



ELMWOOD PLACE COMMUNITY STUDY

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
History.....	3
Community Assets	5
Community Concerns.....	7
Summary and Recommendations.....	13

List of Tables and Illustrations

Table 1: Demographic Profile 2000 – 2015-2018	11
Figure 1: Zoning Map	12



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Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the Urban Appalachian Community Coalition (UACC), in collaboration with a University of Cincinnati graduate student, began developing a neighborhood profile for the Village of Elmwood Place in Hamilton County, Ohio. UACC, formerly the Urban Appalachian Council, has a decades-long history of advocating for social justice for members of the Appalachian community in Cincinnati, and continually seeks to learn more about the Appalachian experience through engagement with communities in and around the city. This report serves both to document Elmwood Place's demographics and challenges in 2020, as well as explore opportunities for the community moving forward.

The preparers of this report express sincere gratitude to the community members and additional staff with whom we have conversed over the course of developing this report. They have provided incredible insight and context, much of which is reflected in the Community Assets and Community Concerns sections of this report. These persons include:

Joe Anneken – Village Council Member, Mayor (2021)

Paul Furnish – Mayor (2020)

Ron Spears – Village Council Member

B. Otto Weaver – Village Council Member

Sheila Dornbusch – Village Clerk, Elmwood Place

Amy Bancroft, Port Authority of Greater Cincinnati

Hubert Furnish – Community Member

Steve Johns, Chief Planning, Service Administrator, Hamilton County Planning and Community Development

Rick Mattson – Branch Manager, Elmwood Place Branch Library

James Noyes, Director, Hamilton County Planning and Development

Betty Roy – Community Member, Former Village Council Member

We also utilized the 2006 Project Impact Report from the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission as a reference point, and many of the numbers and demographic changes we



VIEW OF THE MILL CREEK BANKS, FACING SOUTHEAST

discuss within this report compare Elmwood Place’s current context to that of 2006. While neighborhood profiles can always be expanded upon, we recognize the importance of balancing extended levels of information with readability. We hope this document serves as a summary of Elmwood Place’s circumstances in 2020, and provide citations and references throughout so readers know how to access additional information.

Of course, we would be remiss to ignore the large impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the community and our work. With the exception of one key informant interview, all other information and interviews were acquired via phone and email. We have not been able to organize larger community input events, such as focus groups or advisory boards, due to time limitations and people needing physical separation to prevent and reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Through all of these challenges, our contacts in Elmwood Place have been encouraging and supportive, and for that we are grateful. It has been a pleasure to work with them.



ELMWOOD PLACE’S MUNICIPAL BUILDING, AT THE SOUTHEAST CORNER OF VINE STREET AND MAPLE STREET. THE ELMWOOD PLACE BRANCH LIBRARY SHARES SPACE WITH THE MUNICIPAL BUILDING.

History

Native Americans lived in the area now referred to as Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio, long before white and other non-Indigenous people overtook the region as part of the United States' brutal westward expansion. For Elmwood Place, the first event with white people occurred in 1793:

“As part of a government plan to open new roads, General Anthony Wayne and his men left Cap Hobson’s Choice at Cincinnati October 7, 1793, and followed an old trace through Millcreek Valley on their way to Lockland and the hinterlands beyond.”

-Elm Tree Days, written by Mildred Schulze – Librarian of Elmwood Place Branch Library, 1946

Over the course of nearly a century, lots were sold in what became Elmwood Place and the area was settled by deeply religious people. Officially incorporated in 1890, the Village of Elmwood Place started as a small rural community along the Mill Creek Valley, north of Cincinnati. It was along the railroad line, still in use today, and though many residents today reflect on its early German Catholic influences, its first church was the Union Sabbath-school, first created in 1878. It later developed into the Union Chapel in 1882. The 1880s also saw the genesis of St. Matthew Evangelical and Reformed Church, Elmwood Presbyterian Church, Elmwood Methodist Episcopal Church, and St. Aloysius Catholic Church. The 1890s brought the First Baptist Church, attended by members of the Black community in Elmwood Place, and St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. The Elmwood Pilgrim Church started in Elmwood Place in 1922, and Highland Avenue Baptist Church opened in 1937.

The community was able to grow as residents took up jobs as farmers, merchants, and mechanics.¹ By 1920, Elmwood Place had nearly 4,000 residents. Large industrial and manufacturing businesses, like Tool, Steel, Gear and Pinion, took hold in the community and its surrounding locales,

providing access to jobs for many in Elmwood Place. At one point, as many residents told us during key informant interviews, “there wasn’t an empty storefront on Vine Street,” and “it was the only self-sustaining community along the Vine Street corridor,” having its own doctors, beauty salons, dry goods stores, hardware stores, and more. The 1950s and 1960s were busy times for the community, which also had a gambling and bootlegging presence, and some mafia connections.

