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Builders, artists eye changes in Asheville's River District

by Joel Burgess, JBURGESS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM
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ASHEVILLE — Pattiy Torno thought she had found the perfect spot for a rock club back in 1989 – except for all the crime that came with the abandoned industrial sites along the French Broad River in Asheville.

“When we got here, the first thing I did was put new roofs on the buildings, then I put bars on all the windows,” said Torno, a fabric artist who later renovated the buildings to become her home and Curve Studios along the French Broad River.

In the decade since, the prostitution, break-ins and drug dealing died down while artist studios, clubs and restaurants flourished.

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Pattiy Torno, shown here outside her Curve Studios on Riverside Drive, is a fabric artist who opened her studio along the river in 1989, when the area was blighted and crime-ridden. Conditions have improved somewhat in the River District, but polluted land, the potential for flooding and other issues have slowed redevelopment efforts.

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company Design Workshop. That process could lead to more public discussion on what to do with Asheville's last development frontier.

"The only way the river is going to be a place that I can enjoy is if there are people living down here normally," Torno said.

Ryan Blau with Design Workshop said that some of the exercise will be academic but that real solutions could emerge. Part of the process will involve charrettes, a public presentation and discussion about design

"Part of the beauty of these charrettes is that they are unencumbered by the politics and some of the ideas that have failed in the past. So they will have a fresh eye. And certainly they will be thinking with 'big picture,'" Blau said.

Past charrettes put on by the company in other cities have produced ideas that the cities and other organizations can pick up on, he said. This one could provide a "framework" for what should be protected in the district and what it should look like in the future, he said.

A big offer

Private developers have made offers, those involved with the district say.

One of the largest and not widely known proposals, came two years ago in the amount of \$120 million from Kent Smith, who worked on the Cliffs Communities and whose Global Development Resources is building the 132-home Thoms Estate in Beaverdam.

Smith, an Asheville resident, said he wants to see the district improved and is willing to risk a minefield of polluted land, flood dangers, unyielding railroad rights of way and jockeying interests.

"It is going to take trying to get all of the different people that have individual agendas associated with the riverfront to soften those individual agendas for the good of the riverfront," he said

But Torno fears the old problems are pushing their way back, as evidence in one way by the intoxicated man threatened her in her garden.

Torno believes the ultimate solution is a large private development project. Others sharing in the dream of a vibrant riverfront aren't so sure.

Their varying ideas should find center stage this summer when high-end subdivision developer, an environmental group and others begin exchanging ideas with the subdivision and land planning

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Connecting the River District

Interns with Design Workshop will present their final project on connecting the river district with the rest of Asheville on June 8. The public is invited. A reception will be held at RiverLink at 170 Lyman St. from 4 to 5:15 p.m. The presentation will be from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at Curve Studios at 6 Riverside Drive. Curve and Warehouse Studios will be open from 4 to 7 p.m. as a preview of the river arts district studio stroll June 9-10.

TIMELINE

- 1890: Industry and commerce bring make the river district boom. The area also becomes known for prostitution and liquor houses.
- 1917: Standard Oil occupies offices that later become Curve Studios
- 1970: The industrial boom ends on the river.
- 1972: The district floods. Water rises faster than some remember from previous floods.
- 1990s : Artists and others seeking cheap rent begin renovating, and in some cases, squatting in the district.
- 2004: Tropical storms flood the district.

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Investors expressed interest in his proposal in 2005, he said, before timing and competing ideas scuttled the project.

Environmental group says no

RiverLink, a nonprofit whose goal is economic and environmental revitalization of the district, owned some of the property vital to Smith's proposal. Executive Director Karen Cragolin said RiverLink turned down the idea because the organization wanted a developer with experience in cleaning polluted "brownfields" and building around existing uses.

"A lot of developers like Kent say they are not interested unless they can put together 20 or 30 acres. I'm not sure that is what a lot of the people down there want," she said.

Unlike Torno, Cragolin said small investments are still out there and that she recently helped some artists by property at Haywood and Roberts streets.

A special tax district?

City officials have gotten involved with the district recently by changing the way things can be built by the river and considering the idea of a special tax district.

The City Council voted this year to approve a new zoning district that proponents hope will bring denser, more urban-style development to the riverfront. Mayor Terry Bellamy has talked of a special tax district that could be on the cusp of the riverfront area.

"Why not east riverside," Bellamy said when asked about a possible location for the tax financing district. The district would pledge its increased future tax value to borrow money for infrastructure improvements.

Rising rent, losing artists

Some users of the district fear larger projects would push out artists and other creative groups, changing an area that has served as an inventive incubator for Asheville.

One casualty could be the Recyclery, a bicycle recycling and give-away center, said volunteer Tammy Martin. After an anonymous call about possible building code violations in the area, city officials told the Recyclery it will have to make major upgrades to its rented space or move.

"The rent around here is going up, and it is taking away a lot of its originality, and soon it will be a place that is less creative, less inspired," Martin said of the district.

Smith said he would like to see a project that would prevent that kind of displacement. The developer said he would use some of the profits from a project to provide rent subsidies and give money for building facelifts.

"You can't go in there and do what we are talking about doing and disrupt those who have gone before," he said.

Redevelopment tried before

Whether changes suggested by the Design Workshop interns will make a difference remains to be seen. Redevelopment ideas for the district have been created, often to gather dust. Such plans date to at least 1989, when RiverLink used a federal grant for a concept that called for a



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whitewater paddling course and a unique zoning district. Others followed, including a study of the Interstate 26 corridor and the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Master Plan in 2003. Parts were realized, such as a new zoning district and park facilities. But most were unfulfilled.

Sign of progress

One larger project on the cusp of the district is moving ahead — the planned renovation of the Glenrock Hotel and the addition of 185 townhouses, condominiums and apartments by Mountain Housing Opportunities. The sale of city-owned land around Ralph Street cleared the way for the \$32.5 million to \$42.5 million project by the affordable housing nonprofit. Some users of the district said they look forward to such projects that will include mid-priced homes and community space.



Contact Joel Burgess at 828-232-5960, via e-mail at jburgess@citizen-times.com, or send a letter to PO Box 2090, Asheville 28802.

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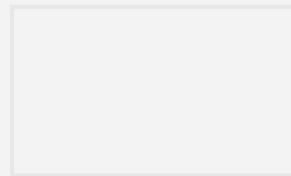
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