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NEWS

Apologizing for Kenyon-Barr's destruction is easy. Making amends will be hard

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Oscar Wright went to City Hall last week when he heard Cincinnati's top elected officials were going to apologize for the "urban renewal" project that destroyed his old neighborhood more than a half century ago.

Wright wanted to know what they planned to do after saying they were sorry for what happened in the West End's Kenyon-Barr district in the 1950s. What action would they take to repair the damage done by the forced removal of 25,000 people, most of them Black, and the demolition of thousands of homes and hundreds of businesses?

How, exactly, would they make amends?

Wright wasn't surprised when he didn't get an answer to that question at the press conference announcing the apology on Tuesday. Apologizing is the easy part, he said. Righting a wrong like the razing of Kenyon-Barr will be much harder.

“I just hope to be around when these changes come,” Wright said.

City officials promised to put action behind their words, but the work ahead will be daunting. They not only will need money and resources for the effort, but they also must avoid the kind of mistakes that led urban planners to wipe out Kenyon-Barr in the first place.

The city’s approach to redevelopment now isn’t what it was in the 1950s, but neighborhood improvement projects still stir debate because they are fundamentally about changing neighborhoods. They disrupt lives and create challenges related to housing, employment, culture, education, class and race – just about every hot-button issue in America today.

Doing those projects right is hard. Doing one right in the West End a half-century after getting it so wrong will likely be harder.

“It’s so complicated,” said Eric Jackson, co-author of “Cincinnati’s Underground Railroad” and a history professor at Northern Kentucky University. “What do you do now? Money is important, but money isn’t everything.”

Jackson said the effort will require a combination of community outreach and investment that will be challenging, but not impossible, to pull off.

The city officials who apologized last week vowed to do just that, saying they’d go after big federal grants for housing and development while also asking residents what they want their neighborhood to be.

“An apology alone is not enough,” said Mayor Aftab Pureval.

“We will not run from any difficult, tough decision,” said Councilman Scotty Johnson, who led the charge to apologize for what happened to Kenyon-Barr.

Wright, who was a child when his family was forced out of their home, said he hopes city officials mean what they say.

When he was called to the podium to speak last week, Wright told a harrowing tale of how his parents and five siblings were evicted from their house on Seventh Street in the 1950s. He described piles of furniture and other belongings in the street as neighbors rushed to get out before the wrecking ball came for their homes.

“If you could’ve seen it, you would’ve thought it was an evacuation,” Wright said.

A plan that destroyed a neighborhood

Kenyon-Barr’s fate was sealed by Cincinnati’s 1948 “master plan,” which determined the neighborhood stood in the way of progress. Specifically, it was in the path of I-75 and a new business district the city would later name Queensgate.

The best solution, city planners decided, was flattening almost every building on Kenyon-Barr’s 400 acres.

They called it slum clearance.

While it was indeed a poor neighborhood, historians now argue the city’s description of it in the master plan was a gross over-simplification.

“This was a neighborhood, just like others of the time across Cincinnati,” said Arabeth Balasko, curator of photographs, prints and media at the Cincinnati Museum Center. “A vibrant community, a place 25,000-plus

African Americans called home."

Kenyon-Barr's population would make it Cincinnati's second largest neighborhood today. It had 137 food stores, 118 bars and restaurants, 86 barber shops and beauty salons, 80 churches, 24 dry cleaners and six funeral homes, according to the Museum Center's archive.

"We had everything we needed down there," Wright said.

The demolition of Kenyon-Barr came at a time when race still mattered a great deal in Cincinnati, especially when it came to housing. Discriminatory real estate and lending practices had locked Black residents out of many Cincinnati neighborhoods for decades, and newspaper classified ads in the 1950s still noted which homes were available to "colored buyers."

The result was a segregated city in which Black residents struggled to join the middle class and to build generational wealth from home ownership.

"The policies were meant to harm the most vulnerable," said Wendy Ellis, a Cincinnati native who now leads the Center for Community Resilience at George Washington University.

Ellis, who is Black, said Kenyon-Barr's destruction was a product of those policies. "People like me were invisible to those types of decision makers," she said.

After Kenyon-Barr's destruction, the city failed to keep its promise to build new quality housing for displaced residents. Thousands poured into neighborhoods such as Avondale and Over-the-Rhine, while others filled the city's largest public housing projects.

“We didn’t know what to do,” said Wright, whose family moved several times in the years after leaving Kenyon-Barr. “We didn’t have another place to go.”

Avoiding mistakes of the past

Pureval and other city officials acknowledged it will be difficult to tackle the problems that still haunt the West End today. Almost half the neighborhood’s population lives below the poverty line, 8 in 10 live in rental housing, and 3 in 4 lack a college degree.

Instead of a single project or community development plan, Pureval mentioned several initiatives that could be cobbled together to bring better housing and more opportunity to the neighborhood.

The city last year secured a $20 million federal infrastructure grant to expand sidewalks, add bike lanes, plant trees and flowers, improve streets and enhance the West End’s business district.

Pureval said the city also has applied for a $50 million grant that would fix up existing public housing units and add more mixed-income housing to neighborhoods like the West End.

The investment, he said, is intended to show residents of the West End “we are here for you.”

Council member Jan-Michele Lemon Kearney, whose father lost his doctor’s office when it was torn down in Kenyon-Barr, said city officials will look for other ways to invest in the community, too.

“We are sorry, and we are working,” she said at the press conference.

Whatever steps come next, one of the biggest challenges will be the city’s limited resources. The West End is one of 52 Cincinnati neighborhoods and has struggled for decades to get attention and dollars.

One day after the apology press conference, City Council approved a 377-page operating budget that included just seven references to the West End and no major new initiatives or investments.

Jackson, the Northern Kentucky University professor, said the nature of redevelopment projects makes the city's involvement essential. Without tax breaks or direct investment, developers will favor building market-rate housing instead of less profitable mixed-income and affordable units that poor and middle-class residents can afford.

The city would then run the risk of redeveloping the West End not for its current residents but for new ones who will replace them.

And that, Jackson said, hardly seems like a way to atone for Kenyon-Barr.

Though not as dramatic or as large in scope as the project that leveled Kenyon-Barr, some recent redevelopment projects show how difficult this kind of work can be.

In Over-the-Rhine, home to one of the city's largest ongoing redevelopment projects, private and public investment has brought new housing, restaurants, bars and other amenities to an area once considered among the city's most blighted.

But all that change, which included some affordable and mixed-income housing, also drove up real estate values and helped drive out residents who could no longer afford to live there.

In 2010, Over-the-Rhine's population was 72% Black. Today, it's 43%.

Jackson said something similar, though on a smaller scale, happened when FC Cincinnati built its new stadium in the West End. Although the team signed an agreement promising to invest in the neighborhood, it also pushed out more than a dozen residents and businesses to make way for the project.

Jackson said redevelopment projects may look different today, compared to what happened in Kenyon-Barr. But he said unless city leaders are thoughtful and methodical in the way they go about the work, the results will be the same.

“You have to have a plan,” he said.

Wright is eager to see that plan. For him, the apologies and promises he heard last week at City Hall were a welcome change coming from a city government that once forced him from his family home. He saw it as a good start, but that’s all.

He’s more interested, he said, in what comes after the apology.

Patricia Gallagher Newberry and Sharon Coolidge contributed to this report