September 4, 2025

202501589

To: Mayor and Members of City Council

From: Sheryl M. M. Long, City Manager

Subject: **Housing Application Program Interface (API) Feasibility**

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Reference Document #202500632

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The Council at its session on March 25, 2025, referred the following item for review and report.

> **MOTION**, submitted by Vice Mayor Jan Michele Lemon-Kearney, **WE MOVE** that the administration prepare a Report within sixty (60) days concerning the feasibility of an Application Program Interface (API) to scan the web, find apartment listings and update itself. The report should consider the following:
> 1. Limiting the listings to a certain income level (80% of AMI and lower);
> 2. Incorporation into the City's affordable housing dashboard;
> 3. Ability to link to the actual listing;
> 4. Whether another organization provides this service;
> 5. Cost; and
> 6. Any other relevant factors.

BACKGROUND

Access to real-time affordable housing is essential for ensuring that residents can locate safe, suitable homes quickly, particularly those earning 80% AMI or below. Currently, available housing data is scattered across different sources, such as landlord lists, online platforms, and nonprofit databases, and is rarely updated in a way that reflects immediate vacancies and other data that makes searching for safe and quality housing accessible. This creates unnecessary barriers for residents, especially those displaced suddenly who must make dozens of calls to locate a viable option.

An API based dashboard could automate the process by collecting listings from multiple online sources, filtering them for affordability, and integrating them into the City's Affordable Housing Dashboard. This would offer residents and housing service providers a single, reliable location for up-to-date listings, improve the efficiency of housing searches, and allow City leaders to monitor trends and direct resources strategically.

Income-Level Filtering (≤ 80% AMI)

The API can be designed to apply filters by rent level, using HUD Fair Market Rents and AMI thresholds as benchmarks. A major challenge lies in parsing whether online listings include sufficient income and rent restriction information. Some listings disclose rent levels, but income qualifications may not always be listed, requiring further validation.

Integration with Affordable Housing Dashboard
The City's Affordable Housing Dashboard already tracks subsidized housing development and availability. A properly configured API could be integrated, providing real-time feeds of private rental listings in addition to public/subsidized housing data. This would create a more comprehensive tool for residents.

Linking to Actual Listings
The API can include direct hyperlinks to the source listing. This ensures accuracy and allows residents to contact landlords or property managers directly. However, care must be taken to remove expired listings and avoid broken links, requiring consistent maintenance and monitoring.

Other Providers of Similar Services
Several third-party platforms already aggregate apartment listings, including affordable options. Partnering with or licensing from an existing provider may be more cost-effective than building a system entirely in-house and maintaining that system for accuracy and privacy compliance.

Considerations And Other Relevant Factors
- **Development Costs:** A custom API could range from $150,000–$300,000 in development, depending on complexity and vendor selection.
- **Licensing/Partnership Costs:** Partnering with an existing platform could reduce upfront expenses, shifting costs to licensing fees or data-sharing agreements.
- **Staffing Needs and Ongoing Maintenance:** Annual operating and monitoring costs are estimated at $50,000–$100,000 to maintain accuracy, update filters, and ensure data quality. Dedicated IT/data staff or a contracted vendor would be required for oversight.
- **Data Accuracy & Fairness:** APIs cannot guarantee all affordable units will be captured, as some landlords do not list online or use smaller platforms.
- **Timeline:** A basic pilot could be implemented within 6–12 months if external partnerships are pursued; 12–18 months for a full in-house build.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERING WITH AN OUTSIDE AGENCY

1. Real-Time and Accurate Housing Information
An API dashboard could consolidate housing listings from multiple sources into one real-time database, ensuring that residents, service providers, and City staff have immediate access to accurate and current information. This would be particularly beneficial during urgent relocation needs, reducing the delays and inefficiencies inherent in manually maintained lists.

2. Administrative Efficiency and Resource Savings
Automation of housing vacancy searches would significantly reduce the time City staff and nonprofit navigators spend on repetitive tasks. With the API continuously updating listings, staff can redirect their efforts to direct assistance, case management, and strategic planning rather than data entry or verification.

3. Increased Transparency and Public Access
A public-facing dashboard would give residents a clear, accessible view of all available in Cincinnati and the criteria used to identify them. This transparency can strengthen public trust, foster accountability, and encourage broader participation from landlords and property managers through targeted engagement.

