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Saving Business Diversity in a Fast Developing OTR

While Cincinnati residents are happy with the aggressive development in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, there are many who believe that the development and growth of new businesses there is draining the area’s diversity and making it hard for long-time residents to remain. It is true that the new businesses have brought a lot of money to our local economy, but if you take a look around, few of these businesses are accessible to the low and middle income residents. With the fast pace of this development, it is important for residents and activists to stand up *now* in order to save the business diversity in OTR.

Recent events have indeed made this issue of maintaining business diversity in OTR an urgent matter. The high presence of urban development in Cincinnati, especially in OTR, is affecting the low-to-middle class residents in the neighborhood, making it difficult for them to stay living, eating, and working in the area. In a recent *CityBeat* article by German Lopez, he notes “as many of the neighborhood’s vacant buildings are rehabilitated and turned into apartments, condos and restaurants that largely appeal to wealthier young professionals, the development is effectively pricing out the area’s former residents in terms of jobs and housing.” In addition to these folks being priced out, their businesses are disappearing too. In the heart of OTR, few affordable eating and shopping establishments remain. While great programs such as ArtWorks Big Pitch celebrate small business owners and entrepreneurs and offer a $15,000 grand prize for the best and most creative entrepreneur, its participants were largely white, well-off, and in-the-know. Had this program been better marketed to a more diverse group, perhaps the grand prize could have gone towards a small business owner that *really* needed the money to get something started in OTR. Other opportunities such as small business grants and business courses are available, but the people who really need the help aren’t being made aware of these opportunities.

Along with the OTR low-to-middle class not being able to shop, eat, or live in this newly developed neighborhood, other issues are at hand as an effect of this gentrification. Community organizations are being pushed out, like the Drop Inn Center, and the hard crime isn’t being dealt with in an effective way since it is moving further out into the suburbs. The long-term residents no longer have places to go and get free services if these services move further out of the urban core where they have been living. More action needs to be taken to keep and build affordable housing, along with keeping and creating new small, affordable shops and eateries.

Having pointed out the need for new, affordable development, the particular power dynamics at work here come to light. There is no lack of development happening in OTR right now, however, the majority of this development is targeted at the wealthy, young professionals, not the people already living in the neighborhood. It seems that developers with deep pockets, such as 3CDC, have the upper hand in opportunities around OTR (and throughout the rest of the city, too). Buildings are being snatched up faster than ever. 3CDC does a great job rehabilitating these old, historic buildings, yet when they rent out their storefronts, they are priced for a specific type of tenant: white, well-off, and catering to the wealthy. There is not a good opportunity for low-to-middle income entrepreneurs to get into these prime storefront locations because of the high rents. These hardworking people have much less power than the big developers with deep pockets.

The revitalization of OTR has been and will continue to be great for Cincinnati, but we need to keep in mind the people who have inhabited these neighborhoods for longer than some of us have been alive. Mindful and inclusive development needs to be the focus moving forward, creating affordable housing along with taking pride in local, affordable, and diverse restaurants, shops, and markets. Perhaps the city or a community organization could put together a free business program for local entrepreneurs to attend, where they would receive information and learn about different opportunities available to them such as small business grants and how to apply for them, or incentive programs through the city for small businesses. Creating a level playing field for the low-to-middle class along with the restaurants and shops catering to the wealthier crowd is key in keeping and building this diversity. These folks need a voice and need to be able to take a stand and stay in their neighborhoods.

Works Cited

Lopez, German. “Redeveloping Issues.” *CityBeat.* N.p. 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 5 Sept. 2014.