“Historically, industrial development in the area was located primarily in communities through the center of Hamilton County and within the Mill Creek watershed district.” – 2006 Project Impact Elmwood Place Community Profile

With job availability in Elmwood Place and more opportunities in the broader Cincinnati region, individuals and families from Kentucky, and particularly Casey County, made their way up to Elmwood Place. Many of the people we interviewed for this report can trace their family history



VIEW OF THE MILL CREEK BANKS, FACING SOUTHEAST ON CENTER HILL AVENUE. CANTER BATTERY, AND CENTRAL STEEL AND WIRE, ARE IN THE BACKGROUND

back to their parents or grandparents' roots in Casey County.

Starting in the late 1960s, it became harder for independent businesses to maintain their competitiveness, and many of the businesses eventually closed or moved to more suburban locations. The exodus of industry was a central theme noted in our key informant interviews. Businesses leaving meant tax revenues fell, but the community maintains a strong sense of character through those challenges.

The Village of Elmwood Place is its own incorporated municipality, and shares a school district with the City of St. Bernard, just to its south. The rest of the neighborhoods surrounding Elmwood Place are part of Cincinnati. These neighborhoods are Winton Hills to the west, Carthage to the north, and Bond Hill to the east.

Community Assets

We conducted interviews with nine individuals over the summer of 2020, to learn about assets and challenges facing Elmwood Place. We have organized them into the topics of Community Assets and Community Concerns, based on the feedback from interviewees.

Education

Elmwood Place and the City of St. Bernard, to its south, share a school district. Elmwood Place houses an elementary school, but beginning this fall, all the elementary students will go to the new K-12 school recently constructed in St. Bernard. Some interviewees believe having all the kids together will be good, because of the bonds it will help build. Interviewees also noted that losing the elementary school will reduce the taxes Elmwood Place is able to take in.



ELMWOOD PLACE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING, FROM VINE AND MAPLE STREET INTERSECTION

Public Transportation

Cincinnati Metro has a bus route that goes through the heart of Elmwood Place, along Vine Street. However, few Elmwood Place residents are seen using it regularly.

Churches

Current active churches interviewees noted are: Highland Avenue Missionary Baptist Church, and Our Lady of La Vang Vietnamese Catholic Church (formerly St. Aloysius Catholic Church, which had German Catholic roots). St. Clement's Catholic Church, though located in St. Bernard, also serves as a church for some residents of Elmwood Place. Four additional churches listed in the county's 2006 report have no working phone number now.

Library

The Elmwood Place Branch of Hamilton County library plays a crucial role in the community. It is currently housed in the same building as the village administration. It brings in paid presenters to put on events for the community, and has 13 computers and internet access for

people to use. It has a fax machine for people to send materials to relevant bodies, like submitting information to the Department of Job and Family Services for welfare benefits. It also serves as a space for youth, in part because there aren't many other activities in which Elmwood Place's youth can engage.

Parks

Elmwood Place has one playground and a few other bits of open space for recreation. The shortage of park space is a community concern. The condition of the parks also needs attention, and some equipment has been removed. In 2006, a DAAP Spring Studio class made design recommendations for Elmwood Place's parks. Suggestions for how to improve parks are on pages 29 and 38 of the Project Impact Study. We recommend that Village Council look again at this report and its recommendations.



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Community Concerns

Job Security

Interviewees spoke fondly of Elmwood Place’s economic activity from circa 1950-1980, when there were numerous employers located within the village boundaries and people could walk to their jobs at large employers such as Xtech (formerly Tool, Steel, Gear and Pinion.) Other employers, like Central Steel, have substantially reduced their operations in the village. Central Steel at one point had over 100 employees, and now has less than a dozen. Queen City Buses is the largest employer in Elmwood Place today, but only employs a handful of Elmwood Place residents. A number of interviewees noted that there haven’t always been empty storefronts on Vine Street, the main thoroughfare through the village. Today, some of those storefront buildings are used as sleeping rooms.



CENTRAL STEEL AND WIRE, LOOKING SOUTHWEST FROM TOWNSHIP AVENUE

Youth Activities

A number of interviewees highlighted the difficulty in finding activities for youth to get involved in. There used to be a ball team, coached by local parents. The community also used to have a pool, but its operational costs were too much for the relatively few people who used it, and it closed about five years ago.