4. Data-Driven Decision Making
Comprehensive housing vacancy data from this tool could be analyzed to identify emerging trends, geographic gaps in affordability, and areas with persistently high vacancies and turnover. This would equip the administration to design targeted interventions, prioritize investments, and strengthen applications for state and federal funding and or LIHTC tax credits.

5. Advancement of City Goals
By focusing on and or ensuring that units affordable to households at or below 80% AMI are included in the dashboard, this tool would directly support the City's objectives and help close the gap in access for low- and moderate-income households. Including the ability to link CMHA listings and vacancies would also be beneficial for residents in search of housing that accept vouchers or listings that are income restricted.

CHALLENGES TO CREATING AN API PLATFORM IN HOUSE

1. Financial Commitment
Initial development costs for an API of this scope are estimated at $150,000–$250,000, with annual maintenance ranging from $25,000–$50,000. These costs must be weighed against other City priorities and budget constraints.

2. Reliability of Source Data
The system's effectiveness depends on timely and accurate data from listing sources. If landlords or platforms fail to update their listings regularly, the dashboard could display expired or incorrect information, leading to user frustration and diminished trust.

3. Legal and Privacy Considerations
Aggregating data from multiple listing services may require agreements to address intellectual property, terms of use, and privacy concerns. The City of Cincinnati must ensure compliance with applicable laws and best practices in data management.

4. Limited Market Coverage Without Broad Participation
If only a small number of landlords or platforms participate, the dashboard may present an incomplete picture of the housing market. Without comprehensive participation, the tool risks underrepresenting available housing options.

5. Potential Redundancy with Existing Services
Some nonprofits, advocacy groups, and commercial entities already provide housing search tools. Without distinctive features—such as income-based filters, integration with City programs, or policy analytics, the City's platform could duplicate existing services.

CITYWISE PARTNERSHIP

The Administration recommends partnering with **CityWise**, a web-based service provider that works with municipalities to improve data-driven decision-making and public-facing information systems. CityWise has expertise in API development, predictive analytics, and housing market analysis, along with a track record of integrating community engagement into technical projects. Their involvement would help ensure the tool is accurate, easy to use, and tailored to the needs of Cincinnati residents.

RECOMMENDATION

The Administration recommends moving forward with development of the Housing API dashboard in partnership with **City Wise Software LLC** under the terms of a three-year **Service and Software Licensing Agreement**, with the option to renew for up to three additional one-year terms.

CityWise brings to this project a proprietary, dynamic, searchable database technology specifically designed for affordable housing listings. Their platform uniquely lowers barriers for small property owners by charging listing fees only to owners with 20 or more units while still supporting large-scale landlords. This approach increases the diversity of listings, ensuring that smaller, often more affordable properties are represented. Including properties that are CMHA and accept Housing Choice Vouchers.

Current cities who have partnered with CityWise:

Milwaukee County, Wisconsin Apartments.county.milwaukee.gov
Green Bay, Wisconsin Apartments.greenbaywi.gov
Oak Creek, Wisconsin Apartments.oakcreekwi.gov
City of Racine, Wisconsin Apartments.cityofracine.org
Kenosha, Wisconsin Apartments.kenosha.org
Brooklyn Park, Apartments.brooklynpark.org
Muskegon, Michigan Apartments.muskegon-mi.gov
Burlington, Wisconsin Apartments.burlington-wi.gov

Under the proposed agreement with the City of Cincinnati, CityWise will:

- Host the housing listing platform on a subdomain of the City's website, maintaining the City's branding and user experience.
- Build and maintain a searchable, customizable database aligned with Cincinnati's neighborhood structure and terminology.
- Remove rented listings within 30 days to ensure accuracy.
- Provide quarterly reporting on usage, listing volume, and subscriber engagement.
- Market the platform locally to expand participation from property owners and managers.
- Deliver product support, technology upgrades, and monthly data backups at no cost to the City for installation or customization.

The agreement would allow the City to receive 20% of net listing fees annually, creating a small but sustainable revenue stream to offset administrative costs. Importantly, all development and integration work will be completed without direct City expenditure for platform setup, significantly reducing financial risk compared to building a comparable system from scratch.

This partnership aligns with the City's goals for a modern, equity-focused housing search tool and provides the technical foundation for integrating an API that can display real-time listings filtered for affordability (80% AMI and below) within the City's Affordable Housing Dashboard. Leveraging CityWise's proven infrastructure and local marketing plan will accelerate implementation, ensure reliability, and deliver immediate public benefit.

cc: Cathy Bailey, Interim Assistant City Manager
       Tiffany Michelle Brown, Chief Opportunity Officer