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## Cheviot's pride key to survival

### 'Separate city unto ourselves' faces its problems

BY CLIFF RADEL | ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**CHEVIOT** - Everyone thinks they know Cheviot.

The little West Side city is best known for being home to the 146-year-old Harvest Home Fair.

During late 2005, Cheviot found another claim to fame. The little town named for the Cheviot Hills of Scotland made front-page news with Cheviot's crime of the decade. Someone stole the fiberglass Baby Jesus from the town's manger scene.

When the fair and Baby Jesus are not in town, Cheviot quietly takes its place on the list of Cincinnati's "first suburbs," one of the area's oldest suburbs - communities that are struggling to survive.

The cities and villages on that list are dealing with the effects of declining populations, aging residents, deteriorating houses, failing infrastructures and decreasing tax revenue.

Despite these problems, Cheviot looks with optimism toward the future.

"We're on the edge," said Peggy Sullivan, co-owner of Cheviot's IGA store and president of the Cheviot-Westwood Community Association. "But we're leaning toward turning things around, making things better."

Officials from the city and the community association are creating a five-year economic plan. New shops, including an eBay drop-off store, are coming to the business district. The city plans a property maintenance code to clean up problem houses.

"We are going to survive," Mayor Sam Keller said.

"We are a separate city unto ourselves with our own police, fire, paramedics, maintenance department and garbage men second to none. And we are extremely proud of it."

### MAINTAINING QUALITY OF LIFE

Equal parts of Mayberry and endangered species make up Cheviot.

The little town that time and policymakers sometimes forget takes up just 1.2 square miles and has fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

Cheviot is the kind of place where the biggest crime in years involved a theft that happened during the 2005 Christmas season. Somebody stole the fiberglass Baby Jesus from the manger scene in the heart of town.

Folks from Cheviot patronize establishments - Small's hardware store, Rohe Pharmacy, Cheviot Savings Bank, Kroner Dry Cleaners - that their great-grandparents once visited.

"When you take a walk in Cheviot, you always run into someone you know. Everybody's intertwined," said Jackie Wright, a lifelong resident and manager of the city's IGA grocery store.

"Cheviot is such a nice little town," she added. "I hope in 10 or 20 years it's still the same."

In Cheviot, residents still make annual pilgrimages to the Harvest Home Fair that began in 1860. They flock to the city's young whippersnapper of an event, the Westside Streetfest founded in 2002. They also contribute to the city's nightlife that Chris Baker, secretary of the Cheviot-Westwood Community Association, said is thriving at nearly a

dozen nightclubs, bars and saloons.

"Our nightlife is doing really, really well," said Keller. "But our day life in our business district needs work. And we're working on it."

He listed areas of concerns:

An empty Frank's Nursery and Crafts store has had interest from a developer representing a discount chain. Keller would prefer a restaurant in that space.

A nursing home, empty for a decade, could reopen by the end of the year.

The city is about to get its first new, independently owned restaurant in 25 years.

A shuttered Roy Rogers restaurant will be demolished within a month. Developers are vying for the spot.

Cheviot is a place where neighbors, business leaders and city officials worry about empty stores and deteriorating houses, and are taking steps to solve those problems.

"No way is Cheviot going to go down the tubes. No sir, buddy," said Steve Neal, a lifelong Cheviotian and the city's safety service director since 1992. "Not on my watch."

Neal pointed to a file of papers three inches thick. That's the paperwork for 58 houses whose tall grass was cut by the city in 2005 for at least \$200 a clip. The cost is attached to the property owner's real estate tax bill.

"This year council will pass a maintenance ordinance that will help us go after the really bad houses," Neal said, "like ones where the siding is hanging off.

"That ordinance also means no more piles of junk in backyards. No more washers and dryers on the front porch. We mean business. We see what's happened to Price Hill. We see what's happening to Westwood.

"It's not going to happen here. We are drawing a line in the sand."

In a recent study by the Brookings Institution, Hamilton County landed on a nationwide list of 64 counties with the largest concentration of first suburbs surrounding an urban core.

After a heyday following World War II, first suburbs are now experiencing declines in population, income and housing stock.

These declines, the study noted, have been ignored for decades by politicians at county, state and federal levels.

"It's a function of aging" and policymaker neglect, said J. Michael Laumann, Cheviot's mayor from 1983 to 2003. The first suburbs' population is growing older. Houses are aging and requiring more upkeep. Older, retired people living alone can't afford the maintenance costs and their reduced incomes contribute less to the city's coffers.

"Couple that with the city's aging infrastructure - we're at the bottom of the county's sewer chain - and for decades the county did nothing to help us with basement flooding," Laumann said.

"And it gets harder and harder every year to maintain the identity, the integrity and the individuality of a small community."

In Cheviot, city workers vacuum mounds of leaves homeowners place at the curb in the fall and proudly plow the streets in the winter. Cheviot is where the city's garbage men cater to their customers.

"They take the cans back up the hill for the little old ladies and the little old men," Neal said.

The small-town equivalent of a city manager, Neal wears many hats as safety service director. He oversees the fire and police departments, the paramedic squad and the public works department.

Neal is also in charge of economic development in a city that has no tracts of land waiting to be developed and no industry.

"It's been that way for as long as I can remember," he said.

Cheviot was the county's fastest-growing municipality between 1920 and 1930. The city continued to post population

gains, peaking at 11,135 residents in 1970. Since then, the population has been on a slow decline. The 2000 census found 9,015 residents in Cheviot. The most recent estimate puts the population at 8,399, a decline of 6.8 percent since 2000.

With the decline came changes in Cheviot's make-up. Absentee landlords - whose properties make up the vast majority of the derelict lawns the city mowed last year - became an issue. Renter-occupied homes account for 38.4 percent of the housing.

The challenges of Cheviot - and other first suburbs - have not gone unnoticed. Hamilton County officials have been meeting with village and city officials in the county's first suburbs.

Phil Heimlich, president of the Hamilton County Commission, has come away from these meetings "noticing the great deal of similarities in the problems the first suburbs are facing."

He keeps hearing concerns about crime creeping from Cincinnati to the suburbs, the spread of federally subsidized housing, property maintenance and the twin losses of jobs and population.

Menelaos Triantafillou, an urban planner at the University of Cincinnati, suggests the city jumpstart its thinking about the future by surveying its residents.

"The city has strong selling points: affordable housing, a sense of community where people help each other, where you can walk to the drugstore or the hardware store and when you can enjoy a sense of tradition," he said.

Cheviot "does not need to see itself as an endangered species," the planner added.

"The city doesn't need a big-shot solution. It just needs some fine tuning and direction."

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