Food Security

The last grocery store in Elmwood Place closed within the last year, which left residents needing to travel to other options for groceries, like Kroger in Spring Grove Village, or stores in communities like Hartwell or St. Bernard. The grocery store that closed had been a mom-and-pop store, in operation for a number of decades. Food stamps are utilized by many low-income residents. Highland Avenue Baptist Church operates a food pantry every Saturday. Between January and June of 2020, the church averaged 79,141 meals distributed monthly. People from all over Hamilton County come to access the food bank, not just Elmwood Place residents.

Health

Our interviewees noted Elmwood Place may not have a strong health infrastructure, but the topic of health only received a few passing mentions in our interviews. People go to doctors outside of the community, and a number of people are on Medicaid. The elementary school has offered health services too. If people have a medical issue, they may just go to the emergency room, which places strain on Elmwood Place's financial resources. The library is used frequently by residents to send or fax documents over to the Department of Job and Family Services, which runs Medicaid.

Senior Citizens

As with the youth, there are not a lot of activities for seniors. There is no senior center and it is not clear that there's a pattern of use of centers outside the community. There is a senior group that meets in the town hall.

Housing

A number of interviewees commented on housing in Elmwood Place. The people who grew up or have generational ties to Elmwood Place have been in their single-family houses for decades, but in the last few decades the community has had more renters and fewer homeowners. Property owners who rent out their spaces don't always live in Elmwood Place. Interviewees noted urban redevelopment and displacement in other areas of Cincinnati may result in newcomers moving to Elmwood Place.

The community has a number of Section 8 properties and some halfway houses. Some houses are being split up into sleeping rooms. People who move into the neighborhood today may only stay for 6 months to a year. The community also has a number of registered sex offenders on some streets. Property is relatively cheap, and the Port Authority has taken over some properties and then resold them. This eases the problem of having abandoned buildings.

Infrastructure

The village council is entirely volunteer, which makes engagement difficult at times. The council has reached out to Hamilton County for help on specific projects, like inquiring about a new facility for the volunteer fire department. The police department is locally-run, and council has discussed developing a planning commission. Not having a planning commission or a board of zoning appeals has made it hard to enforce things like the zoning code, or do more strategic economic development. A shrinking tax base means the village has limited capacity to attract and administer grants for community development projects. Community-based organizations include the Elmwood Place Community Improvement Council (CIC) which owns some of the vacant industrial properties and is marketing them. There are no non-governmental agencies such as those funded by United Way in many Cincinnati neighborhoods. The joint public school system with St. Bernard makes it possible for Elmwood Place children to attend a new school this fall even if the village is losing its own school. The number of children under 16 dropped

from 900 in 1990 to 400 in 2000¹. The building that houses the Town Hall and public library was built in 1976. The effort to get a new fire station has not gone forward due to the village's lack of administrative capacity. The same is true of the community's desire for more park land.



THE QUEEN CITY TRANSPORTATION PARKING LOT, FROM CHESTNUT STREET FACING WEST

¹ County Subdivisions Summary, ca 2017 with 200 projections.

Census Data

The following charts compare demographic information for Elmwood Place between 2000 and 2018. Some limitations of the data include:

1. The gender binary implied by male/female population data is not inclusive of the range of gender identities.
2. There were also changes in terminology for racial identification, explaining why some variables (e.g. Asian) have a percentage for 2000 but not 2018, and vice versa.

Jurisdiction	Village of Elmwood Place
County	Hamilton
Zip Code	45216
Incorporation Year	1889
Land Area	.3 sq miles, or 192 acres
School District	St. Bernard-Elmwood Place School District

Population

The population of Elmwood Place dropped from 2,691 in 2000 to an estimated 1,907 in 2014-2018. In 1950 the population was 4,113. The community has experienced five decades of decline. The number of households has declined from 2,681 in 2000 to 861 in 2014-2018.

Income

Median household income has dropped from \$29,017 in 2000 to an estimated \$20,066 in 2014-2018. The number of housing units has declined slightly from 1,173 in 2000 to 1,089 in the same period. Per capita income has grown from \$13,466 to \$18,412. The percentages of residents living below the poverty line is 37.7 (ACS estimate).

Housing

The median house value declined from \$62,900 to \$56,400 during the past decade (ACS estimates).

