

Durham neighborhood comes 'back to life'

BY JIM WISE - Staff writer

Published in: Real

Estate News

DURHAM Five years ago, few people would have bothered taking a tour of homes in this city's Golden Belt neighborhood.

As home loans flowed, prospective buyers flocked to tours of suburban manses and condominiums in reviving downtowns.

In Golden Belt, however, houses were run down and boarded over. Drug dealers and prostitutes prowled. Residents who left for work in the morning feared what they might find when they got home.

But on Sunday afternoon, amid a national housing slump, Golden Belt was abloom with flowers and balloons. It was the neighborhood's first "Before and After Home Tour."

"Our tour is showing a neighborhood coming back to life," said John Martin, a tour organizer who also owns a home in the Golden Belt district. "Every single building on the tour, with one exception, was at one time vacant and boarded up."

Boards still cover the doors and windows of some houses in the Golden Belt neighborhood, a National Register historic district near the former Golden Belt textile

Prospects for Rolling Hills-Southside

Revitalization has been slower to arrive in other sections near the center city. But it's coming.

South of downtown, in Durham's original black neighborhoods, the Durham Freeway and urban renewal swept away much of what existed 40 years ago, when it was a bustling area.

Despite millions of public dollars invested there since, the Rolling Hills-Southside area remains blighted.

The city has another project under way to revive the area, anticipated to cost \$48 million in public and private investment over 10 years. Construction could start by fall.

"I'm glad they're finally doing something with the community," said Sharon Williamson, who attended a neighborhood festival Saturday.

Others remain skeptical. "They do a lot of talking," resident Kenneth Johnson said. "I've seen a lot go down the tubes."

Staff writer Jim Wise

Related Stories

Related Images

factory. More characteristic, though, are fresh paint, tidy yards, blooming flowers, and a sense of pride and optimism.

The factory's 2008 renovation into a mixed-use complex of loft apartments, artists' studios, offices and an 11,000-square-foot ballroom was a boost for revitalization in the early-20th century mill village next door.

Golden Belt, like other long-distressed residential sections in central Durham, is benefiting from a combination of official emphasis, private investment, and a changing trend in residential fashion.

The neighborhood lies within Northeast Central Durham, a vast area between downtown and U.S. 70 with a history of poverty, run-down rental housing, unemployment and crime. The city committed itself to reviving the area in 1993, four mayors and five city managers ago.

Revitalization

Meanwhile, revitalization was finally catching on in the central business district - itself an object of public investment, grand plans and high hopes since the 1950s.

In recent years, Durham has plowed at least \$1.2 billion into things such as parking decks, a new performing arts center, transportation depots, a central park and street improvements.

And the city has offered incentives to companies considering moving to the town that faded with the tobacco industry.



PHOTOS BY HARRY LYNCH -
hlynch@newsobserver.com

Golden Belt neighborhood homeowner John Martin makes a walking visual inspection of his house and grounds Thursday in preparation for Sunday's Golden Belt Neighborhood Home Tour.

[0502 Durham Neighborhoods.eps](#)



Duke University departments also have expanded into the center city, filling downtown offices.

That, combined with real-estate bargains, an influx of residents who prefer urban homes and a concerted effort by the nonprofit Downtown Durham Inc., stoked investment, energy and appreciating property values.

Blighted residential sections, though, formed a semicircle to the north, east and south of booming downtown and made uninviting gateways to the city center. With downtown's rebirth established, Mayor Bill Bell made rebirth of adjoining neighborhoods a City Hall priority.

"We must continue to recognize the symbiotic relationship between our downtown ... and our neighborhoods," Bell said in a 2010 speech. "... Neighborhood revitalization is much more complex and difficult than downtown revitalization, but it can be accomplished."

By then, though, some of the same factors that drove downtown's comeback were making themselves tangible in those sore spots.

Downtown's shops, restaurants and nightlife were a draw for newcomers who also wanted pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods with ethnic variety, architectural character and low prices.

All those were available in such neighborhoods as West End and Lyon Park, in Southwest Central Durham; Old North Durham, just above downtown; and Northeast Central districts such as Cleveland-Holloway, Old East Durham and Golden Belt.

They've become magnets for young professionals, said Bill Kalkhof, chief executive of Downtown Durham Inc.

"They can afford it," he said. "They're all close to downtown. It's happening a little bit quicker than people thought."

Affordability

Contractor Jon Fish was standing outside a potential bargain during Sunday's tour.

Paint was peeling off the Craftsman bungalow, and the front porch sagged.

In April, Scientific Properties, the Golden Belt factory's redeveloper, bought the bungalow with the intention of remodeling it and selling it.

It needs a new porch, new wiring, new plumbing and air conditioning, Fish said.

Fixed up, the 1,100-square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bath bungalow will go on the market for \$110,000. "You can't beat that," Fish said.

Affordability is the big thing that attracts buyers to the inner city, real-estate agent Lou Perron said, along with "the sense of community in a neighborhood raising itself up."

Durham neighborhoods that have already revitalized, such as Trinity Park between downtown and the Duke East Campus, are home to many of the city's prominent citizens, and properties command premium prices.

That's what brought Laurie Snyder and Chuck Giddings to the tour Sunday. The couple moved to Durham from Charleston, S.C., about six months ago. The tour interested them because of the area's revitalization, Snyder said, "and we're looking for affordable housing."

Don Rosenberg, who was taking the Golden Belt tour, said he moved into Trinity Park 35 years ago, when it was on a downward slide and its vintage homes were being split up for student apartments.

"I do find it interesting and attractive over here," said Rosenberg, who had also been impressed by home tours in Cleveland-Holloway and Old East Durham. "Little neighborhoods working up tours and showing what can be done," he said. "It's very interesting."

'Nice to see it'

Whether spurred by City Hall, private developers or an influx of home buyers, inner Durham would appear to have the temper of the times on its side.

"The Next Real Estate Boom," a Brookings Institute paper published last fall, predicted "an epic amount of money" will flow into downtown and close-in suburbs due to a convergence of aging baby boomers and "Generation Y" tastes for urban living without long commutes and yards to mow, and with amenities in walking distance and community feeling.

The latest census figures show that Durham's suburbs - especially near Chapel Hill and the Southpoint shopping mall - are the hottest properties in town.

But downtown, including fashionable Trinity Park, grew from 1,247 residents to 1,946 between 1990 and 2010; the census tract including Golden Belt gained 500 over the same time.

"It's certainly getting there," Kalkhof said. "But it still has a long way to go. The nice thing is they actually have a house tour. Two or three years ago, forget that. There was nothing to see."

The tour sold about 100 advance tickets, said homeowner Juanita Evans, and about 30 more were sold in the tour's first 30 minutes.

Durham residents Russell Burns and Robert Letourneau came out Sunday to have a look.

"We're interested in preservation," Burns said.

"It's nice to see it happen," Letourneau said.

jim.wise@newsobserver.com or 919-641-5895