

Weinland Park carryout talks done in secret

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The two men couldn't have been mistaken for regulars.

As soon as the flimsy door drifted shut behind them, they stood out as neck-tied newcomers in a corner store with no dress code. They passed the aisles of potato chips and the beer cooler and slipped a piece of paper across the counter. It was an offer to buy the D&J Carryout.

Omar Anwer read the offer and laughed. He had run this shop for 14 years and wasn't about to let it go. The two men left a business card and walked back out the worn door.

That afternoon started a series of negotiations that ended last week when Campus Partners, the development arm of Ohio State University, bought and shut down two Weinland Park carryout stores. Those behind the deal hope it will reduce crime and draw new residents to the area.

In total, Ohio State provided \$855,000 from revenue the university makes by leasing its property to third parties. It doesn't come from tuition, student fees or taxes. But until recently, the owners of those shops — the D&J and Kelly's Carry-out, both on N. 4th Street — didn't know who had sent the two men to bargain with them.

The negotiators were intentionally vague: They said there was a potential buyer. But as they worked, they were forbidden from identifying Campus Partners, Ohio State or others behind the deal. They worried that the shop owners would demand lavish payouts if they knew there were deep pockets.

The tactic is common in the real-estate world, but it was new for Ohio State.

"It wasn't to be deceptive, it was simply to make sure that we got to a fair, straightforward deal," said Keith Myers, chairman of the Campus Partners board and OSU's associate vice president for Physical Planning and Real Estate.

Good intentions didn't make the job any easier for negotiators. Secrecy bred mistrust.

"You kind of felt like you were sitting in someone's living room where you really weren't welcome," said Mike Simpson, president of NAI Ohio Equities, which led the negotiations. "We clearly didn't belong."

Simpson guided the bargaining but often sent one of his associates, Joe, into the stores. Over several weeks, Joe negotiated over store counters, through bullet-proof glass and once over an extravagant Mediterranean lunch that he described as a scene right out of a movie.

Joe wouldn't provide his last name, saying it would jeopardize his work in the future, but he said he used to be a contractor in Afghanistan who hired translators for the U.S.

Eventually, the men sealed the sale of both stores for a total of \$1.1 million. On that first day, though, they weren't even close.

A decade ago, developers in Cincinnati were studying crime maps when they saw a problem. In the map

of Over-the-Rhine, a neighborhood that was once a thriving hub of German immigrants, they saw a sea of vacant homes and clusters of dots, each the site of a crime.

“There were these carryouts sprinkled around,” said Anastasia Mileham, a spokeswoman for Cincinnati Center City Development Co. “A lot of the criminal activity — the shootings and the murders and the type 1 crimes — were occurring in front of these carryouts.”

Backed by wealthy corporations, the development group bought seven of the shops, shut them down and boarded them up. Over time, the crime rate in the area fell by 50 percent.

“Unless you were involved with criminal activity, you weren’t upset about the shutting of the doors on corner stores,” Mileham said. “They were scary places.”

Myers, of Campus Partners, later lived in Cincinnati and worked as a consultant for that development group. He saw Over-the-Rhine pivot on the heels of its shuttered carryouts. The project has been used alternately as an example of gentrification and of urban turn-

around, but it stuck with Myers. Bars and restaurants were finally moving in, and people were following.

“I couldn’t believe what had happened down there,” Myers said. “It was a remarkable transformation.”

About a year ago, soon after being hired by Campus Partners and Ohio State, Myers was studying the Weinland Park neighborhood. Efforts to clean up vacant houses and attract tenants had been paying off, but crime problems lingered. So he looked in another direction — at the neighborhood carryouts.

Christopher Bowling was a police sergeant, newly assigned to the Weinland Park area, when the call came in. Shots fired at the corner store at 4th Street and 8th Avenue. It was about 9 p.m. in January 1996.

Police found then-D&J owner Dib “Miguel” Yasin dead behind the counter. Two teen gunmen had demanded money from Yasin, a 44-year-old Jerusalem-born Palestinian. He opened the register and backed away, but one of them fired anyway. Police never found his killer.

