

Once-busy Hilltop building symbolizes area's decline

Vacant former pharmacy raises the question: What can be done to heal the neighborhood?

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By [Mark Ferencik](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Courtesy of Ed Salser

Ed Salser ran Edwards Drugs on W. Broad Street in the Hilltop from 1967 to 1997. He then rented the building to various tenants; after a fatal shooting there last year, it is vacant and a target of vandals.



Jeff Hinckley | Dispatch

Since Edwards Drugs closed in 1997, the building has housed a restaurant, a grocery, and an after-house night club.



Ed Salser, a retiree living on the Northwest Side, has fond memories of his Hilltop store and its neighborhood.



Ed Salser owns a building that was once a neighborhood landmark: a pharmacy that for three decades supplied customers with not only medicine but also products as varied as candy, goldfish and Hoover sweepers.

Last year, his building, which had been turned into an after-hours nightclub, was the scene of a fatal shooting.

Today, the building is empty. It has been tagged with graffiti and stripped of its copper pipes.

Salser, 80, learned that last part when he returned home from a stay in a hospital this month.

Salser never lived in the Hilltop, but he made his living there as the proprietor of Edwards Drugs for 30 years. He served as president of the old Hilltop Civic Council for four years.

Now, he's stuck with a rotting building in a struggling area on W. Broad Street in the Hilltop, where men drink in its parking lot.

"My heart aches for the people who are still there who want to make a decent life," Salser said. "What's going to happen to the Hilltop?"

Last summer, before Mayor Michael B. Coleman's Neighborhood Pride swept through that area east of Hague Avenue, code-enforcement officers warned 250 property owners about violations. That was more than half of the 448 residential properties in the area.

That hurts the effort to revitalize a ragged Broad Street commercial corridor in an area where homes are selling for as little as \$8,500.

City code inspectors have counted nearly 900 vacant homes in the Hilltop east of Hague Avenue and north of Sullivant, said code-enforcement administrator Dana Rose. That's almost 15 percent of the city's total of 6,117 vacant properties.

The area is one of five neighborhoods where the city is installing surveillance cameras. The cameras are to go up by August along Sullivant Avenue: near S. Warren Avenue, near S. Wayne Avenue, at S. Highland Avenue and at Clarendon Avenue.

No cameras are planned for W. Broad Street.

Some community leaders say the city needs to pump more money into the area, as it has in the King-Lincoln District, Weinland Park, the neighborhood near Nationwide Children's Hospital and along Morse Road.

"I don't like how W. Broad Street is not given the attention that is needed," said Dru Bagley, who has lived on Doren Avenue for 18 years.

W. Broad was resurfaced last year, part of a \$1.1 million project. But some still object to the new bike lanes on the street and parking bans during evening rush hour that they say harm potential business development.

"There are enough households to support more retail, but Broad Street is so blighted. It's a challenge," said Columbus retail consultant Chris Boring, who has done a market study for the area.

"It's going to take some pioneers."

A group of doctors showed interest last year in buying from the city 22.5 acres off Wheatland Avenue north of W. Broad to build medical offices. It didn't happen.

The city, which spent \$1.7 million to buy and clean up the site, is talking to two groups, including the nonprofit group Homes on the Hill, about building housing there. The agency already is renovating or building 30 homes in the Hilltop, 28 of them east of Hague.

"This is what I consider a minimal effort as to what the community needs," said Steve Torsell of Homes on the Hill.

Nancy Rhynard owns commercial property - a former bar - at W. Broad and S. Oakley Avenue for which she's trying to find a tenant. She said Columbus police are doing an "amazing job" trying to address crime in the area.

"The Hilltop has an old guard of residents, the backbone of the area, who raised their children there," Rhynard said. "They're captive in their neighborhood."

Byrd Prillerman, who lives on S. Oakley near Rhynard's property, said his kids want him to move. But he won't.

"I've lived in my house since 1963. I'm not going to leave," said Prillerman, 88, who used to build airplanes for Curtiss-Wright at Port Columbus.

Salser, now retired and living on the Northwest Side, has fond memories of his drugstore and its neighborhood. He has five photos in a frame on the wall of his office that show the store when it thrived from 1967 to 1997.

Since then, he has rented to people who have operated a restaurant, a grocery and the club, Lollipop West, where a 21-year-old man was killed last year.

Salser pays someone to sweep up the broken glass around his building. He paid \$500 to cover the graffiti.

He has tried for two years to sell the building.

He wonders if he ever will.