

A PASSION FOR PLACE
SPECIAL SERIES

NEIGHBORHOODS IN PERIL

COMING THIS WEEK

Monday: East and West Price Hill: Few neighborhoods feel the loss of families and owner-occupied homes more than these two residential neighborhoods, which must reinvent themselves in trying times.

Tuesday: Madisonville and Avondale: These East Side neighborhoods are taking different paths to find the resources they need to rebuild, stem the population loss and attract new residents.

ENQUIRER EXCLUSIVE: Around the city's heart, houses decay, residents flee and blight creeps outward

Cincinnati's fate is tied to its neighborhoods. A first-of-its-kind Enquirer analysis reveals that neighborhoods which have been the backbone of the city for more than a century are in peril.

They are losing people, homes and families. Property values are plummeting, and crime is rising. The analysis suggests the most significant change is under way in places such as North and South Fairmount, East and West Price Hill, Avondale and Madisonville.

Their problems matter to the entire region, because they can spread from ailing neighborhoods to healthy ones, and from the city to the suburbs.

As millions of dollars are invested in Downtown and Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati's neighborhoods are struggling to rebuild and remain viable for the next generation. Their challenge is compounded by dwindling city coffers and scarce resources, leaving many neighborhoods to fend for themselves.

Starting today, as part of a three-day series, The Enquirer explores the troubling trends under way in these communities and why they matter to all of us.

"If we lose our neighborhoods, we would all suffer," says Frank Russell, director of the University of Cincinnati's Community Design Center. "We would lose our sense of community. That impacts the entire region."

Today: North and South Fairmount struggle with decades of falling population and property values. **A12**



When Melvin Walker was growing up in a middle-class home on North Fairmount's Pulte Street, the neighborhood was solid and active. His childhood home is gone, as are the bowling alley, stores, school and firehouse. THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON



Portions of today's Enquirer were printed on recycled paper

\$2.00 retail
Home delivery pricing on A2



INDEX Nine sections, 171st year, No. 358

A&E.....D1	ForumF1	Lotteries.....A2	Puzzles.....D6
Business.....G1	History.....B5	Obituaries.....B8	Sports.....C1
Classified.....A18, I1	Local.....B1	Opinions.....F2	TV.....TV Week

Copyright 2012,
The Cincinnati Enquirer

WEATHER

High 78 °
Low 56 °
Shower or storm



Complete
forecast:
A2



**Cintas Institute for
BUSINESS ETHICS**
Frank Abagnale: *Catch Me If You Can*
April 10, 7pm Lecture~Xavier's Cintas Center
www.xavier.edu/williams/events

High-stakes decline

Once solid, now struggling – North and South Fairmount a cautionary tale for region

NORTH FAIRMOUNT

The stairs on Pulte Street used to lead somewhere.

Row after row of them line the end of the street, climbing the hillside into a tangle of weeds and brush. Disconnected power lines dangle overhead, and a fallen retaining wall spills onto the sidewalk.

At the top of each set of stairs is the foundation of a house that is no longer there.

Decades ago, these stairs carried working-class men and women in North Fairmount home to their families every night. They connected children to playgrounds and schools, and parents to factory jobs in the valley below.

Now, the stairs are crumbling monuments to a way of life that is disappearing as fast from this neighborhood as the homes that once lined Pulte Street.

"There used to be a house here ... and here ... and here," says Melvin Walker, pointing to vacant lots where his neighbors used to live. "They're all gone."

"A lot of people use it as a dumping ground now."

Pulte Street's troubles are among the most serious in Cincinnati, but such problems are not confined to a few city blocks or even to North Fairmount.

A first-ever Enquirer analysis of all 52 city neighborhoods shows that some of Cincinnati's most important communities are in peril. Homes are disappearing. Population is falling. Families with children are leaving. Vacancies are on the rise. Property values are dropping. Rentals are displacing owner-occupied homes.

