Visitability Begins to Take Hold in Cincinnati Market

The new housing market is gaining energy again in the region after several slow years. One design innovation that is finally becoming available locally is visitability. New visitable homes were the highlight of CitiRama, this year at the Witherby subdivision in College Hill.

Visitability means someone using a wheelchair or with limited mobility can visit the home because it has a no-step entrance, wide enough doorways and a bathroom on the first floor. These are modern housing features being used around the country in recognition that many people who are not disabled themselves have family or friends who are. In addition, the population is aging, and homeowners are concerned about staying in their homes if their mobility should become limited.

CitiRama is an event co-sponsored by the City of Cincinnati and the Homebuilders Association. Previous years’ events have been criticized by disability advocates for the lack of visitable homes. Indeed the events themselves were not accessible.

This year developers T.J. Ackermann and Meierjohan Building Group, www.meierjohanbuildinggroup.com, took the lead in highlighting visitable homes at CitiRama. The Meierjohan model home also partnered with Whole Home, www.wholehome.org, to feature aging-in-place amenities such as an oversized shower, reinforced towel racks that can be used for grab bars, and no-touch kitchen faucets.

Visitability is not legally required, but is one way a community can reduce barriers for people with disabilities and further fair housing. Congratulations to T.J. Ackermann and Meierjohan Building Group for showing leadership in furthering fair housing in Cincinnati.
Fair Housing Mock Trial – Education Opportunity

When: November 13, 1:00-4:10 pm
Credit Hours: 3 hours CEU-Ohio Civil Rights
Location: Sharonville Convention Center
11355 Chester Road, Cincinnati 45246 (Rooms 201 and 202)

This course has been specifically designed for real estate professionals who want to be better equipped to work with customers with disabilities and knowledgeable of the risks that come with discrimination.

The course instructor is Brandon Craig, HOME Compliance Manager. The home buyer who has filed the fair housing case is deaf and uses a sign language interpreter. Paul Saba will be the attorney for the seller’s agent and the broker. Judge Pat Fisher of the Ohio First District Court of Appeals will preside.

Register with the Cincinnati Area Board of Realtors at www.cabr.org/education/course-information.

Charles ‘Chuck’ Judd: 1916-2014

Charles “Chuck” Judd, co-founder of HOME and its first board president, died Friday, Oct. 17. He was 98.

Having grown up in an all-white suburb, attending all-white schools, Mr. Judd seemed an unlikely civil rights advocate. Indeed, when he moved to Cincinnati, a friend advised that he “move to Hyde Park, join a country club and play golf.” But, Judd was not one to ignore injustice and be content in his life while others were suffering.

As a member of the Mayor’s Friendly Relations Committee in the 1950s, he began to have true conversations with African Americans, most notably Mayor Ted Berry, the city’s first African American mayor. Berry often would lunch with Judd at the MFRC office. That friendship proved to be life-long with Judd being asked to speak at Berry’s funeral in 2000.

In 1959, Judd along with a few others started the Greater Cincinnati Committee for Equal Opportunities in Housing and began efforts to encourage housing choice for all residents of the region. That volunteer group provided the foundation for HOME and its mission to fight illegal discrimination in housing, especially racial discrimination.

Judd was the board’s first president in 1968 and remained on the board continuously until earlier this year when he was honored by board resolution as “Board Member Emeritus.”

Fellow board member Marion Spencer, civil rights leader and former vice mayor, called Judd a “loyal and true friend.”

“I don’t know anyone who has had more interest and dedication to diversity, inclusion and fairness throughout decades of service,” she said.

You’re Invited!

Annual Meeting and Holiday Reception

December 10: 4:00-6:00 PM
United Way building
2400 Reading Road, Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

This year HOME is combining its traditional Holiday Reception and its annual meeting. There will be a short business meeting before the festivities followed by lots of food and good company.

All HOME members, friends and colleagues are invited to join the staff for this FREE event.

For more information, call Dotty Hall, coordinator for the event, at 513-977-2626.
Recent Federal Fair Housing Actions in Ohio

Racial Discrimination

In August, after 3 years of litigation, Massillon, Ohio landlords agree to a $850,000 settlement to resolve housing discrimination lawsuits brought by the Federal government.

The settlement requires that the defendants hire an independent management company to manage all of their rental properties and to hire a third party to periodically test their properties to ensure compliance with the Fair Housing Act.

The settlement came after an order in which the court noted that 10 former employees had testified that they were instructed to discriminate against African Americans and other former employees had testified that they been instructed to discriminate against families with children.

The court ruled that the department had presented sufficient evidence of a pattern or practice of unlawful discrimination by the defendants for the case to go to trial before a jury.

In September, the U.S. Justice Department entered into a consent decree for $30,000 with the landlord of a 36-unit apartment complex in North Ridgeville, Ohio.

The Federal attorneys alleged that the defendants discriminated against African Americans by quoting higher rental and application fee rates to them than to white apartment seekers, and by refusing to show African Americans vacant units when they visited while showing such units to white apartment seekers who visited the complex.

The complaint was based on evidence obtained by the Justice Department’s fair housing testing program.

Discrimination Based on Disability

In August the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that after investigation, it has charged Kent State University and four of its employees with housing discrimination for refusing to allow a student with disabilities to keep an emotional support animal in her campus apartment.

The student alleged that the university offered her academic accommodations, which she did not need, but denied her request to keep her support animal.

As a result of the denial, the student and her husband were forced to move to an apartment the university did not own.

Lending Discrimination

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced a $5 million settlement with Wells Fargo Home Mortgage, the nation’s largest provider of home mortgage loans, resolving allegations that the lender discriminated against women who were pregnant, or had recently given birth, and were on maternity leave.

Since 2010, 190 maternity leave discrimination complaints have been filed with HUD against numerous lenders, resulting in more than 40 settlements.

‘Hello Neighbor’

HOME along with the city, the county and the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission hosted a regional round-table discussion on best practices for promoting community interaction and communications. The Oct. 2 event, “Hello Neighbor: Using the Power of Connection to Strengthen Your Community,” drew 36 people from 22 different city and county neighborhoods to discuss difficult questions in a respectful, thoughtful discussion and share concerns and ideas.
Staff Changes – Tenant Advocate

After six years as the tenant advocate for HOME, Nicole (Kelch) Lesniak has left the organization for a position with Legal Aid of Southwest Ohio.

Janet Brown, right, has accepted the position and began the new role in early October. Brown has worked with HOME for three years as a member of the Mobility team assisting voucher-holders in finding safe housing in low-poverty areas.

As the new tenant advocate, she will assist callers in understanding their rental rights under Ohio’s Landlord-Tenant and advocate on behalf of clients when necessary to help ensure they do not lose their housing because of disagreements with their landlords.

Brown also will continue HOME’s new partnership with Carson Elementary in Price Hill. The goal of the two-year, pilot project is to help families stay in their homes, so that the children do not fall behind on their school work.

Tenants with concerns can call Brown directly at 513-977-2621.

As Nicole did, Janet will answer common questions through an “Ask Janet” column. HOME does not give legal advice, but provides general information on Ohio landlord-tenant law.

Elaine: It’s getting cold outside and the landlord won’t turn on the heat.

Janet: State law says it is the landlord’s responsibility to provide a working heating system, but local health codes specify when the heat must be turned on.

In Cincinnati, for example, heat must be provided when the temperature outside is below 55 degrees for 24 hours. The local health department can provide information for other jurisdictions.