Family Structure

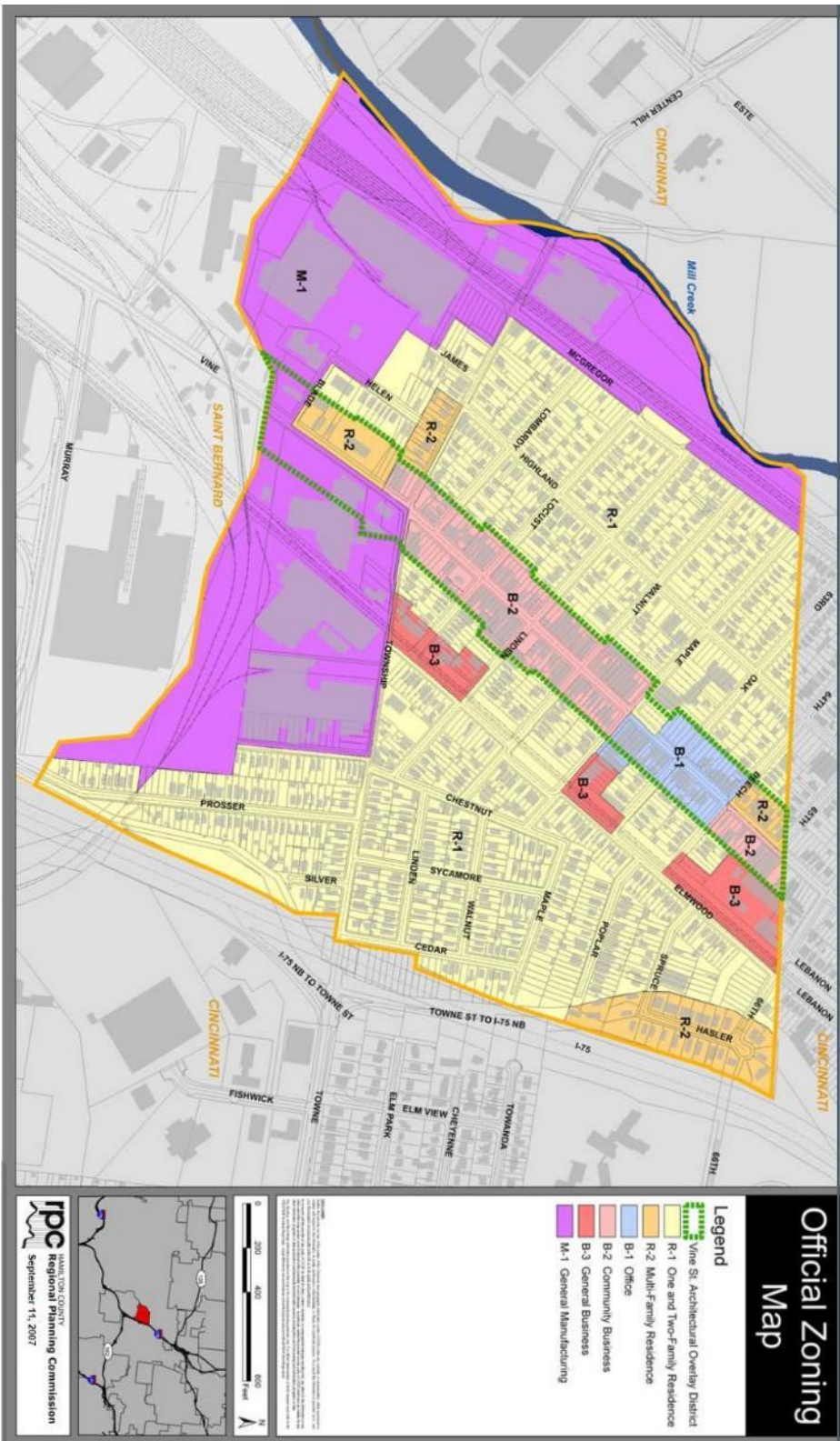
Family structure has changed in a positive direction from 2000 to 2015-2018. The percentage of children under 18 living with two parents increased from 36.7% to 53.8%. This means that young children have more support, that families are stronger.