The analysis suggests the most significant change is under way in places such as North and South Fairmount, East and West Price Hill, Avondale and Madisonville.

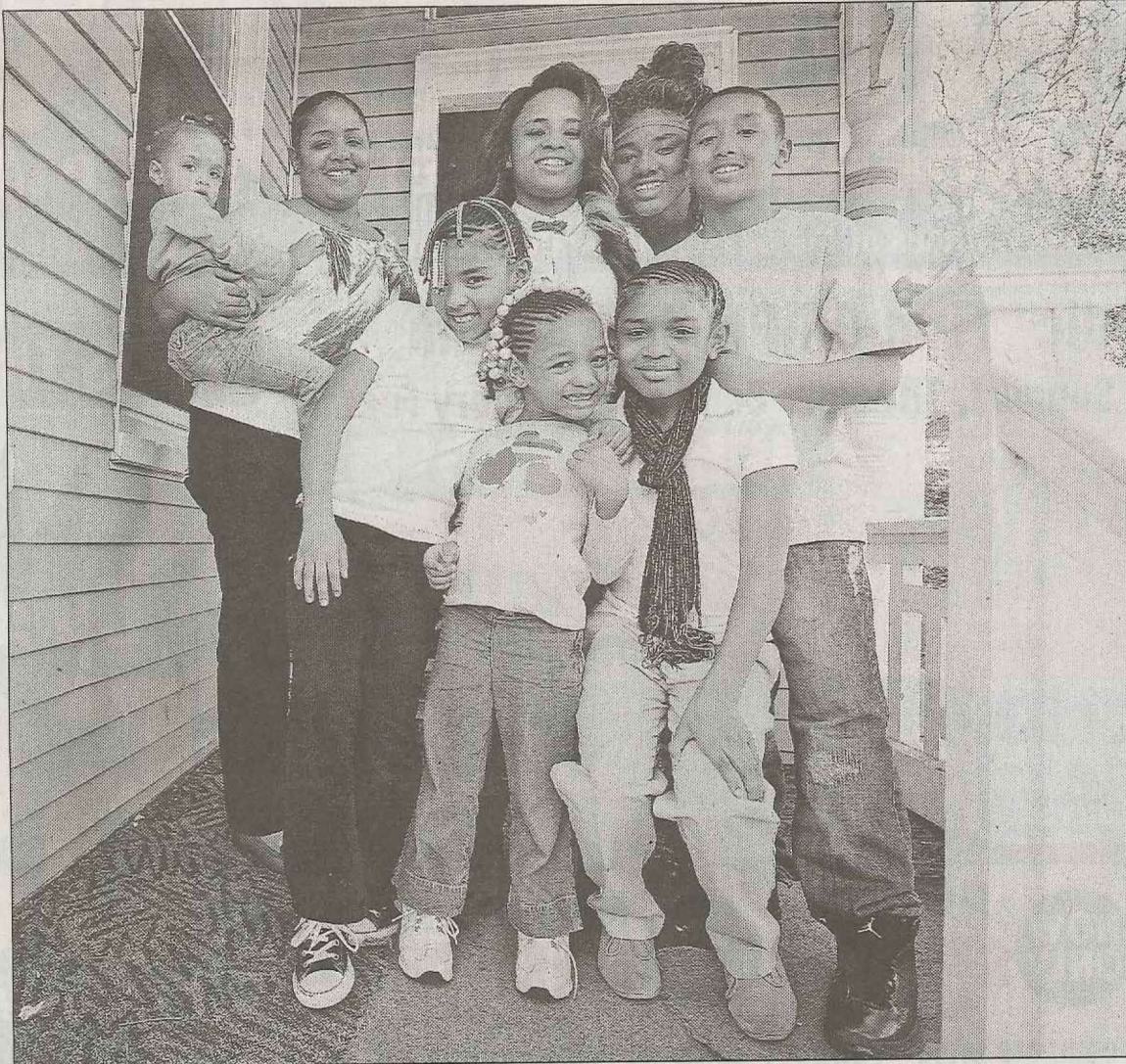
The news is not all bad. Some neighborhoods are faring better than others, and success stories can be found in all of them.

