

# Housing summit action conference summarizes ideas, launches plans & task forces



by Laverne Dees Webb, Muriel Finegold and Emily Kearns

**W**hat happens when you bring together a group of about 80 people with as many perspectives and sometimes competing interests, to plan the future of housing, community and economic development for their city? If a February Action Conference is any example, it is clear that people who don't ordinarily plan together, and who often don't see eye to eye on needs and priorities, can collaborate purposefully and effectively.

How does it happen? The events that led up to this conference began nearly two years ago when Dubuque's Housing Department began an Appreciative Inquiry process with EnCompass, a consulting firm. Since then, over 300 people have participated in a process that included 220 individual interviews and a Summit Conference, task forces of landlords and city officials that met over the past year to work out differences, and stakeholders who met in focus groups over the past three months.

These stories and ideas were disseminated prior to the conference, paving the way for pooling, refining and creating new ideas to determine where the collective will is for moving forward. From the start, the emphasis has been on what's working, how to build on it, and do even better. The significant strides that have been made over the past year in establishing responsive, customer-focused housing services, improved collaborations, and new initiatives, were based on inquiring into the best of the past and present as a plat-

form for creating a better future. The Feb. 11 Action Conference was designed to capitalize on that spirit to unleash the best ideas of a diverse gathering and create common ground for setting directions and planning new initiatives.

The challenge for the Planning Committee was to determine which voices needed to be at the table. The challenge to the facilitators was to design a conference that would assure that all the voices were heard and that participants worked together to create action plans that would achieve results on their priorities for the future. Nearly 80 people, representing landlords, tenants, community leaders, commerce, essential services, housing development and management, and government interests, came together ready to focus on solutions, willing to collaborate across their differences, and able to create new strategic directions, plans and initiatives.

The very first task of the conference was to create a framework for working collaboratively across boundaries and differences. Together participants designed the high road that they would travel throughout the day. They wanted conversations based on trust, respect and inclusion. They sought to be open to new ideas that took them beyond the ideas they carried into the room. And they wanted to move to actions that embraced their individual interests and their shared interests.

It was an intense, high-energy day that began at 8 a.m. and ended at 6 p.m. People

worked in pairs, in mixed groups, in their stakeholder groups and together in a whole group, to determine seven top priority areas around which to take action. They grappled with issues of downtown planning and development, mixed neighborhoods, improving occupancy rates, establishing a tenants' organization, affordable quality housing and neighborhoods, green space, transportation, diversity, a clearing-house on services and workforce recruitment and retention. They struggled to find shared meaning, to create goals to which they could commit, and to define the steps they were ready, willing and able to take together that would accomplish those goals.

These seven Action Initiatives represent strategic directions and actions that will become the heart of the city's five-year Consolidated Plan for housing, community and economic development. It will guide the investment of over \$20 million over the next five years. The coordinators of each Action Task Force will meet one week after the conference to plan a six-week follow-up workshop with all task force members to report on steps taken and to make future plans. The community can follow the Task Force's activities and progress at the Housing Department's internet site at <http://members.aol.com/DBQHousing/>.

**The 7 Action Initiative Task Forces**  
Develop a Downtown Comprehensive Master Plan for Dubuque

- Review Vision 2000 projects
- Identify key players
- Survey other cities
- Get ownership of City Council

#### **Develop/Enhance Mixed Neighborhoods**

- Create new neighborhood associations
- Plan leadership training
- Understand needs
- Create opportunities for growth
- Support local businesses
- Conduct diversity education

#### **Create Livable Neighborhoods**

- Support expansion of Boys/Girls Club
- Seek input from neighborhood groups
- Encourage neighborhood fairs
- Increase Homestead Exemption
- Provide incentives for demolition of blight
- Extend bike trails

#### **Affordable Housing**

- Assess available programs
- Inform businesses of viable partnerships
- Establish a tenant association

#### **Improve Rental Occupancy Rates and Make Downtown a Desirable**

##### **Place to Live**

- Establish a tenant association
- Encourage investment in older buildings
- Address building code issues
- Encourage units to condo conversion
- External appearance programs
- Create multiple listing service for renters

##### **Clearinghouse on Programs and Needs**

- Gather groups to research and share information
- Set up clearinghouse
- Expand Early Childhood Care Center
- Develop City Ombudsman position
- Hold business seminars

##### **Youth Participation and Workforce Retention**

- Increase youth decision making
- Link schools, jobs and volunteerism
- Teen center and dance center for college kids
- Market and recruit workforce
- Flexible worker accommodations

- Outreach to immigrants

At the end of the day, each of the seven action planning groups was asked to present to the whole gathering a report on its action planning, and to do so in a creative way that would get peoples' attention. A unique version of Little Red Riding Hood reminded us of the need for coordinated services. A play on Who Wants to be a Millionaire? confronted us with how we saw the opportunities and constraints that would influence our future, and challenged people to make commitments. Perhaps the most poignant presentation was from a group concerned with youth participation and retaining a strong workforce, including youth and immigrants. A Bosnian began this presentation report in Croatian. No one understood a single word of what he was saying, but his message was clear to everyone. The future of Dubuque is about all of us. Let the future begin.

**[Editor's note: About the authors: Webb is CEO of EnCompass from Washington, D.C. Finegold is a consultant from Boston. Kearns is a professor of sociology from Clarke and Action Conference Historian.]** ♦