

## '5 Questions With' Debbie Berry, Vice President of Community Development at University Circle Incorporated

McDonald Hopkins Public Law Practice Group presents



5 QUESTIONS WITH

Debbie Berry | Vice President of Community Development, University Circle Incorporated



University Circle is known as a world-class center of innovation in health care, education, and arts and culture. What has created this national reputation?



**University Circle has an unparalleled network of 40 nonprofit institutions in just over one square mile**, including three hospitals, three universities, and multiple cultural, religious, and human service providers. Those institutions continually lead the world in innovation and “firsts,” and because of their physical proximity, they are working collaboratively with one another in ways in which other nonprofit organizations cannot as easily do.

Read the full Q&A at [mcdonaldhopkins.com](https://mcdonaldhopkins.com)

Monday, July 12, 2021

### **1. The University Circle area is known as a world-class center of innovation in health care, education, and arts and culture. What has created this national reputation?**

University Circle has an unparalleled network of 40 nonprofit institutions in just over one square mile, including three hospitals, three universities, and multiple cultural, religious, and human service providers. Those institutions continually lead the world in innovation and “firsts,” and because of their physical proximity, they are working collaboratively with one another in ways in which other nonprofit organizations cannot as easily do. The University Circle district and its members continue to receive top honors with University Circle itself just being named the best Arts District in the country by a USA Today reader poll.

### **2. As the Vice President of Community Development, what is on the horizon and how do you keep the community engaged?**

One of our goals at University Circle Inc. (UCI) has been to create a Complete Neighborhood with everything a person needs within a 15-minute walking distance. Our first step was building more housing. When I joined UCI about 15 years ago, most of our residents were students, so by their nature, they were transient. We wanted to create more permanency and really grow the neighborhood, and we’ve done that by building and renovating nearly 2,000 residential units with a mix of rental and for-sale products. Once people started to move in, they wanted nearby services and amenities. We met this demand by enhancing our retail with more local restaurants, a drug store, and a grocery store. We have also been focused on improving greenspaces and making better connections throughout the district so that people can safely walk, bike, or take transit instead of needing to get in their cars and drive. Looking toward the future, UCI is in active discussions with developers about future uses at several remaining parcels we own. We will soon

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be breaking ground on a residential project in the Little Italy neighborhood that will add 17 for-sale townhomes, 80 apartments, and a host of neighborhood amenities including a sculpture park, dog park, and playground. We will continue to work closely with the existing residents in Little Italy as we design these public spaces so that they serve the entire community.

### **3. As the city re-opens, what do you expect for the visitors, residents and business in University Circle area?**

I am so excited to see people coming back to University Circle! Last year was a challenging year for our businesses and retail with the cultural institutions having to close their doors and the universities serving their students remotely. Across the Circle, each organization rose to the challenge and figured out new and different ways to serve their constituents while planning for the return of in-person gatherings. All our institutions are again open to the public with several new additions on the way. The Cleveland Museum of Natural History just broke ground in June on its \$150 Million expansion and renovation project. The Cozad-Bates House Interpretive Center, a UCI project, will open its doors to the public in late August shining light on University Circle and Cleveland's history as a center of anti-slavery activism before the Civil War and our role in the Underground Railroad. While we are still missing some of our regularly scheduled community events in the Circle, stay tuned for an upcoming announcement about a free concert series on Wade Oval later this summer.

### **4. What continues to be your greatest challenges in today's market?**

The Circle's greatest challenge is probably everyone's greatest challenge – funding! We have so many nonprofit institutions competing for the same funding sources and now the pandemic has depleted or re-directed some of those sources. It is a constant challenge to fund all the great work that we do, but we all keep at it! Real estate, in particular, is complicated in University Circle because land prices are high and construction costs have gone up, yet we have a ceiling on the amount of rent we can charge because there are so many nearby options available. Also, market dynamics are challenging because we are not really growing our population. All of the revenues UCI receives from our properties, whether from a land sale or parking revenue, goes back into our operating budget so we are not really in a position to subsidize property sales for the greater good of the neighborhood or else we have to sacrifice other programs or services we provide. Given all of these factors, we are constantly looking for ways to diversify our income streams and find new partners who can execute on complicated land transactions to help us create our Complete Neighborhood. One tool that UCI has used on several major projects to make the financing work is a long-term, 100-year ground lease. This financing allows the developer to pay for the land over time, as they receive income, but more importantly it guarantees UCI an income stream that we use for our ongoing operations.

### **5. With the upcoming City of Cleveland mayoral election, if you had one ask of the incoming administration, what would it be and why?**

Even though UCI has been jokingly referred to as “City Hall East,” we need the City of Cleveland for so many things because we are not a government. One significant and simple thing the new administration can do to help organizations like ours, as well as our residents and businesses, is to make city hall more user friendly by modernizing overall city communications and making information on existing permitting processes easily accessible. This starts with a modern, organized, easy to navigate, functioning website with information that is frequently updated and consistent from one department to the next. The website

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is often people's first impression of our city, and the user experience could be greatly improved from what exists today. We want our government to be effective and efficient and this would go a long way in terms of transparency and trust building with the community. Somewhere on that website there should be a place where people can go to get detailed information on existing permits, including what they allow and don't allow, how to file them, a tracking number to follow the permit through the process, and access to a human being who can assist the applicant if there are problems or unusual situations arise. Difficulties with permitting go well beyond the Building & Housing Department – a city resident cannot easily access a permit for a children's activity like a soccer game on a city field. This is a very simple step that I believe will make it easier for people to interact with City Hall.