But the reality is this: Neighborhoods that have been the backbone of the city for more than a century are in peril. They must either find a way to restructure and rebuild, or follow a path that leaves them a shell of the communities they once were.

For some, such as North and South Fairmount, time is running short. Their decline began decades ago and grows worse by the year.

"In the long run, it's really unlikely there will be a turn-

By Dan Horn and Lisa Bernard-Kuhn dhorn@enquirer.com; lbernard@enquirer.com



DeAna Pressley rents a renovated home in North Fairmount for herself and her seven kids. Falling home values in the neighborhood have had plenty of ill effects, but Pressley said she could not afford such a home in many other parts of town. She loves the house and hopes to buy it within a year.

around in all of those neighborhoods," says Gary Wright, a demographer and the founder of Wright Futures in Cincinnati. "This is the cold, hard truth of it."

The stakes for these neighborhoods – and for the rest of the city – are high. The neighborhoods have been centers of business, transportation and family housing for generations. Many are located close to Cincinnati's core, and together they represent about 20 percent of the population.

They are home to some of the city's best-known schools, churches, businesses, landmarks and historic figures. If they fail, the cost to Cincinnati's image, economy and surrounding neighborhoods will be great.

That's because the city's fate is tied to its neighborhoods. Problems such as blight, vacant homes and crime can spread

from ailing neighborhoods to healthy ones and from the city to the suburbs.

Cincinnati is home to nearly 300,000 people, and thousands more come every day for jobs, a Reds game, dinner with the family, medical treatment, a zoo visit or countless other activities. The city is the heart of the region, and what happens to its neighborhoods matters to businesses and homeowners from Butler County to Northern Kentucky.

"If we lose our neighborhoods, we would all suffer," says Frank Russell, director of the University of Cincinnati's Community Design Center. "We would lose our sense of community. That impacts the entire region."

Spreading funds evenly? 'Those days long gone'

Yet the city's most troubled neighborhoods often lack the

resources they need to turn things around. Public dollars are hard to come by and banks are hesitant to loan money in places with falling property values and rising vacancy rates.

Some neighborhoods boast strong, grass-roots organizations to take on the challenges they face. Others struggle with internal feuds and missed opportunities. All are looking for help wherever they can and worry the rest of the city isn't doing enough.

"I don't think the city looks at the 52 neighborhoods equally," says Patti Hogan, a longtime resident of East Price Hill. "All you have to do is drive around Cincinnati and you can see the ones that have been neglected."

She and others are quick to point out that their neighborhoods have continued to decline even as tens of millions of dollars has poured into new hous-

ing and infrastructure in Over-the-Rhine, Downtown and the Uptown area.

The disparity is not accidental. City officials say their effort to revitalize the city's center, which is home to most of Cincinnati's businesses and jobs, benefits every neighborhood.

For that reason, they say, it gets the biggest share of the city's limited resources and cash. The city can help neighborhoods, they say, but it can't be a white knight riding to the rescue.

"We've tried to be strategic in what we do," says City Manager Milton Dohoney. "One of the things I heard in the past is that if you've got \$52 and \$2 neighborhoods, then I want my dollar. Well, that is not being strategic."

"Those days are long gone."

But without a greater commitment beyond the city's center and some key business districts, Hogan and others fear Cincinnati could lose some of its endangered neighborhoods, block by block, street by street.

They see the vacant lots and the stairs to nowhere on Pulte Street not as a product of hard times on a single city street, but as a warning the city should heed.

"Blight is like cancer," Hogan says. "It might start on one block, but before long it takes over."

Bad luck, poor decisions ... unending decline

If there is a cautionary tale for Cincinnati's struggling neighborhoods, it is the story of North and South Fairmount.

