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## Reviving Elmwood Place

The typical resident? 'People who can't afford another community'

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**ELMWOOD PLACE** - Hamilton County officials look at Elmwood Place and see a New York-sized challenge: If they can make it there, they can make it anywhere.

If they can turn around Elmwood Place - the county political jurisdiction losing population faster than any other - then they can turn around a county that has lost 6 percent of its population over the last 15 years.

They want to turn Elmwood Place into a model to show how older suburbs can overcome bleak prospects and take responsibility - with help - for their communities and their futures.

"They're kind of using us as a poster boy," Elmwood Place Mayor Richard Ellison said.

### CAN ELMWOOD PLACE BE SAVED?

It's losing population faster than anyplace in Hamilton County.

It's next to a former landfill, railroad tracks and Interstate 75.

It ranks at the top of most "bad" statistics, like the percentage of residents in poverty (one in five) or lack of education (barely half have completed high school).

It ranks at the bottom of most "good" statistics, like next-to-last in median family income at \$31,528 a year.

Despite that, some Hamilton County officials see Elmwood Place as the future - so much so that a new venture called Project Impact is providing the village with expertise and information for everything from landscaping to zoning to marketing itself.

"Hamilton County has a unique opportunity that Butler, Clermont, Warren and Campbell (counties) don't. We have places that are real places," said Ron Miller, executive director of Hamilton County's Planning and Zoning department.

Those places - called "first suburbs" because they grew in the mid-1900s close to urban cores - have grid streets, places to walk to, mom-and-pop stores and, often, a town square or gathering spot.

"They are great places that have a sense of place to them," Miller said.

Lifelong Elmwood Place resident Betty Roy, 55, wouldn't trade her late-1800s home "for one of the prefab cracker boxes (in what) people call subdivisions."

"Elmwood Place is the people. It's not the buildings," Roy said.

### A MID-CENTURY HEYDAY

Even the most optimistic don't see the village returning to its zenith, but they do see potential for success.

"We had an area of six or seven blocks where we had just about any kind of store you could find - or two of them," Ellison said of Elmwood Place in the 1930s through the 1950s.

"They used to come from all over to shop at Elmwood Place. The saying was, 'If you can't find it in Elmwood Place,

you can't find it.' "

Not anymore.

Now, those who live in Elmwood Place are "people who can't afford another community," Miller said.

Nine miles and 15 minutes from Fountain Square, Elmwood Place is an easy commute to downtown or elsewhere in Hamilton County because of its access to I-75 and the Ronald Reagan Highway.

Already, Hamilton County has:

Helped Elmwood Place get a landscape architect and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to help create rows of elm trees at the four entrances to the village.

Introduced the village to a Cincinnati Recreation Commission playground expert to provide advice on how to improve its two playgrounds and unsafe equipment.

Brought officials from Greenhills, which already has demolished some of its old homes to build anew, to tell Elmwood Place about those experiences.

Brought Springdale officials in to talk about how they dealt with absentee landlords, a problem in Elmwood Place with its large number of renters.

At 206 acres, Elmwood Place is also small enough for residents to walk to the library, Valley Grocery & Meats, Belly Dancing by Habeeba or the Elmwood Place Pharmacy.

But with so many boarded-up buildings on Vine Street, the village's main thoroughfare, its goal is to add more businesses as destinations for residents.

"If they can turn us around, maybe they can do it with more communities," Ellison said.

County officials realize Elmwood Place likely never will be what it was during and just after World War II, when it had almost 5,000 people, making it the county's densest community. It has about 2,500 people now.

"Elmwood Place was a very privileged place," said Catalina Landivar-Simon of Hamilton County's Regional Planning Commission. "It was a thriving place."

It had good, affordable housing. It had access to plentiful jobs and dozens of businesses. It had trolleys that went downtown several times a day or took workers to nearby Ivorydale to work for Procter & Gamble.

It also had backroom gambling.

As a kid, when Ellison went to the candy store, he was puzzled why it always was crowded with men with newspapers stuffed under their arms.

"Of course, later on I realized that was the racing form and they were there to bet," Ellison said with a laugh.

## **'NO LAND TO DEVELOP'**

The village has positives.

It's close to everywhere and is bisected by Vine Street, which brings 10,000 cars per day - containing at least 10,000 potential customers - through the village.

It's accessible from I-75 and a bus line. It's cheap to live there.

It's negatives will be hard to overcome.

The housing stock, the mayor said, has led to high rates of absentee landlords and a transient population.

"We have no land at all to develop. Revitalization is what it has to be," Ellison said.

Roy predicts Elmwood Place's Vine Street will succeed with a niche market - like Reading's wedding industry and Milford's antiques shops.

"We all know that small, community businesses cannot compete with the big guys," she said.

People like Ricardo Gastelum see the positives government. In March, he opened Elmwood Place's only restaurant, Papi's Restaurante Mexicano, at 6304 Vine St.

He opened there to cater to the significant Hispanic population that lives to the north in Carthage.

"It's a busy street, Vine Street, and I see no other restaurants. Now, I'm just waiting for customers," Gastelum said.

"I've got a lot of good feelings about this place. I see a lot of people working on the street and no place to eat."

If homes can be redeveloped and people come in as hoped, the restaurant - and the rest of the village - will succeed, Ellison predicted.

"A trend is going back to the local community. The people who thought suburbia was salvation realized they don't like to drive everywhere, especially now with gas at \$3 a gallon," Ellison said.

"Here, you can walk down the street to the pharmacy or the meat store."

## **SIGNS OF CHANGE**

Elmwood Place's population has shrunk so much that its Roman Catholic Church, St. Aloysius, is home not to Elmwood Place Catholics but to the Our Lady of Lavang Vietnamese Catholic Community, most of whose members live in Fairfield.

It is a haven for low-cost rental properties and has 112 empty houses, about one in ten of its houses, the census shows - including the 517 Linden St. house where the mayor was born in 1935.

It has little space and some of its "pocket parks" aren't usable because playground equipment is so bad.

The school district, which also includes St. Bernard, faced such financial woes that it considered open enrollment, hoping to attract more students - and more state money that follows those students.

Those woes were eased May 2 when voters approved an emergency levy expected to reinstate almost \$900,000 to the schools' budget this year.

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