The coldness of the crime drew attention to the neighborhood, but police continued to field similar calls. The area remained a hangout for the Short North Posse gang, said Bowling, who is now the police commander for the area.

In 2003, a hail of 37 bullets left a 21-year-old man dead outside the D&J. Police said it was a gang shootout. Last year, a bullet tore into a city bus as it passed the store, striking a female rider in the head. She survived.

It can be unfair to blame stores for the violence outside their doors, Bowling said. “But that one has just been bizarre because of the homicides that have occurred there.”

Three blocks north, Kelly’s Carry-out has been the scene of violence, too.

A year after Yasin’s death, a gunman shot two clerks at Kelly’s, one of them six times. They both lived. In 2005, a 22-year-old man was shot and killed while walking out of the store.

Crime has leveled off at the two stores in recent years, and police cameras now watch from high above on the corners.

Officers were called to Kelly's 11 times during the past year and twice to D&J, mostly for minor problems. Tricia Stewart, 41, who worked at D&J and lives next door, said the store isn't responsible for neighborhood crime. A man who identified himself as the owner of Kelly's declined to comment.

Some neighbors are happy to see the stores go. But in a neighborhood that still struggles, the corner stores also were a lifeline.

Not everyone hops in the car to get their milk at Kroger. Many walk to the carryout for their baby formula, their bread, the diapers. If they are short on money, the clerk might forget the difference. And with no public library or fancy pool or mall, the shops become meeting places. For good purpose or bad, everyone eventually wanders by.

Those who led the Campus Partners deal acknowledge that the stores had a place.

"We don't want the community to feel like there's something being taken away," said Amanda Hoffsis, the president of Campus Partners. "We think there are other ways to provide those services that will actually increase the asset or the value to the community."

Myers and a neighborhood group decided in March to go after the stores. Myers asked Simpson if his company could negotiate the deals.

At Kelly's, the bargaining was simple. Over a counter with shelves filled with candy and gum, Simpson and Joe exchanged offers with the owner, listed in records as Khaled Hamad, while he manned the cash register. In the end, Campus Partners agreed to pay \$750,000. The owner had paid \$190,000 for the store in 1990.

"But the D&J," Simpson said, "that one was a little trickier."

It took another dozen visits after the initial rejection before the negotiators learned that Anwer, the business owner, was leasing the property. Only Nizar Omar, who owned the building, could agree to a sale. Joe started talks with Omar over lunch, in the back of a restaurant owned by Omar's cousin.

"They just kept bringing out kebabs," Joe said. "After we ate, then we started to discuss business."

They traded counter-offers over the phone and sometimes through the glass-paneled counter of another bodega that Omar owns on 5th Avenue. "We walked away from the deal at one point," Myers said. "They were negotiating, and the guy was coming back with ridiculous offers."

Days after the talks stalled, Omar came back to the table and they sealed the deal, Simpson said. They agreed on \$380,000. The store last sold for \$62,000 in 2009. Anwer said he was forced to close a business that he wanted to keep. Omar didn't respond to calls.

No one knows yet what will replace the stores.

Campus Partners plans to sell the D&J site to the Ohio Capital Corporation for Housing, which helped pay

for the purchases along with Ohio State and the Columbus Foundation. A drawing of a sample concept at the Kelly's site depicts a three-story, street-front building that stretches down the block.

Soon after the deals were finalized on Thursday, a scrap company hauled coolers and shelves out that rickety door at the D&J and into a truck. Workers put bags over the white painted sign advertising beer, groceries and lottery tickets. A locksmith came and made sure none of the old keys would open the door.

Joe walked around the site, still in his tie, still not quite fitting in, he knows. On the ground out back, he spotted a spent 40-caliber bullet casing, tarnished to a mottled dark brown.

He scooped it up, a symbol of the past, he hopes.

cbinkley@dispatch.com