

Charlotte WEEKLY

Circulation: 45,000

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, FOR THE COMMUNITY

Volume 6, Number 31 • Aug. 3-9, 2007

www.thecharlotteweekly.com



Photo courtesy of City of Charlotte

The city's economic development manager, Tom Warshauer, said the North Tryon Street corridor will improve with streetscapes that are more pedestrian- and driver-friendly. Many people like living and working in this corridor because of its proximity to center city and interstate access.

Making blighted areas bankable

by **Kathryn Daniel**
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Charlotte's business corridors stretch from center city outward like veins from the heart. They are the lifeblood of the city's economy.

Just beyond center city's healthy business district, though, five of these corridors have been identified as priorities for revitalization before they fall to the parasite that is urban blight. Its path is marked by vacant businesses lining stark concrete streetscapes, by empty lots overgrown with weeds, by the perception of high crime. In sum, the chance to boost

the area's economy through new investment has nearly slipped away.

The Business Corridor Revitalization Strategic Plan was created by the city's Economic Development Office to infuse new life into identified business corridors within the Queen City's inner ring. It received guidance from a 25-member committee representing the nonprofit, public and private sectors.

The plan aims to eliminate blight, create strong local economies, align city policies and programs, and promote environmentally sustainable development in

(more on page 8)

Community

Bankable

(continued from page 5)

five business corridors:

- Beatties Ford Road;
- Eastland Mall and surrounding areas;
- Rozzelles Ferry Road;
- North Tryon Street; and
- the Wilkinson-Freedom-Morehead-Bryant Park area.

The city's economic development director, Tom Flynn, summed up the initiative: "Our goal is to make the business corridors an attractive, vibrant part of Charlotte's economy so that the private sector will invest in the corridors." Like the heart and circulatory system in the human body, these corridors work together to ensure the entire city's economy – and its residents – prospers. The city's policy statement for this initiative starts with drawing investors to an area, expanding the tax base and improving adjacent neighborhoods.

Under way for more than a year, plans and ideas are now being implemented through an \$8.9 million budget approved by City Council.

Redeveloping declining neighborhoods

When asked if the plan to revitalize lagging business districts is proactive or reactive, Flynn admitted that from the big picture, the plan is reacting to declining areas. The city, he noted, is taking on more of a leadership role in making the five corridors a priority, marketing them to the private sector and redeveloping land to make it more desirable.

"It's important to market to people the benefits of being in these corridors. Some people get it ... but I think some people have a bad perception of these areas," said Darrell Williams, who served as vice chairman on the project's steering committee and works at Neighboring Concepts architecture firm.

Partnerships with the Charlotte-

Mecklenburg Development Corporation and the county make it all possible, along with state and federal grants.

The \$9 million capital funding will be used over the next three years. In 2007, the big purchase is a lot off Rozzelles Ferry Road owned by Charlotte Housing Authority that once was the location of a housing project called Belvedere Homes. Next door to the empty lot is an industrial area, so the city will purchase the land and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Development Corporation will redevelop it for a light industrial park.

Also on the 2007 agenda is completing infrastructure improvements in Bryant Park, including sewers, medians and



CharlotteLaw has signed an agreement for a long-term lease on property located at the intersection of Suttle Avenue and Wilkinson Boulevard. Plans call for the construction of a four-story, 102,000-square-foot building.

roadways. Williams' office is located in that area and he sees change as well as invests in it. Neighboring Concepts purchased and restored a dilapidated 68,000-square-foot warehouse, and now it's full of businesses. Down the street, Charlotte School of Law will soon break ground on its new campus.

Across town, vacant retail and commercial buildings in the Eastland Mall area are being targeted for redevelopment. With support from community business and residential leaders, change is afoot along Central Avenue, the corridor that passes a few miles before the oft disparaged Eastland Mall. Just last week, for instance, the less-than-attractive Morningside apartments on McClintock Road were razed to make way for a \$400

million mixed-use village developed by Firmitas, L.L.C.

An immediate in-house objective of the Economic Development Office is to restructure grant programs so they are easier for the public to use. The city offers façade and security grant programs, for example, to assist business owners in eliminating blight and stimulating economic growth.

Success stories

Tom Warshauer, the city's economic development manager, is working closely on the North Tryon redevelopment plan. The City Council will hear input from community residents and CATS, the Economic Development Office and the Charlotte Department of Transportation this fall. Warshauer said light rail, slated to make its way along North Tryon Street, dictates land use, street design and physical infrastructure to provide amenities for private-sector development.

"People who do business there like being in that location. It's convenient to Uptown, it's convenient to free-ways, it's convenient to universities – it's a good location," Warshauer explained. "And (residents) like being that proximate to town. ... They are excited about some of the changes that are happening in NoDa and ... in other areas." Residents and business owners are ready for that change to make its way down North Tryon Street.

NoDa, the arts district on North Davidson Street parallel to North Tryon Street, has undergone significant revitalization due to redevelopment over the past decade. And the South Boulevard business corridor closest to center city, too, has attracted new investment as businesses and townhomes pop up along the thoroughfare. These are success stories cited in the plan that officials strive to mimic in the five priority corridors. □

Want to know more?

The complete Business Corridor Revitalization Strategic Plan can be viewed at www.edo.charmeck.org.