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College Hill corner struggling

Shops move on, leaving vacant stores behind

By Ken Alltucker
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Once a bustling intersection, the crossing of North Bend Road and Hamilton Avenue in College Hill shows the struggle many city neighborhoods face as shops and residents gravitate to the suburbs.

Chain retailers have vacated two corners. A closed restaurant on a third corner will be auctioned Thursday. The fourth corner is home to a coffee house that beckons a young, hip crowd in a neighborhood where gray hair is more common.

Vacant shops and changing demographics have College Hill and Cincinnati leaders grappling for the right mix of shops and restaurants to revive this aging neighborhood and its business district.

"There is a lot of ongoing hardship in the neighborhood," said Dave Schwartz, director of the College Hill Business Association and owner of Schwartz Jewelers. "We are keenly aware that getting quality development on the corner is key to what we look like and what we get down the road."

The next year or two could prove critical for the city's fifth-largest neighborhood. Although College Hill's population declined 3.3 percent during the 1990s to 15,269, it managed to retain more people than all but two large (10,000 or more) city neighborhoods, Hyde Park and Westwood.



The now-empty CVS on the southwest corner of North Bend Road and Hamilton Avenue in College Hill is one of



Dave Schwartz, owner of Schwartz Jewelers, with the empty Schuller's Wigwam to be auctioned Thursday.

(Tony Jones photos) | [ZOOM](#) |

Vibrant centers are the "hottest form of retail" that can be a catalyst for neighborhood growth, rising property values and a swelling tax base, said Stan Eichelbaum, of Marketing Developments Inc., a retail consultant in downtown Cincinnati.

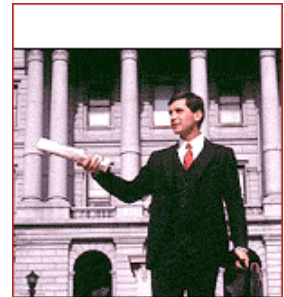
"I'm not saying every one will work," Mr. Eichelbaum said. "But a district can be turned around to add to

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many stores that have closed and remain vacant in the area.

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the economic vitality of a neighborhood."

City and neighborhood leaders envision a one-two punch of public money and

aggressive recruitment of new businesses to shore up the three-plus blocks of storefronts between Cedar and North Bend along Hamilton Avenue.

Already, the city has committed nearly \$1.5 million to dress up the main drag with new lighting and sidewalk improvements in 2003. Another \$250,000 grant from the city will be used to demolish a vacant dry cleaner and adjacent building at 6013-15 Hamilton and pave it over for parking.

And even though much of the city's effort has focused on filling the empty stores, there remains a solid base of successful shops and restaurants such as Angert's and Bacalls Caf  that draw customers from College Hill and beyond.

But for now, neighborhood leaders are facing more departing businesses than new ones.

The most recent exit was Kroger Co., which dumped its longtime store last summer in favor of a superstore less than 2 miles away in North College Hill.

The new location has all the trappings that Kroger seeks in a modern store - a flower shop, expanded pharmacy and sprawling parking lot right off the Ronald Reagan Highway. It's nearly three times as large (73,000 square feet) as the old store (25,000 square feet).

Kroger, which holds a lease through 2006 on the darkened corner store, has vowed to block any competitor from opening at its old College Hill site.

"They said they would not sublease it to a business that would compete with the superstore they just built down the street," said Peg Moertl, Cincinnati's director of community development.

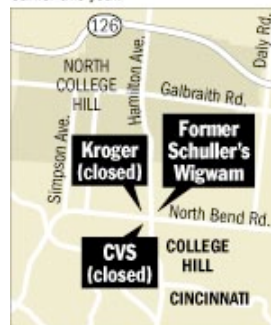
Kroger spokeswoman Amy Schulten didn't return phone calls.

That creates a dilemma for many longtime residents. Without a major neighborhood grocer, some wonder where they'll shop for food.

One resident called Mr. Schwartz in tears seeking some help. Since Kroger closed, she now buys groceries for a total of eight families on her block.

3 vacancies

Three of four corners at College Hill's high-profile intersection of Hamilton Avenue and North Bend Road are vacant. Yet neighborhood business district leaders hope for a boost when Schuller's Wigwam, closed since June 2000, is auctioned. Kroger and CVS vacated their stores at the intersection earlier this year.



The Cincinnati Enquirer/ M. ROYER

An investor is studying the possibility of opening an IGA at the former Kroger store, according to Mr. Schwartz, and has asked the neighborhood business district to write a letter asking Kroger to relent on its block-the-competition stance.

Across the street from Kroger is an empty CVS store leased through 2016. The drug store chain closed the Hamilton Avenue store in January when it acquired six outlets from struggling chain Rite Aid.

In many ways, the College Hill business district is struggling with many of the same problems that other city business districts are facing. How do you stay relevant when so many families shop in large grocers or suburban malls?

"College Hill is particularly difficult," said Mayor Charlie Luken. He believes that while College Hill has suffered, it's "not for a lack of city development," with the planned streetscape improvements and a parking lot between Elkton and North Bend coming soon.

One of the problems in College Hill is that the business district may be too long. The distance between Cedar and North Bend is "a pretty good stretch," Mr. Luken said.

Some College Hill leaders are looking to other neighborhoods for answers. Pleasant Ridge, for instance, has opened a mini-version of Findlay Market at a shuttered IGA store on Montgomery Road. The indoor Ridge Market is home to vendors peddling everything from vegetables to meats to wine.

Mr. Schwartz said that is the type of locally owned store that can draw shoppers from outside the neighborhood and add to a district's flavor of choices. Those independent stores also are free from the Wall Street-driven pursuit of profits that drive many chains to use and discard stores at will.

City Hall also has a duty to step up its efforts for struggling neighborhoods, said first-term Councilman David Pepper.

The city tends to establish creative financing for high-profile downtown projects such as the Saks Fifth remodel downtown but doesn't expend the same energy on neighborhood business districts that also feel the pressure of suburban competitors.

One remedy could be a council proposal to set aside \$70,000 next year to hire "mall managers" to recruit private businesses to various city neighborhoods.

Mr. Schwartz emphasized College Hill must find a balance between the new and the old, its current residents and its thirst to draw newcomers. Focusing all efforts on recruiting new shops while disregarding what neighborhood residents want won't work, either.

Just ask CVS and Visconti & Lechler Pharmacy on Hamilton Avenue. The CVS is closed. Visconti & Lechler is

still posting revenue gains.

E-mail kalltucker@enquirer.com

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