Never known as "destination" neighborhoods, the Fairmounts in the early 20th century carved out a working-class niche in the hills and valleys between Westwood and Camp Washington.

More than 15,000 called the neighborhoods home in the 1920s and many worked in the breweries, factories and warehouses that sprang up along the railroads on the Fairmounts' eastern edge. Soon, the area became a stable, lower- and middle-class community.

But the Fairmounts' heyday, such that it was, didn't last long.

Bad luck, demographic trends and some lousy decisions by city leaders combined to send the neighborhoods into a free fall that began in the 1950s and continues today.

Troubled streets like Pulte now crisscross the neighbor-

A PASSION FOR PLACE SPECIAL SERIES

Fairmounts

Continued from Page A12

hoods' steep hillsides, and the factories that once sustained families here are boarded up and deteriorating. Hundreds of narrow, split-level houses built years ago on blue-collar salaries have been abandoned or torn down.

"To look at conditions here now, you would never believe this was once a very beautiful community," says Pamela Adams, president of the North Fairmount Community Council.

"We're like a Third World country out here at times." More than 1,000 housing units disappeared from North and South Fairmount in the past decade, a decline of nearly 30 percent. Property values fell a combined 57 percent - the biggest drop in Cincinnati - and three out of every 10 buildings are now vacant.

The neighborhoods' combined population tumbled 41 percent, to about 4,600, and the number of families with children plunged 55 percent.

The closing of the English Woods public housing complex accounts for some of the declines in North Fairmount. But the numbers show a continuation of a trend in both neighborhoods that was decades in the making.

'One of the biggest mistakes ever made'

"Fairmount has had it as tough as any place in the city," says Charlie Luken, Cincinnati's former mayor. "I really can't predict when a neighborhood like Fairmount is going to see great progress."

The troubles started when the middle class began leaving North and South Fairmount in the 1950s and 1960s for nicer homes and bigger yards in the suburbs. Outdated factories started closing in the 1970s, and small businesses moved out with the population.

The houses left behind often became rentals that fell into disrepair. As property values tumbled, more homeowners left and private investors stayed away.

Another blow came 40 years ago when the city turned the two major thoroughfares in South Fairmount into one-way streets. The changes to Queen City and Westwood avenues devastated the business district and made the neighborhood a place to drive through, instead of a place to be.

Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls shakes her head when she talks about that long-ago decision. It is, she says, "one of the biggest mistakes ever made in that community."

The consequences of the Fairmounts' steady decline is obvious to Walker, who grew up on Pulte Street, every time he sees the debris-strewn vacant lot that once was his childhood home.

As he walks the streets here, he points to the remains of the neighborhood he used to know: the old firehouse, vacant storefronts, a closed school, a boarded-up bowling alley and a vacant lot that once was home to a church.

"My house was right along here," says Walker, a retired bakery worker who now lives in a different home on Pulte. "Everything was right here."

Trying to adapt, survive in changing times

Jo Ann Metz leans forward in the pew at San Antonio Church in South Fairmount, praying alongside a half-dozen women who gather in the tiny Catholic chapel every Tuesday afternoon.

"How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord mighty God. Blessed are they who dwell in your house."

Some pray for family and friends, others for guidance in their own lives.

Metz prays for South Fairmount.

"They can pray for other things, too," she says of her friends. "But I always ask them to pray for the neighborhood."

Born and raised in South Fairmount, the 82-year-old Metz knows a cause in need of prayer when she sees one.

That's because she knows the neighborhood this used to be, the one that was home to German and Italian immigrants who worked in the factories, raised large families, tended gardens and made wine from wild blackberries they picked in the hills.

"It was a very colorful neighborhood," Metz says.

Her hope and prayer is that her neighborhood can adapt

and survive, much like her church. San Antonio nearly closed in the 1990s, but parishioners fought for the tiny church and preserved it as a chapel that still hosts services and its legendary spaghetti dinners.

