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Neighbors rally to save Ridge Market

Nonprofit group takes over building's lease

By Maggie Downs
Enquirer staff writer

PLEASANT RIDGE -

Under an antique tin ceiling, the Ridge Market offers tastes to tempt any palate - thin-sliced smoked turkey, tangy gazpacho, fresh-squeezed orange juice.

Here the merchants are friends and often greet the customers by name.

"It's not just another chain store," said frequent shopper Dan Carlson of Kennedy Heights. "It's local, small businesses."

Just shy of its two-year anniversary, however, the Ridge Market isn't growing, which could hurt the budding shopping district on Montgomery Road and seriously bruise the East Side community of 8,872.

"The market is a big morale booster," Carlson said. "For the people who live around here, it's nice to know they have quality stuff available in their own neighborhood."

The gathering place features nine distinctive vendors: an organic produce store, a wine shop, a pasta place, two delis, a cafe, a florist, a juice bar/raw foods restaurant and a store for bird enthusiasts.

But the market has had trouble maintaining vendors. Since opening, it has never been filled to capacity. A significant space at the market, formerly a seafood shop, has been vacant for eight months. One month ago, the Chai Tea vendor pulled out as well.

Some customers said inconsistent hours have led them to visit the market less frequently. Recently, the market



Melanie Arata works at PastArata, a Ridge Market specialty shop that she operates with her husband, Ian Arata. Since it opened two years ago, the market has never had all of its available spaces leased.

Photos by TONY JONES/The Enquirer

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tried to fix that by establishing core hours during which every vendor had to be open.

About 50 residents gathered Tuesday for a Pleasant Ridge Community Council meeting to discuss the future of the market.

"Everyone is trying to encourage more customers to patronize (the market)," said resident Pete Engel, who attended the meeting. "Nobody wants to see it go away."

Formerly an IGA store, the grocery served the community for more than 60 years. Then 10 investors, three churches and many residents formed Ridge Market Limited Liability Corp. and developed a plan for a truly local grocery, modeled after Findlay Market in Over-the-Rhine. The project was funded entirely by private investments.

"It became a center where there used to be a semi-eyesore of a grocery store," said resident Catherine Tuck, who said the selection at the place now is upscale, fresh and unique. "It's very healthy for the Ridge as far as a destination."

The current lease changed hands on July 2, going from the Ridge Market LLC to Improve Pleasant Ridge, a nonprofit business development corporation. The leaseholders hope to alleviate the problems of a partly empty market and low traffic.

"One of the reasons we took the lease back is, as a not-for-profit, we have a better chance of making sure the market remains a viable place in our community," said C Kevin Armstrong, treasurer of Improve Pleasant Ridge. "We can get grants and fund-raise in a way the LLC never could."

Surrounding businesses are hoping the new management will help the market thrive.

"Obviously an empty storefront of any kind in the neighborhood is not something we'd like to see," said Geoff Hoffman, owner of Queen City Comic and Card on Montgomery Road.

"Especially on weekends, the market helps more than anything else," said Pat Dorsey, manager of Everybody's Records, who added that the staff often get take-out dinners from the grocery.

Supporters also say the market improves property values, providing an economic boost for the entire area.

"The real financial stakes are with the community, not with the vendors or with the LLC or with Improve," said Randall Ball, who runs Paradise Found raw juice bar in the market.

"What it means to our community life and our sense of community, you can't quantify that financially."

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Ridge Market was the selling point for Dan Driehaus, vice president of the community council, who moved to the neighborhood from Over-the-Rhine a year ago.

"Not because of the food exactly," he said. "But the idea of a community coming together to salvage a building that was going to be abandoned shows the strength of the people.

"The Ridge Market represents a lot of what the community is about."

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