Neighborhoods love their corner markets.

These small, usually independent groceries provide the three Cs – community, convenience and choice – that can help turn a mere residential area into a place people call home.

None of these markets qualifies as a superstore in size. They are not part of a massive chain. But they create a superstore's worth of goodwill in a neighborhood.

Barbara Wolf and Ali Weaver already know it. They still mourn the recent closing, following a rent increase, of the DeSales Market at East Walnut Hills' revitalized DeSales Corner.

"It had only been open a year," said Weaver, a percussionist, as he sat at a table on the plaza outside the closed store's coffeehouse neighbor, Cafe DeSales. "And yet the owner would get whatever you wanted. When I needed a mop and a bucket, he got them in two days. I didn't have to drive to get here."

He just had to walk across the street.

"The market was a delight," said Wolf, a documentary filmmaker and East Walnut Hills resident. "It gave you a chance to walk to the store and chat with your neighbors."

Weaver remembers "little stores like that all over East Walnut Hills when I moved here 59 years ago. Now, they're all gone."

He shook his head. He sipped his tea and puffed on his pipe.

Gazing up and down the streets intersecting DeSales Corner, he noted, "We've got an influx of younger people moving in."

The signs of those newcomers' gentrification abound: a coffeehouse, outdoor seating, well-tended flowers, redone sidewalks, multifamily complexes with names ending in "Flats" and signs bearing slogans like "a great place to live."

"These young people want to shop close to home," Weaver added.

"We need a corner grocery and a bank and a pharmacy within walking distance. You don't have a community until you have these things in place, (until) you have some commitment to an area.

"People are moving in. But you don't have a community. You just have a bunch of people asking, 'Where do you shop?' "

It's the same question in Over-the-Rhine and Downtown, where residents yearn for markets to satisfy the tastes of both urban pioneers and long-timers.

Or in Clifton, where Gaslight District neighbors pool their resources in hopes of reopening the long-shuttered Keller's IGA.

"These markets reinforce relationships among people. They make a community more stable and balanced," said Frank Russell, director of the University of Cincinnati's Niehoff Urban Studio.

Russell has studied Cincinnati's neighborhoods. He knows their grocery needs and the role their corner markets play in the community.

He knows how important these stores are to a community – when one of them closes, customers take the loss to heart.

"In some neighborhoods, where many people don't have cars, people need to be close to a food outlet. They don't have the time or money to take a bus or a taxi to buy groceries," Russell said.

"In other neighborhoods, the market provides specialty foods, like organic vegetables, or a social function by offering a place for people to meet."

"In all of these neighborhoods, people become attached to where they shop, the service the store provides and the people who work there."

In Clifton, that used to be called Keller's.
The grocery store was so tightly woven into the fabric of the community, its 70th birthday in 2009 was commemorated by the installation of a brass plaque in the sidewalk by the market's entrance.

Two years later, Keller's closed. That loss left the neighborhood shocked, saddened, angry and undaunted.

Five years and several false starts later, Gaslight District residents are selling shares in an effort they call Clifton Cooperative Market (http://cliftonmarket.com) to reopen the store as a co-op venture.

"We've sold shares to people in the neighborhood and as far away as London," said Shaun McCance, the Market's treasurer. "People want this store back in business."

The grass-roots group needs to raise $1.65 million by October to buy the building.

After that, another $2.5 million is needed to cover the costs of construction, purchasing equipment and stocking the shelves.

McCance sat in the store, accompanied by some forlorn shelving units and a few grocery carts, on a hot summer day. Passersby ducked in. He handed out fliers and even sold a $200 share in the co-op.

One woman stumbled in and wanted to buy some groceries. She was surprised that the store isn't open yet.

"Happens all the time," said Adam Hyland, the Market's board chairman.

"And I am not surprised," he continued. "Clifton is a very walkable community. People are used to having everything they need within walking distance.

"It's part of the Clifton culture. That's the reason people stay in Clifton and move here.

"Having the grocery store open again would act as a business generator for the entire business district."

A reopened store would also serve, Hyland noted, "as a great focal point." Sounding more like an Anthropology 101 lecturer as opposed to his line of work, a political consultant, he added:

"Markets offer a social space for people in the community to see each other and interact. Instead of driving off to other parts of the city to shop, you come together in the same place, a marketplace. Everybody has to eat. Everyone has to get their food somewhere. Going to a neighborhood meeting place like this has been happening for thousands of years."

Chris Hatting represents the third generation of his family to work in the grocery business. He knows full well how his store, Hatting's Supermarket, is received in Green Township.

"I constantly hear from my customers how much they appreciate that we are here, a small independent store where they don't have to drive a long way to get to and, once they're inside the store, they don't have to walk a long way to buy a gallon of milk."
That's why the bags for his store bear this slogan: "Downtown Mack's Largest Supermarket." The slogan doubles as an inside joke: Mack's downtown is practically nonexistent. And there's only one supermarket: Hatting's.

"People tell me how much this store reminds them of the small stores they used to shop in when they were kids," Hatting said.

That could be because customers see familiar faces. Most of the staff has worked in the store for decades.

Hatting enjoys being a throwback to the old-time shopkeeper. He works 80-hour weeks. During the day, he can be seen stocking shelves, running the cash register, repairing a cooler, bagging groceries, taking a special-order case of wine to a customer's car or tending to a cleanup in aisle three.

Working those hours and performing those tasks enables him to know who's in his store. "I probably know 75 percent of my customers by name," he said. "I make it my business to do so."

He also makes it his business to offer little touches that distinguish a corner market.

When a regular customer recently went through the store's No. 1 check-out lane, she opened her purse and found no wallet.

Hatting was her bagger.

"That's all right," he told her. "I trust you."

She took her groceries and left. Minutes later, she returned to pay her debt.

The exchange left the cashier in shock.

"I knew she'd be back," Hatting told the cashier. "She's a good customer."

Weaver heard that story about Hatting and the wallet-less customer as he lamented the closing of DeSales Market.

"Now, that's what a little corner market is all about," Weaver said. "You can't walk out of the big stores without paying."

He sat back in his chair and looked over his shoulder at the empty space that once held DeSales.

"If I could get that market reopened, I'd be so relieved," he said.

"I could tell everyone that my community is thriving and alive."

That's how much a corner market means. ■

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