It's smaller now, she says, but it's still alive. It still has a purpose.

The challenge for Metz and other residents in both Fairmounts is finding a new purpose for their neighborhoods now that most of the factories and people are gone.

The work is especially difficult because North and South Fairmount don't have the kind of assets many other neighborhoods do: historic business districts, great housing stock, popular nightspots or thriving industries.

"The Fairmounts have so many factors going against them," says Kathy Schwab, executive director of Local Initiatives Support Coalition, a non-profit community support agency. "You do have to ask, is it realistic to invest resources?"

It's a testament to how difficult things are in the Fairmounts that their best hopes at the moment are a massive sewer project and a potential subsidized housing project.

While some neighborhoods would howl in opposition, residents here are willing to listen. That's because both projects offer something the Fairmounts have been unable to get from private investors or city officials: a plan to build and the money to do it.

The housing project is far from a sure thing. But a recent planning grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development creates the potential for a multimillion-dollar investment in North Fairmount and the old English Woods site.

The goal is to create new, mixed-income residential areas with a combination of private and public dollars.

"It's a great opportunity," says Kelly Kramer, spokeswoman for the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority. "It takes into account all the neighborhood's needs."

The sewer project in South Fairmount would be even more dramatic, wiping out at least 80 homes and businesses and putting a stream to drain rainwater through the center of the neighborhood. Pipes beneath the stream would carry sewage, while the stream handles storm water runoff.

Critics say the project would destroy as many as 20 historic homes and leave a "drainage ditch" in the middle of the neighborhood.

"It's laughable," says Paul Willham, a preservationist who believes renovating historic homes could lead to a renaissance in South Fairmount. "Other cities do not bulldoze their history the way we do."

But some residents think it's a good idea. They say the stream project, which also would create new parkland and a potential residential space along Queen City Avenue, is a good option for a neighborhood that has few others.

"It's a cheaper solution, and it adds to the neighborhood," Metz says. "I say to people, 'Please don't flub it. This is our 100-year chance.'"

Despite years of bad news, reason for hope

Disagreement is nothing new in the Fairmounts. Community groups have bickered for years over what their neighborhoods should become, sometimes to the detriment of their cause.

But there is a sense of urgency now. The bleak population and housing numbers of the past 10 years suggest that if they don't act soon, there may not be much left to save.

"People here are so vulnerable," says Lois Broerman, co-director of the North Fairmount Community Center, a nonprofit that provides social services and renovates homes. "There are so many things that get stacked against them."

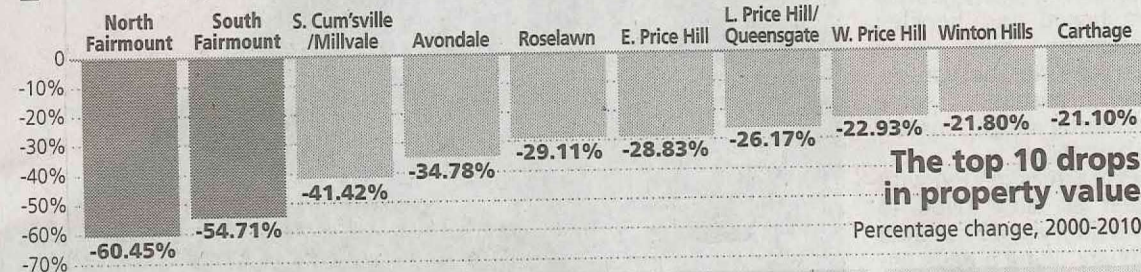
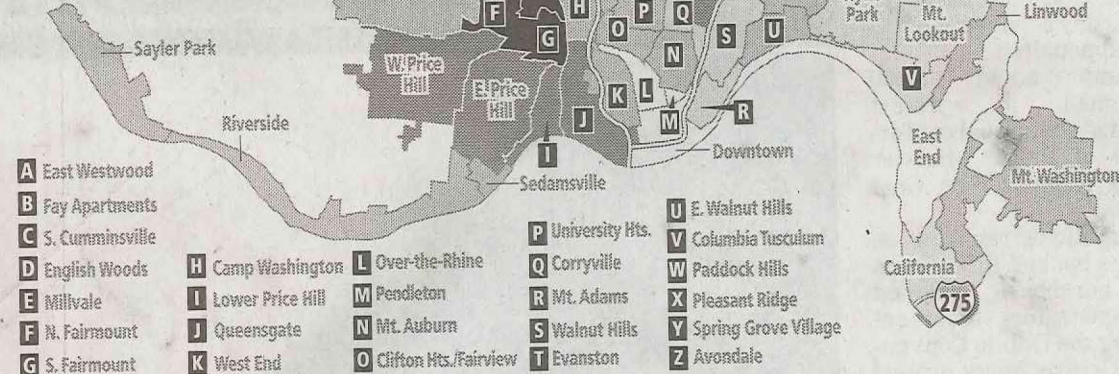
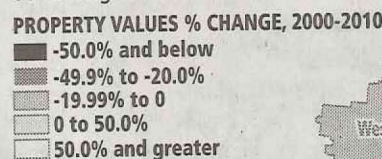
Still, she and others see reason for hope. They may not yet agree on the path they need to take, but they share a desire to change expectations for their neighborhoods and to be realistic about what is possible.

