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Wednesday, July 30, 2003

Empty feeling hurting College Hill**By Kevin Aldridge**
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Once a bustling intersection of stores and restaurants, Hamilton Avenue at North Bend Road in College Hill is virtually a ghost town today.

Chain retailers vacated two corners about a year ago. A "for sale" sign hangs prominently on the facade of a closed restaurant on a third corner.

College Hill leaders have been working on proposals to jump-start redevelopment, but most seem just out of reach. At a time when Cincinnati City Council is paying millions of taxpayer dollars to keep companies such as Saks Fifth Avenue, Kroger and Convergys downtown, the intersection of Hamilton and North Bend underscores the reality that development challenges go beyond downtown's borders.

"It does no good to build everything downtown, while our neighborhoods go to hell in a handbasket," said Karen F. Dudley, president of the College Hill Forum.

Vice Mayor Alicia Reece said council needs to weigh how it can incorporate benefits for city neighborhoods into future tax incentive deals with downtown corporations.

Reece said the city should have encouraged the Kroger Co. to sell its abandoned College Hill store to the community in exchange for the city agreeing to build a \$15 million parking garage for the company.

Kroger dumped the longtime store at Hamilton and North Bend a year ago in favor of a superstore less than two miles away in North College Hill. Kroger, which holds a lease through 2006 on the vacant building, has vowed to block any competitor from opening a store there.

Last month, Kroger persuaded City Council to ante up \$15 million to build a new parking garage at Vine Street and Central Parkway. The company threatened to move its downtown headquarters out of the city if Council refused.

Reece suggested in a July 9 letter to Kroger that the company consider selling or subleasing the abandoned College Hill store to the community for \$1.

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"Suddenly the Kroger deal becomes good for downtown and College Hill," Reece said.

Lynn Marmer, a Kroger spokeswoman, said selling the property is not an option because Kroger doesn't own the land or the building. She said the company, however, has hired a real estate broker who is searching for tenants, because Kroger is still obligated to pay rent.

Marmer said the broker has interviewed more than 70 prospective tenants for the closed store.

"Some of the prospects are businesses that would not be desirable, such as lounges, bars and nightclubs," Marmer said. "Other prospective businesses have been more neighborhood-oriented, but unfortunately, they have decided not to pursue the location."

Business leaders in College Hill said the empty storefronts give a false perception that businesses cannot prosper there when, in fact, a solid base of shops and restaurants is less than 20 feet away.

Angert's Appliances, Bacalls Cafe and Schwartz Jewelers all draw customers from College Hill and beyond.

"It just does not convey the message we would like, and that is prosperity," said Dave Schwartz, director of the College Hill Business Association and owner of Schwartz Jewelers. "All three of those stores left for different reasons, but it wasn't a question of bad business."

Kroger moved to expand its operations. CVS closed its Hamilton Avenue store in January 2002 when the drugstore chain acquired six outlets from the struggling chain Rite Aid. Shuller's Wigwam Restaurant closed after the Shuller family decided it no longer wanted to be in the restaurant business.

A coffeehouse that caters to a young clientele sits on the fourth corner and is the only thing that keeps the intersection from being completely deserted.

Jody Williamson, owner of Bacalls Cafe, a College Hill mainstay for 21 years, said her restaurant sees fewer customers after 10 p.m. Williamson said many customers have told her the vacancies make the area appear unsafe, particularly at night.

Community and business leaders have asked the city and Kroger to pitch in for a \$22,500 marketing and feasibility study to find out the best use for the sites. But so far, neighborhood leaders said they have received no response.

Marmer said Kroger is willing to support such a study and share the costs. She said the vice president of the Cincinnati-Dayton Kroger Marketing Area - which operates the 100 stores in Greater Cincinnati - is working to arrange a meeting with representatives from the community, CVS and the Shullers.

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