

golden community

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DURHAM -- As a young boy, Terry Fisher walked through what was then the Golden Belt textile mill that made cotton bags for looseleaf tobacco, among other products, since his grandfather and grandmother worked there.

On Sunday, he walked through a part of the mill complex again, this time to see the red brick building's transformation into upscale loft apartments and studios.

Fisher, now a Hillsborough resident, said he remembered the mill as a busy, noisy place, but he wasn't unhappy with the change.

"I'm glad to see the neighborhood come back," he said.

The redeveloped Golden Belt complex at 807 E. Main St. in Durham was one stop on this weekend's Golden Belt House Tour that offered a glimpse into the redeveloped mill and houses in the area that are the target of a redevelopment

effort.

The tour took visitors through a two-story loft apartment inside Golden Belt and also into seven homes in the Golden Belt Historic District.

Some of the seven homes on the tour have been restored, and others are prospects for restoration by new homebuyers to continue the revitalization trend in the area.

"(We want) to try to bring new life to the community, new life to the neighborhood, and bring it back up," said Antoine Freeman, an organizer of the Golden Belt Neighborhood Association. "Because it was down for awhile."

Freeman said that before the turnaround started, the neighborhood was an impoverished area that saw its share of drugs and prostitution.

The revitalization began after the developer Scientific Properties renovated the Golden Belt complex, he said. That trend continued alongside increased home ownership in the area.

"We have that massive anchor right there, that's already anchored, and it was rehabbed and revitalized, then it's like a domino effect," he said.

Gary Kueber, chief operating officer of Scientific Properties, said that at one time, there was an 8 percent rate of home ownership in the area. That increased to around 30 percent, and he said the rate is higher now.

Kueber said the company, which completed the historic renovation of the Golden Belt apartments and studios and opened them in the summer of 2008, has purchased homes in the neighborhood that were initially vacant.

He said the company's plans were to bolster the historic district by doing initial restoration work on the homes, sell them, and increase the owner-occupancy rates in the area.

As for the studios and apartments -- those are 100 percent occupied, he said.

"We wanted only to be involved in vacant property to help provide a firmament for folks to feel empowered to have a stake (in the community)," he said. "I've never wanted us to overstep our involvement in the neighborhood," he added.

Kueber said the company purchased a home several weeks ago at 1007 Morning Glory Ave. from the Durham Housing Authority. The home had been abandoned for about five years, he said, and was knee-deep in clutter.

"It takes a little vision, but it's going to be a great home," said John Fish with

Acanthus Construction that is contracted by Scientific Properties for initial home renovation work. "This is in much better (shape) than we thought we'd find."

That home was the second stop on the tour behind one at 1005 Morning Glory Ave. owned by John Martin, who said he bought refurbished the home last year because he had confidence in the quality of the finished product.

Martin said there are homes in other parts of Durham also originally built in the early 20th century that are much more expensive than the ones around Golden Belt.

"It's economical," he said. "Homes over here are a lot less expensive."

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