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Golden Belt area 'looks alive again'

Separate projects put reformation on the horizon

BY JIM WISE
STAFF WRITER

Beverly Craig used to feel uncomfortable leaving her East Durham home to go to work, not knowing what she might find when she got back.

"It was kind of a crime-ridden area," she said.

It's better now.

From the next block, DeDreana Freeman said neighbors used to avoid going out on the streets.

"Now, if you come through the neighborhood you can see kids out playing and neighbors

out talking."

Historically, that neighborhood has been called "Edgemont." It developed in the early 1900s to serve employees at the Golden Belt and Durham Hosiery cotton mills.

Now, it's known as "Golden Belt" — sharing a name with the former factory remodeled last year into a complex of apartments, shops, offices and artists' studios, and sharing a bit in the uplift:

■ Through its subsidiary Edgemont Neighborhood LLC, Golden Belt factory redeveloper

Scientific Properties has bought four derelict houses in the neighborhood and undertaken their rehabilitation.

■ Separately, Habitat for Humanity has built or renovated nine Golden Belt houses and sold them to resident owners in the past year.

■ Urban InSite, a Durham consulting firm, has, on its own, prepared a Golden Belt Neighborhood Revitalization Proposal and presented it to the city community development

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GOLDEN BELT

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department.

"I see a lot of positive effect" from that outside interest, said Craig, who has lived in the neighborhood since 1997. "Before, it was almost like the neighborhood was forgotten.

"It looks alive again."

Gary Kueber of Scientific Properties said, "We've got a neighborhood, or remnants of a neighborhood, that are starting to be pieced back together."

The neighborhood covers roughly 27 acres, from Elizabeth Street east across Alston Avenue to Holman, and from East Main Street north to Taylor Street. Eastway Elementary school is off its northeast corner; the Golden Belt complex at its western edge.

The Golden Belt Manufacturing Co. ceased operation in 1996, removing one of the last economic drivers from an area already saddled with a rough image and a history of poverty dating to the 1940s.

The Durham Housing Authority owned the old factory for a few years, did little with it, and sold it to Scientific Properties in 2006. Scientific Properties had a hip, green renovation in mind, but that image clashed with the vacant lots and boarded-over houses next door.

So, the company expanded across the street to join the neighborhood rehab effort.

"Not everyone who's interested in living in an urban neighborhood like this is going to live in an apartment" like those in the re-

modeled factory, Kueber said. "Some people want or need homes."

Christine Westfall, who prepared the Revitalization Proposal with her Urban InSite partner, Barbara Beechwood, said the Golden Belt neighborhood needs more homeowners. At the time the proposal was done in 2008, 35 percent of the area's lots were vacant and owner occupation in the houses was only 26 percent — indicating, the proposal says, "a neighborhood with little stability."

Housing is "one of our critical issues in Durham," said Westfall, who has lived for 10 years in central Durham. She got interested in the region east of downtown when friends began buying houses there, and saw it as an area of "great properties, but not a strong neighborhood."

Aware of Scientific Properties' project, Westfall and Beechwood researched the neighborhood and wrote their proposal "to encourage Scientific Properties and the city to plan and invest."

She was quick to say she didn't mean "gentrification" — rather, "It's time to start encouraging income diversity."

According to Durham County records, of the 16 residential sales in the neighborhood in the past two years, prices have ranged from \$22,000 (a Scientific Properties buy) to \$117,000 (three Habitat sales).

Larry Jarvis of the city's community development office presented Urban InSite's proposal to the city council in December, but "as far as moving the study ... to the next level, we have nothing in motion right now."

The city is directing some money into the area, such as \$40,000 of federal community development funding toward Scientific Properties' purchase of a burned-out house on Morning Glory Avenue. Several similar transactions are in the works to assist Scientific Properties and Habitat, Jarvis said, but in the current economic climate, "It's slow."

Back in the neighborhood, Freeman and her husband, Antoine, have organized a Golden Belt Neighborhood Association. It has "about 15 active [members] and about 30 that I keep up with," she said. It meets once a month and maintains a Web site (goldenbelthistoricdistrict.wordpress.com) to share information on concerns like the Alston Avenue widening, police activity and the Neighborhood Watch.

"We reach out as we see new people" moving in, including those taking residence at the Golden Belt complex, Freeman said.

The Freemans bought their home in 2007.

"We were looking for a place we could afford and have an inner-city feel, be part of downtown," she said. "I didn't expect it to work out as well as it has, how neighbors have come together."

Activity in and around Golden Belt is getting attention, she said.

"We always have these different people stopping by, they have no clue what's going on," Freeman said. "They're like, 'Wow!' It makes you feel good, have pride in the neighborhood."

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