

Please Don't Go

Bar the door: The young folk are leaving

BY DOUG TRAPP

Could this have been the year Cincinnati and the rest of the Tristate woke up and realized we're losing our young people and aren't doing much to keep them here?

Was this the year we got back to the business of building a great city — not by having the lowest taxes or widest roads or biggest department stores or newest stadiums but by returning life to our streets and neighborhoods?

Was 2002 the year we embraced the arts and historic redevelopment as a way to regain our long-lost title as the Paris of the Midwest?

Ask again in a year. So far the early signs aren't bad, despite the failure of light rail, despite state leaders' half-hearted efforts with public education and despite gutting of the city's planning department.

Even if the efforts of three new civic groups — Urbanists I and II and Cincinnati Tomorrow — don't radically change the city, they might be the seeds for some new thinking, which Cincinnati has needed for a long time. Their efforts in Over-the-Rhine will probably be helped by Cincinnati's new budget — the first in recent times to offer more than lip service toward the idea of investing in neighborhoods.

Last one out, turn off the fountain

Cleveland once had a fire in its river. Other cities, such as Miami, have faced bankruptcy. For Cincinnati, the 2000 U.S. Census might have been the unmistakable sign the city isn't going in the right direction.

During an early 2001 city council meeting, Mayor Charlie Luken announced Cincinnati had lost another 9 percent of its population — about 32,800 people.

You could almost feel the air pressure in the room drop and see council members slouch. It was the fourth decade in a row the city suffered a net population loss. Today Cincinnati has about two-thirds of the 500,000 residents it had in 1960.

In response, the 2003-2004 city budget sets aside \$15 million to attract another \$85 million from local banks for low-interest loans for market-rate housing and rehabs. The city estimates the fund could attract a total of \$250 million in new neighborhood investment.

The budget also merges the city's Planning Department with the Community Development Department but keeps the historic preservation section intact. The key casualty is former Planning Director Liz Blume, a clear talent forced out by the city manager's and mayor's budget.

The city is also refocusing its economic development efforts. A task force appointed by Luken recently issued its first recommendations for how the city can boost its economy.

The first suggestion was stunning in its simplicity: Establish a mission for the city's economic development department. Then the city needs to develop a system for judging and awarding development incentives.

It begs the question: Why wasn't this done years ago?

Those who scoff at the city's woes should know one thing: The population decline is more regional than previously thought, according to an analysis by the Hamilton

THE YEAR



IN REVIEW

Nicholas Spencer, the moving force behind Cincinnati Tomorrow, has a radical idea for keeping young people in Cincinnati: Give them something to do.

County Regional Planning Commission. The study covered 11 years of Internal Revenue Service data on county-to-county migration.

Since 1994 the Tristate's 13 counties haven't been attracting as many new people to the region as they used to. Of the 13, only Warren County in Ohio and Boone County in Kentucky had a net population gain without counting locals moving from one Tristate county to another.

From 1990 to 1993 the 13-county region had a net gain of 4,000 to 5,000 people. In 1994, these net gains decreased to almost an even trade, peaked again in 1997 at about 3,500, then hit a new low in 2001. That year the region had a net loss of population of a few hundred people.

"People seem to be spreading out," says Senior Planner Christine Nolan, who researched the report.

Most of the population loss is centered in the Tristate's old, urban centers such as Hamilton, the inner suburbs and Cincinnati, according to Nolan.

So who's leaving? Young people accounted for a lot of the decline in Cincinnati and Hamilton County in the 1990s. The city suffered a net loss in every age category under 39, while the rest of the county suffered a similar losses of people ages 22 to 34.

For example, the city lost 28,582 people between the ages of 18 and 39. The county lost 16,672 people in the same age group, not counting the city.

Nolan hasn't conducted similar research into the age of people moving into or leaving the other 12 Tristate counties, but plans to.

The Florida factor

Which brings up Richard Florida, the Carnegie Mellon University economic development professor and author of

The Creative Class. He has a new theory about why some cities — such as San Francisco, Austin, Chicago and New York — boomed in the 1990s, and why others — such as Cincinnati, St. Louis and Pittsburgh — did not.

Economic development experts have been tracking the number of high tech and high-paying jobs, but Florida argues using tax incentives to lure companies isn't the way to succeed anymore.

Florida visited in June as part of a nationwide lecture tour. He was invited by the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by Procter & Gamble (See "Cool Is Money," issue of June 20-26).

Florida says a new class of workers — the Creative Class — is driving today's economy. They are about 38 million people who use their brains to create wealth, he says. They work in courtrooms, scientific labs, studios, universities and other places where creative thought counts.

These people are mobile and choose to live in cities that have lots of street life, good music and arts scenes and other cultural amenities.

In short, it's about providing a quality urban environment. Cincinnati has the raw materials for it — the buildings, the streets and parks. We just haven't maintained most of them very well.

Whether or not Florida's statistics and theories are exactly right, he seemed to hit a nerve when he talked about the need for young people taking action to rebuild their cities.

"The only way to change this is if we do it," Florida said.

The Urbanists — a group of 40- and 50-something city lovers in Cincinnati — had already been quietly examining great cities of the past 2,000 years to find out what made them great.

After Florida's visit, a younger, more action-oriented group called Urbanists II began talking about doing a model redevelopment project in Over-the-Rhine. In early December the two groups held a joint meeting attended by 75 people, and now people in the group such as Jeffrey



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