In South Fairmount, Dennis Smith sees a future with or without the sewer project. Smith, the owner of Paper Products and the founder of the neighborhood's business association, sees value in South Fairmount's location.

He says it's the gateway to Cincinnati's West Side, with 60,000 cars passing through every day. It may never attract

Property values plummet

North and South Fairmount each saw bigger drops in property values than any other neighborhoods in Cincinnati.



NORTH FAIRMOUNT		2000	2010	Change	% change
Total population	4,510	2,217	-2,293	-50.84%	
White population	741	318	-423	-57.09%	
Black population	3,657	1,806	-1,851	-50.62%	
Hispanic population	44	36	-8	-18.18%	
Total housing units	1,966	1,157	-809	-41.15%	
Owner-occupied	510	311	-199	-39.02%	
Renter-occupied	1,265	526	-739	-58.42%	
Vacancies	191	320	129	67.54%	
Percent owner	28.73%	37.16%	8.42%	NA	
Percent renter	71.27%	62.84%	-8.42%	NA	
Percent vacant	9.72%	27.66%	17.94%	NA	
Total families	1,065	481	-584	-54.84%	
Families with kids	827	304	-523	-63.24%	
Percent of families with kids	77.65%	63.20%	-14.45%	NA	
Percent pop 17 and under	39.11%	33.69%	-5.42%	NA	
Percent pop 75 and over	2.73%	2.98%	0.25%	NA	
Total residential property value*	\$32,916,080	\$13,017,173	-\$19,898,907	-\$60.45%	
Subsidized housing**	1,082	350	-732	-67.65%	
Percent subsidized housing	55.04%	30.25%	-24.79%	NA	
Serious crime, rate per 1,000 people	71	80.3	9.3	13.10%	
Overall crime, rate per 1,000 people	148.3	169.1	20.8	14.03%	

