

Growing a new city

Laura Brunner takes on local development's biggest job

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Laura Brunner, new CEO of the Port Authority of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority, stands on the roof of the Queens Tower in Price Hill, overlooking the city. Brunner's experience in real estate development makes her ready for the port authority's work, those who have watched her say. / The Enquirer/Jeff Swinger



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The Vernon Manor remake in Avondale. The incoming University Square at The Loop in Clifton Heights. The Medpace expansion in Madisonville.

Count off recent high-profile development projects in Greater Cincinnati, and chances are good that Laura Brunner had a hand in them.

Now, she's about to take on the biggest challenge of her career: Heading up the agency expected to have unprecedented power to grow jobs, businesses and the economy in the region.

Friends say Brunner is a perfect fit as new president and CEO of the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority. The 52-year-old real estate executive and former CPA has the experience and connections to make deals work, they say.

“She knows the influential people in the community and the leaders who she will have to go to” to get the job done, says Otto Budig, chair of the port board. “Laura is a very quick study. We’re confident she’ll make the port what it’s envisioned to be.”

Cincinnati and Hamilton County leaders have high expectations for the port, as it becomes the region’s economic development powerhouse charged with beefing up strategies to fuel job growth.

The agency was reorganized in 2008 and has been envisioned as a countywide version of Cincinnati Center City Development Corp. (3CDC), the privately funded group that has been buying and redeveloping property in the urban core of downtown and Over-the-Rhine.

The agency last week tapped Brunner for the top job after a year-long search. She’ll earn an annual compensation package of up to \$287,300, according to the agency’s 2012 budget.

Brunner says she’s “far more excited” than she is overwhelmed as she prepares to take on the challenge.

“I’m passionate, I’m optimistic. I’m driven. I’m results-oriented. I’m a good listener, and I’m strategic,” she says.

“I really have a wide range of experience and a broad knowledge of our community that I can call upon.”

Experience in shaping deals for big projects around the area

Brunner’s marks already are on heavyweight projects across Cincinnati and Hamilton County.

As executive vice president of business development at downtown-based Al. Neyer Inc., Brunner played lead roles in plans for University Square at The Loop. The \$80 million development is set to break ground after the New Year for new apartments and retail and office space in Clifton Heights.

“If I was starting a business from scratch, I’d start with Laura,” says Arn Bortz, whose firm Towne Properties is teaming with Al. Neyer on University Square. “She

understands all dimensions of the development business, and she doesn't take no for an answer. Some people might call her impatient, but I think this town needs dozens more like her."

Plans for the project also include 40,000 square feet of space for University of Cincinnati offices – a key component that Brunner negotiated and helped make happen.

"Laura is enormously talented," says UC President Gregory Williams. "She's a great strategic thinker and very goal-oriented. We worked closely on U Square, and there were some difficult points during the project. Her leadership is a major factor in the project moving ahead."

Brunner also helped shape deals for the move of Norwood-based MedPace to the former 30-acre Nutone site in Madisonville.

And she helped craft plans for a new facility for Christ Hospital in Green Township.

"The executives of Al. Neyer Inc. are extremely happy for Laura and are not surprised on her appointment," says John Handelsman, CEO at Al. Neyer.

Brunner may best be known for her work on the \$37 million remake of historic Vernon Manor hotel into offices for 600 employees of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Among other roles in that project, Brunner set goals for minority contractors and lined up African-American investors to take an ownership stake in the hotel's renovation.

"This was an extremely complicated and complex project, and these were people, including myself, who had not made significant investments in commercial real estate before," says Edwin Rigaud, a Vernon Manor investor.

"It all stitched together the right way, and I credit Laura for that. She knows the movers and shakers and she knows the grassroots organizations, which is a big plus.

"They trust her, and they know when she takes on something she delivers it."

Commitment to diversity 'can be a tremendous asset'

This year, Brunner received the Cincinnati NAACP's Presidents Award and the Merlin Pope Diversity Award from the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission for her work in minority affairs.

Brunner says her work to promote minority inclusion began more than 20 years ago through Scouting. As one of few women to be board president of the Dan Beard Council of the Boy Scouts of America, she worked to promote ScoutREACH, a program aimed at recruiting inner-city children to the organization.

She also is active in the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber's minority business accelerator and was co-chair of diversity for Leadership Cincinnati's Alumni program.

"I have a very strong personal passion for minority inclusion and really think it can be tremendous asset for our region," Brunner says.

During her bid for the port position, the NAACP came out to publicly endorse Brunner as the top candidate, stating she has a "track record for including African-Americans" in community and economic development.

"Laura Brunner is the right person for the job," says Cincinnati Councilman Christopher Smitherman, former president of the Cincinnati NAACP. "We wanted to make sure that the choice was someone who not only has the business acumen, but the heart for the community.

"To us that translates into inclusion, and I think with Laura's leadership, the port will be uniquely positioned to really do great work."

High-energy leadership and knowing the players

Before joining Al. Neyer, Brunner was the first female managing principal at the Cincinnati office of commercial real estate services firm Colliers Turley Martin Tucker.

There, she helped "take the firm to the next level," says Eric Gardner, a former senior vice president at Colliers.

"She's a very positive, high energy leader," he says. "She's highly invested in the community – knows everyone – and still has the ability to bring fresh, new perspectives."

Brunner began her career in 1980 as a certified public accountant at the Indianapolis office of Fowler and Suttles CPAs.

Outside of her professional experience, Brunner also is involved in community work, including with the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority commission, Downtown Cincinnati Inc., Mercantile Library, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and Beech Acres Foundation, among others.

She lives in East Walnut Hills with her husband, Paul Brunner, CEO of Tire Discounters. They have two adult children.

Brunner said she believes her “wide range” of experience and passions will help her “bring people to the table to get the input ... and ultimately the buy-in that’s necessary to really have more of a laser focus” for the port.

“I care about this community, and I’m very committed to being a part of transformational change of which everyone can be proud,” she said.