to enact transformative changes that drive growth and prosperity for all residents. While many of our communities continue to grapple with the persistent effects of systemic racism, redlining, predatory lending, disinvestment, and sprawl, we believe that the County can be a strong partner in building an inclusive future for all.

To that end, members of the First Suburbs Consortium (FSC) and Cleveland's community development corporations (CDCs) began meeting in April 2022 to discuss shared challenges and how new Cuyahoga County leadership could be a strong partner in community development. We explored what works well within our current county government, which issues need more attention, and where there were still opportunities to improve the impact and outcomes of county programs. **From housing and economic development to county leadership, ours are realistic recommendations that can be achieved over the next four years and will lay a strong foundation for future growth.** These policy recommendations are rooted in the experiences of community leaders from 34 Cleveland neighborhoods and 20 inner-ring suburbs, which collectively constitute two-thirds of Cuyahoga County's total population.

In making these recommendations, we must also commend the public servants who work every day to make our communities great places to live. Whether they work in a city office, for Cuyahoga County, or in the local community development ecosystem, the recommendations we offer today magnify the work they are already doing.

It is no overstatement to say that our next County Executive and County Council have the opportunity to ignite inclusive growth for and across our region. It will be impossible without collaboration. We are committed to being your partners in growing an inclusive, prosperous future for the communities and neighborhoods we serve. We offer these recommendations as a place from which we can work together to refine the tools and programs that our communities need to succeed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer Kuzma".

Jennifer Kuzma  
Executive Director  
Northeast Ohio First Suburbs Consortium

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tania Menesse".

Tania Menesse  
President & Chief Executive Officer  
Cleveland Neighborhood Progress

## Housing

- *Use existing data to improve housing program performance and equity.* Cuyahoga County should analyze and make public data about housing program utilization. Relevant programs include the county’s Gap Financing program, HELP loan, down payment assistance program, and home repair programs, among others. Being transparent about geographic and demographic information would provide valuable insights into utilization across communities.

Such insight can be used by policymakers, program administrators, and other stakeholders to evaluate programs for effectiveness; improve program performance; and, as warranted, discontinue programs that do not meet their intended purposes so that those funds can be reallocated to other programs that need investment – many of which are outlined further in these recommendations

- *Improve the county’s Down Payment Assistance programs.* Expand it countywide. Increase the amount of assistance it offers in order to keep up with increasing house values. Create match programs with local municipalities to expand the program’s reach and value. A new County Executive and County Council should explore all of these options – and more – in order to help more Cuyahoga County residents build wealth in homes they own.
- *Expand home repair, rehab, and renovation products countywide,* and remove any restrictions that prevent local landlords from leveraging these programs to improve their rental properties in Cuyahoga County. Cuyahoga County has developed a strong fleet of grant and loan programs that help residents and neighborhoods, and it should double-down on programs that work well, increase access to capital, and decrease interest payments for homeowners.
- *Pass and implement 'Pay to Stay' protections.*
- *Continue shifting resources into and supporting programs that have improved the county’s ability to help individuals dealing with emergency issues related to rent, utilities, property tax, and other housing challenges.* The county and its partners developed or evolved these programs during the pandemic, and these investments have proven their worth over and over again.
- *Require that real estate transactions include the full contact information* – including email addresses, mailing addresses, cell phone, office phone, and buyer/seller/contact name, at a minimum – on real estate transactions. If the buyer uses a property management firm to maintain the property and handle tenant issues, require that their complete contact information also be listed alongside the owner’s.
- *Integrate housing as a part of the county’s economic development strategy.* When scoring economic development projects and making decisions about public financing and/or investment, Cuyahoga County should consider and award additional points for factors such as the availability of affordable housing, access to public transportation, and opportunities to move or buy in mixed-income communities.



- *Create a county-matching fund that cities and community-based organizations can leverage to engage in development activities and capital investments.* Municipalities and community-based organizations know their communities' needs best. The county can support their efforts by making funds available that expand their capacity to engage in site acquisition, demolition, home repair, and other programs tailored to meet their specific needs.
- *Support safe, healthy, affordable housing developments by creating programs to help challenged properties whose special financing has ended.* Cuyahoga County can help communities whose affordable housing developments have passed Year 16 and whose tax abatements have reached their full term. With reallocated funds from programs that do not meet their intended purposes, the County could offer low-interest loans or grants for ongoing maintenance and capital repairs at these facilities. The county should also consider deeper, systemic changes, such as basing property taxes for these facilities on their ability to generate revenue, as opposed to commercial, market-rate comps.
- *Implement shared legal and administrative support to augment municipalities' ability to navigate uniquely challenging foreclosures situations.* The County is in a unique position to offer a streamlined, efficient method of addressing challenges and leveraging expertise in complex foreclosure scenarios that municipalities only encounter in rare instances, but that county personnel have experienced much more frequently. Cuyahoga County should leverage its staff's expertise in ways that both address the foreclosure situations and empower municipal staff to more effectively handle these situations in the future.