*Values are for 2005 and 2011

**For years 2002 and 2010; includes public housing units, vouchers and HUD-contracted housing

North Fairmount data includes English Woods

SOUTH FAIRMOUNT		2000	2010	Change	% change
Total population	3,251	2,368	-883	-27.16%	
White population	1,556	885	-671	-43.12%	
Black population	1,479	1,338	-141	-9.53%	
Hispanic population	75	85	10	13.33%	
Total housing units	1,541	1,344	-197	-12.78%	
Owner occupied	427	286	-141	-33.02%	
Renter occupied	847	650	-197	-23.26%	
Vacancies	267	408	141	52.81%	
Percent owner	33.52%	30.56%	-2.96%	NA	
Percent renter	66.48%	69.44%	2.96%	NA	
Percent vacant	17.33%	30.36%	13.03%	NA	
Total families	690	465	-225	-32.61%	
Families with kids	463	276	-187	-40.39%	
Percent of families with kids	67.10%	59.35%	-7.75%	NA	
Percent population 17 and under	33.04%	27.49%	-5.55%	NA	
Percent population 75 and over	4.49%	2.91%	-1.58%	NA	
Total residential property value*	\$66,523,420	\$30,126,140	-\$36,397,280	-\$54.71%	
Subsidized housing**	281	236	-45	-16.01%	
Percent subsidized housing	18.23%	17.56%	-0.67%	NA	
Serious crime, rate per 1,000 people	165.5	213.3	47.8	28.88%	
Overall crime, rate per 1,000 people	286.7	355.2	68.5	23.89%	

*Values are for 2005 and 2011

**For years 2002 and 2010; includes public housing units, vouchers and HUD-contracted housing

Sources: US Census Bureau, Hamilton County Auditor, Cincinnati Police Department, Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority and Enquirer analysis
The Enquirer/Mike Nyerges

CHAT WITH KATHY SCHWAB

What will it take to transform Cincinnati's struggling neighborhoods? Join our online chat from noon to 1 p.m. Tuesday. Questions will be answered by Kathy Schwab, executive director of Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC), a nonprofit that works to help revitalization efforts in a number of city neighborhoods.

FIND YOUR LOCAL STATS

To find demographic, housing and crime data about every Cincinnati neighborhood, go to Cincinnati.com

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

Want to learn more about what's happening to improve North and South Fairmount or other Cincinnati neighborhoods? Check out these upcoming events.

» City-wide Form Based Code Charrette

April 28 through May 2
Fourth Floor, Two Centennial Plaza
805 Central Ave., Downtown

A five-day series of charrettes (interactive public meetings with lots of talking and colored markers) will put residents and professionals at the same table, working together to identify what Cincinnati's Form Based Code should contain. For more details about Form Based Code, visit <http://planbuildlivecincinnati.com/>

» North Fairmount Community Council

Next meeting: April 10, 6:30 p.m.
Location: St. Leo Church, 1845 Beekman St.

» North Fairmount Community Center

Call 513-921-5842 or email nfcc@fuse.net

» South Fairmount Community Council

Next meeting: April 10, 7:30 p.m.
Location: Orion Academy, 1798 Queen City Ave.

boutique shops as Hyde Park does, but he thinks more stores or even a Walmart could thrive here.

"This place has got great location, great proximity," he says. "Some day, somebody is

going to realize it."

In North Fairmount, Broerman's group was forced to adjust its expectations a few years ago when the housing crash put a damper on its modest efforts to buy, renovate and

re-sell homes. Unable to sell many of them, the group now rents more than 20 homes.

It's not ideal, Broerman says, but it keeps houses from going vacant and falling apart.

"We're going to keep fighting," she says. "We always have hope."

Much of that hope is invested in people like DeAna Pressley, who rents one of those renovated homes and lives there with her seven children, ages 2 to 16. She runs a tight ship: The house is immaculate, and her older kids help her keep watch over the young ones.

When Pressley gets home from her job with a marketing firm on a typical weekday, she barks instructions while the kids run around, still in their school uniforms.

"Wash your hands!" she tells one of her daughters.

"Take out the garbage!" she tells her son.

She loves the house and knows she's unlikely to find many others in her price range and big enough for her family. She hopes to buy this one in a year or so, something she wouldn't even be able to consider in a neighborhood with pricier real estate.

Pressley worries about vacant houses, crime and falling population like everyone else here, and she's seen the empty lots where homes once stood and families like hers once lived.

But she sees something else, too. Despite its many troubles, Pressley still sees opportunity in North Fairmount. She sees a future.

"I kind of like the neighborhood," she says. "I plan on being here for awhile."