



December 29, 2012

Will this be the year for Avondale?

Downtrodden neighborhood senses awakening with federal grant

By Mark Curnutte

Avondale's time is now.

No more waiting and wishing to reverse the decades-long slide into poverty and blight.

Announcement this month of Avondale's receipt of a \$29.5 million federal housing grant, one of four nationwide, stamped an exclamation point on a year of accelerated positive change, documented since March in The Enquirer series Saving Avondale.

"We got our chance now," said Ozie Davis, the Avondale native and resident who leads the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corp., a neighborhood-based nonprofit whose primary role is to promote cooperation and prevent infighting.

- Crime is down. The only homicide in Avondale this year resulted from a police-involved shooting. A Westwood man led officers to Avondale after an undercover drug buy across town. In 2011 Avondale had tied Over-the-Rhine with 11 homicides for the most of any city neighborhood.
- The Avondale Youth Council continues to grow in membership and influence. In 2013 it will celebrate the college graduations of some of its initial 2006 members.
- Coordinated efforts to provide residents with an expanding supply of fresh fruit and vegetables at Gabriel's Place and through programs in public schools are precursors to the return of a grocery store.
- Residents coming home to Avondale and other urban Cincinnati neighborhoods from prison are receiving job-readiness training at the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati and other agencies – and are actually finding work.

Steep challenges remain. In Avondale, two of every five people live below federal poverty levels. While homicides are down, shootings in the neighborhood through Dec. 11 were on pace with 2011 – 34, second only to Over-the-Rhine's 43. And 85 percent of shootings in Avondale involve gang or affiliated criminal group members.

"We're not a rags-to-riches story," Davis said. "It's about trying to get people from rags to britches. Let's just get Levi's on people. Let's move them to the middle by helping get them some work."

Spillover investment pegged at \$45 million

The large grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will go primarily to renovate 318 units of affordable housing on Reading Road and wrap social supports around the people living there.

Federal officials expect the grant to spur an additional \$45 million in private and local government

investment in Avondale.

Among the five affordable housing complexes slated for overhaul by the Community Builders, two – the Poinciana at 3522 Reading Road and Somerset Manor, 802-814 Blair Ave. – rank among the city's most notorious addresses. Firefighters and police don't even like going in.

"Our message to the residents in those five buildings is, 'You are the change,' " Davis said.

Those five properties aren't the only housing changes coming to Avondale.

The Community Builders has its sights set on some vacant land at Burnet and Rockdale avenues for new housing. Planners envision market-rate housing that attracts employees of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and University of Cincinnati Medical Center, major employers within walking distance.

De'Angelo Boynton, 43, owns Stag's Barbershop and Beauty Salon on Burnet, directly across from the lots where new housing would rise.

"New business," said Boynton, an Avondale resident, father of five and founder 10 years ago of the Avondale Angels youth sports program. On April 1, he will open Stag's Day Spa next door to the barbershop.

"People here are talking about how Avondale is like a puzzle where the pieces are coming back together," he said. "A while back, people would have written off Avondale because of the crime and the (abandoned) buildings."

Avondale Town Center: New tenants, location?

Already, an ambitious demolition program has begun in cooperation with the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority to raze 15-20 of the abandoned or vacant buildings.

The first three were torn down on Reading Road, just north of Carmel Presbyterian Church. Coupled with about two vacant acres behind the street-facing lots, Community Builders plans to create new housing there within a short walk of the Avondale Town Center.

Built in 1983, the town center sits back from Avondale's major intersection, Reading and Rockdale. Some HUD money is expected to go toward an effort being led by the nonprofit Center for Closing the Health Gap and Cincinnati Development Fund to entice grocers to return to the city's under-served urban neighborhoods. Avondale will get the first of these grocery stores. The neighborhood's last grocer moved out of the town center in 2008.

"There is talk of totally rebuilding the town center and moving it up to the street," said Patricia Milton, president of the Avondale Community Council.

Talk and various plans will come together with the Choice Neighborhoods grant application to form a land-use plan early in 2013, Milton said, that will map a series of priorities and next steps.

The first quarter of 2013 will be a busy one in Avondale.

The Cincinnati Outreach (COR) Music Project will begin instrumental lessons for students at Rockdale Academy and South Avondale elementary schools, the first step in forming the Avondale Youth Symphony for students in third, fourth and fifth grades. COR is a nonprofit formed by a student at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Deron Hall, and will connect fellow CCM students with children in Avondale. The lessons and instruments are free. Hall said he hopes to reach up to 50 students.

COR joins a list of social programs that have taken root in Avondale, among them a legal-medical partnership involving Children's Hospital and the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati, as well as the Gabriel's Place food-based ministry.

The Children's-Legal Aid team has promised to stay engaged in Avondale, whose residents have benefited from pressure brought against landlords to improve living conditions in affordable housing complexes.

HUD Choice Neighborhoods money will go to expand the Gabriel Place produce market and urban gardening program. In addition, money will be available to upgrade its new kitchen to commercial-grade and renovate its reception hall to make the site more appealing for wedding receptions and other events.

Physically, Gabriel's Place will get a new roof on its Civil War-era church building, and the bell tower will be removed for safety.

The Know Your Neighbor program will expand from its initial six streets and provide more structured social events for residents.

Preparing youths, preventing desperation

The efforts add up to a brighter tomorrow in Avondale.

Yolanda English, 33, a single mother of seven who grew up in the neighborhood, wanted for years to move out. She still wants to move – elsewhere in Avondale.

"I can say that five years ago ... it was going downhill," said English, who works as a licensed nurse's aide.

She is especially grateful for the opportunities her children receive in the Avondale Youth Council – many more than she experienced – and for a change in the community's collective attitude that now values the contributions of her children and other young people.

Youth is a focus of the new Avondale. Leaders and residents alike envision a community of residential choice that home-grown young adults want to come back to after college.

Davis, a father and husband who lives on Eden Avenue, experienced a home burglary this month. He wasn't happy, but wasn't distraught, either.

He spoke to fifth-grade students at South Avondale School about the crime.

"These aren't bad people, they're desperate people," said Davis, moved to tears in the classroom and again the next day in retelling the story.

He told students: "Do the things necessary now so you're not desperate when you're 15."

Looking ahead, not behind, Davis said, "We're going to be a safer neighborhood. We're going to be a healthier neighborhood.

"We got to love each other first. Then we can have success."

Additional Facts

Safety first

Maintaining Avondale's fledgling sense of safety is the priority. Before the dramatic drop in homicides, Avondale averaged 9.4 homicides in the previous five years – up to a high of 13 in 2007.

Police and residents worked together in two applications in 2012 of the Moral Voice program. Using a relatively simple approach, Moral Voice deploys people of influence in the lives of known criminals to speak to them and encourage them to put their guns down.

“You have to stay on top of it,” said David Kennedy, John Jay College criminologist and co-chair of the National Network for Safe Communities who led the design of Moral Voice and other anti-violence programs.

“If people are shooting each other in a neighborhood, no one will want to invest there, shop, visit or live there by choice.”