## Economic Development

- *Refresh Cuyahoga County's portfolio of economic development programs* by working with municipalities and community-based organizations to evaluate the performance of county programs and identify which ones should be expanded, modified, and replaced. Consider county-wide programs for the following:
  - Adaptive re-use,
  - A revolving loan fund to help redevelop or update aging shopping centers and strip malls,
  - A streetscapes and main streets program,
  - Support for transit-oriented development that aligns with regional plans,
  - A reinvigorated storefront program that includes exterior improvements, white-boxing, and other interior improvements,
  - Funding for critical commercial demolitions,
  - A fund that helps cities attract resident-focused retail businesses not currently offered in their communities.
- *Deputize an economic development team member or contract with professional services company to work directly with municipal and CDC staff on wrangling the real estate/property data needed by TeamNEO for business attraction and expansion efforts.* Too many professionals in economic development are trying to provide this information, but the work is time-consuming and challenging. Cuyahoga County can help TeamNEO attract more businesses here if we can ensure that the real estate data they are using is complete.
- *Develop a county-wide retail market strategy* to assess the strengths, challenges, and competitive position of retail in Cuyahoga County so that we can foster successful retail centers that serve all communities and are poised for future growth. This strategy should include an analysis of existing businesses to illuminate gaps in services available to communities today. It should also prioritize the use of transit-oriented and mixed-use development strategies because customers increasingly value retail centers as “destinations” and shopping as an “experience.” Additionally, neighborhood goods and services such as pharmacies, hardware stores, barber shops and salons, grocery stores, and other similar retail businesses, should be given priority as anchor institutions because they are more resilient to trends towards online shopping.
- *Expand the Department of Economic Development's team to include staff who would serve as proactive liaisons* between the Department and all communities, informing municipal staff of available programs and opportunities available through the county to help municipalities and their businesses.

## County Leadership & Partnerships

- *Elevate regionalism and sustainability by building out the teams charged with identifying and advancing each issue.* These expanded teams should explore opportunities within their respective Departments to advance these priorities, and they should work with external partners on opportunities that would bring our communities closer together. All ideas should be advanced through the existing positions of Chief of Regional Collaboration and Chief Sustainability Officer, who report directly to the County Executive.
- *Strengthen the County's working relationship with the City of Cleveland.* Just like the collaboration between the First Suburbs Consortium and Cleveland's community development corporations, the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County will be stronger when they work together. This work should include Identifying shared goals, investing in mutually beneficial programs and partnerships, and building trust so that our residents and communities can thrive together.
- *Take a stronger leadership role on workforce development.* Businesses are struggling to find employees right now, and many workers struggle to find living-wage work with a reasonable commute. Meeting these needs is important, and it requires short-term actions balanced with long-term changes. There are simple strategies we should deploy today to promote and strengthen Cuyahoga County's existing network of workforce development partners while we work on aligning job concentration, public transportation, and other investments. A new County Executive and Council must balance these priorities, promoting existing programs and resources while convening stakeholders to identify and implement solutions to larger problems in workforce development.
- *The County should continue to strengthen the alignment and coordination between the County's Planning Commission, Department of Development, Department of Public Works, and the Office of Capital Projects.*
- *Convene municipalities, community-based organizations, and larger, regional groups to help align efforts, build shared understanding of community challenges, and identify paths to meet shared goals.* Major regional entities such as NOACA, NEORS, Cleveland Water Department, RTA, and CMHA - among others - are already collaborating and sharing information with First Suburbs and CDCs. The County Executive can provide greater staff support and leadership to make sure that we maximize the public benefits from such partnerships and collaboration.
- *Prioritize population growth by doubling down on quality of life investments.* Several efforts are underway to attract and retain new residents, and they need the County's full support and leadership. New and existing residents will stay when they have great access to economic opportunity and high quality of life. To that end, the County should commit to investments that improve the quality of life in Cuyahoga County. Those investments include expansion and maintenance of the county's multi-purpose trail network, its tree canopy and network of parks, mixed-use retail districts, and connections to Lake Erie and its many tributaries.