Table 1: Demographic Profile 2000 – 2014 - 2018

	2000 Census	2014-2018 ACS 5-Year Estimates
Population	2,681	1,907
Male	1,371 (51.1%)	1,019 (53.4%)
Female	1,310 (48.9%)	888 (46.6%)
Median Resident Age	33.0 years	38.2 years
Density	8,936 persons/sq mile 13.96 persons/acre	6,356 persons/sq mile 9.93 persons/acre
Households	1,061	861
Median Household Income	\$29,017	\$20,066
Housing Units	1,173	1,089
Median House Value	\$62,900	\$56,400
Per Capita Income	\$13,466	\$18,412
Percentage of Children Under 18 Living with 2 Parents	36.70%	53.8%
Percentage of Residents Living Below Poverty Line	19.0%	37.7%
Racial Distribution		
White	91.87%	68.8%
Black	5.45%	20.5%
Native American	.56%	1.47%
Asian	.19%	
2+ races	1.19%	1.52%
Pacific Islander	.07%	
Some other race alone		7.71%
Hispanic or Latino		9.3%
Percentage of People Over the Age of 25 with at least a High School Diploma	62.2%* (2010 ACS 5 year)	77.7%
Age Structure		
Under 18	29.2%	24.5%
19 to 64	60.6%	56.2%
65+	10.1%	19.3%
SES Rank in SMSA	32	26

Sources: 2000 Census and American Community Survey Five Year Average 2014 - 2018

THE VILLAGE OF ELMWOOD PLACE



Source: Village of Elmwood Place Zoning Map. Prepared by the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission. Adopted 1964, with revisions accepted September 11, 2007.

Summary and Recommendations

Elmwood Place, like the other communities in the Mill Creek Valley which were once the center of Cincinnati's vast manufacturing complex, is seeking to regain control of its destiny and redefine its purpose as a community. Because of its decline in jobs, population, and tax base the village is ill-prepared to cope with this challenge. The will to preserve its identity as community is strong and its leadership is motivated. Talks of a merger with St. Bernard were suspended.

Village Council grapples with the issues but is limited by the fact that it is all volunteer and lacks the time to do all that might be required. For example, the village is satisfied with its police and fire services but does not have the means to develop new facilities for its volunteer fire department. As another example, community leaders feel that the village is losing control of its destiny – that it is getting more than its share of Section 8 units, halfway houses and placement of sex offenders. They feel that agents they do not know are making these decisions for them. This is not expressed as hostility toward the newcomers. People are aware of their own history as immigrants from Germany and migrants from rural Kentucky, for example.

A limited tax base limits their ability to have the resources larger communities have, like a planning commission and current land use plan., and a means to enforce its zoning code. There is no civic engagement structure such as a community council. There is an effort to revive the Community Improvement Council (CIC) but it lacks staff support. It is getting some support from the Greater Cincinnati Port Authority to help with abandoned properties.

The Hamilton County Department of Planning and Development has access to grants that could help with issues like the firehouse and other development opportunities but the village's lack of administrative capacity has put things on hold.



The Port Authority example offers a possible door to the future: Partnerships. What if the Port Authority could administer a grant for the firehouse project? If not, could the CIC develop a United Way and foundation-funded agency that could administer grants and develop projects? The joint school district is another example of how the village can partner with other agencies or communities to provide services for its residents. Could the CIC be a joint enterprise with St. Bernard or Carthage? One council member suggested that we could ask the UC School of Planning to help develop a land use plan (that could be an instrument to regain control of development). The Urban Appalachian Community Coalition is willing to work with Village Council to pursue such partnerships.

Elmwood Place, while it has its share of challenges, also has a number of opportunities the community can focus on, and enhance, to improve its wellbeing. Its large tracts of industrial-zoned land, and the commercially-zoned corridor along Vine Street (see zoning map on previous page) gives it some options for bringing in new businesses, which our interviewees stated would be helpful. Its comparatively low cost of living, in addition to its location and easy access to other parts of Cincinnati, are also opportunities for the community. The Vickie Stambaugh Park in the community offers a shared space for residents and visitors to interact, and the front-porch atmosphere mentioned by many of our interviewees enables a general sense of community. The lovely Town Hall and Library complex are other centers of community life. It is time to mobilize this sense of community in developing a vision for the village's future.

The excellent Project Impact Study: Elmwood Place Community Profile, done in 2006 provides a ton of historical data about the community's demographics and economic circumstances. It includes sections on land use, infrastructure, and strategies for economic development. The heart of this report is about 10 pages called Elmwood Place Community Vision. This section includes a situation analysis and several pages of recommendations. **Our most important conclusion is that the Village Council review this material and develop priorities and means for implementation.**

References

1. Source: Schulze, M. E. (1946). *Elm Tree Days*. Lockland, OH: Valley Shopper and the Millcreek Valley News.
2. Source: County Subdivision Survey, ca. 2017 with 2020 projections.
3. Hamilton County Department of Planning and Community Development, Project Impact Study: Elmwood Place Community Profile, 2006.