



## Ohio Commission Assists Local Governments in Resolving Disputes

In June 2002, the Northeast Ohio Area-wide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) contacted the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management (the Commission) about a dispute between a city and a township over competing land use development plans and related water and sewer issues.

To assist them in resolving the dispute, the Commission referred a mediator to the parties, who agreed to try mediation. Pittsfield Township Clerk Jim McConnell credits the mediator with getting him and Oberlin City Manager Rob DiSpirito to come to the table. "The mediator helped us acknowledge common ground, and to consider changes we had not previously thought about," he said.

The NOACA case is one example of how disputes in Ohio could be successfully negotiated as part of the Local Government Initiative, a Commission-sponsored program offering conflict resolution services to local government officials. The program—launched by the Commission in 1991 with a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation—is a joint effort of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio, the

Ohio Township Association, and the Ohio Municipal League. Over the years, more than 195 local officials have been trained through the program.

Today, the parties in the NOACA case are working toward final agreement on a joint plan for future development in the region. According to Oberlin City Manager DiSpirito, it was mediation that kept the matter out of court. "Without the mediation process, the issue would definitely have gone legal," he said.

The Initiative enables cities, townships, and counties to apply for funding for conflict resolution services to address public policy disputes. One requirement of the program is that the parties must apply for assistance *together*. Maggie Lewis, the Commission's Associate Director, said the program requires cities, townships, and counties to be at a point where they are ready to address the key issues in dispute when requesting assistance.

"Often, only one party wants to address the dispute," Lewis said. "Or, the parties want to pursue different avenues for addressing the issues—one through alternative dispute resolution or dialogue and the other through traditional court legal processes. This Initiative is designed for parties who are ready and willing to work together."

The Commission held a workshop on the Initiative for local government officials, and is now accepting applications. Commission staff believe that through the Initiative, more local governmental bodies will have the opportunity to resolve issues without having to rely on the state court system.

For more information on the Initiative, contact [Maggie.Lewis@cdr.state.oh.us](mailto:Maggie.Lewis@cdr.state.oh.us) or call 614-752-9595.