A super market
The New Republic; Washington; Dec 7, 1998; Peter Beinart;

Volume: 219
Issue: 23
Start Page: 46
ISSN: 00286583
Subject Terms: Community policing
                 Urban renewal
                 Grocery stores
Geographic Names: New Haven Connecticut
Companies: Shaws Supermarkets Inc
Abstract:
The inner-city revitalization of New Haven CT is discussed, focusing on the opening of Shaw's Supermarket. New Haven's implementation of community policing precipitated business' return to the inner-city.

Full Text:
Copyright New Republic Dec 7, 1998

IT'S TEN-THIRTY ON SUNDAY MORNING, and Greg Williams, the manager on duty at Shaw's Supermarket on Whalley Avenue, descends from his second-floor office to inspect the store. He looks at the brimming salad bar and the rotisserie chickens turning behind the deli counter. He touches a loaf of French bread and notes approvingly that it's warm. Supermarket customers, he explains, come in waves. The key is to have the right merchandise in the right amount in the right part of the store when those waves come. The cooked chicken, warm bread, and salad bar are aimed at people coming home from church. And, by 11:15 a.m., just as Williams predicted, women with high heels, fancy hats, and well-dressed, hungry children descend upon the store.

THE SUPERMARKET THAT WILLIAMS helps run sits on the corner of Whalley and Orchard Street in New Haven. It is eight blocks from Yale's nearest dormitories. And it is two blocks from Kensington Street, which until recently housed the Kensington Street International, one of New Haven's most notorious drug gangs. The area is called Greater Dwight. In the 1950s, it was largely Jewish, and Whalley Avenue, its main thoroughfare, was New Haven's automobile row-- boasting Ford, Lincoln, Pontiac, Dodge, Chrysler, and Plymouth dealerships.

FROM THERE, THE STORY BECOMES depressingly familiar. New Haven's big foundries--where Winchester made guns and Geometric made machine tools-- gradually closed down. Like middle-class homeowners of all ethnicities, the Jews of Dwight headed for the suburbs, leaving behind a poorer and somewhat embattled orthodox remnant. The car dealers relocated to the suburb of East Haven. And, in 1981, Dwight's last supermarket shut its doors--leaving the now mainly African American and Latino residents to either pay exorbitant prices at small local groceries or trek to supermarkets at the edge of town. A study showed that the impoverished community paid ten to 20 percent more per capita for food than its suburban counterparts.

THEN, THIS SUMMER, SHAW'S opened a 54,000-square-foot store in the heart of the neighborhood. The New York Times cited the opening as evidence that supermarkets were returning to the inner city. And, as with so many recent trends, observers who were still struggling to understand why things in Dwight had gotten so bad were left to explain why they were all of a sudden turning around.

THE ANSWER STARTS IN 1990, WHEN New Haven implemented community policing. The police

set up neighborhood substations and allocated some of the space to community management teams. The Dwight Management Team, led by an energetic neighborhood activist named Linda Townsend Maier, drew the attention of Yale, which in 1995 applied for a grant under a Department of Housing and Urban Development program aimed at helping universities improve the communities around them. Yale gave half of the money to the Dwight Management Team, which incorporated as the Greater Dwight Development Corporation (GDDC).

MEANWHILE, TWO ADJACENT BUSInesses on Whalley Avenue, a cable company and one of the street's last auto dealers, began negotiating to sell their land to a New York supermarket developer named Marty Berger. Berger bought the land but soon realized he couldn't make a profit from a Dwight supermarket—the site needed costly environmental cleanup, and he couldn't get preferred bank financing for an inner-city project. So he invited the newly formed GDDC in as his partner, hoping it could lure nonprofit and government subsidies. The GDDC secured $1 million from the state of Connecticut and $3 million from the Retail Initiative, a national nonprofit created to lend money for inner-city economic development. Faculty and students from Yale Law School represented the GDDC at the negotiations with Berger, and last summer the parties struck a deal. Berger would develop the land and sell it to the GDDC, which would rent it to Shaw's.

ONE OBVIOUS LESSON OF THE Shaw's project is that inner-city revitalization requires the contributions of diverse actors. But, in a sense, the supermarket project also worked because none of the players contributed too much. We assume that the federal government depends on a balance of power among different forces, but the Shaw's story suggests that cities, too, require a balance of power in order to act competently and honestly. And yet impoverished communities often lack that balance—in part because ideologues of the right and left try to concentrate power either in the hands of businesspeople, or government planners, or neighborhood activists.

IN THE CASE OF SHAW'S, NEW Haven's change in policing spurred the community activism that led to the GDDC. But city government didn't control the project. Unlike neighborhood groups in New Haven and other cities, the GDDC wasn't a power base for local politicians seeking patronage from city hall. And that meant that the GDDC didn't try to steer the benefits of the project toward political cronies, as happened several years ago with a proposed Pathmark supermarket in Queens. Yale, for its part, received the federal grant, which tied it to the GDDC. And Yale Law School provided the CDC with the technical expertise to negotiate a contract that didn't leave it hopelessly in debt. But Yale also allowed the GDDC to set the terms of the deal, which gave the project legitimacy in the neighborhood. Shaw's was given free rein to operate in accordance with business principles. But the supermarket won local support by giving Dwight's various ethnic groups a say in what food it stocked. And so today Shaw's sells everything from Wolf's kasha to frozen chitlin loaf to five kinds of cooking roots.

OF COURSE, FOR THE SUPERMARKet to succeed, Dwight's political balance has to endure. The GDDC runs out of federal money next summer, and it could find itself more dependent on city hall. Shaw's is only legally committed to stay for one year, and, so far, the store reports that it has many customers but that they do not buy much per person.

AND, WHILE MUCH IN NEW HAVEN is improving, the past few years reveal just how quickly social trends can reverse themselves. They seemed to take a turn for the worse last month when, walking near the center of the Yale campus, I heard shots less than a block away. I ducked behind a building, next to a young man who exclaimed, "I'm so glad I go to Princeton." But the shooting stopped, the police came, and no one was hurt. I hung around for a while to watch the commotion—then continued on my way to the supermarket.