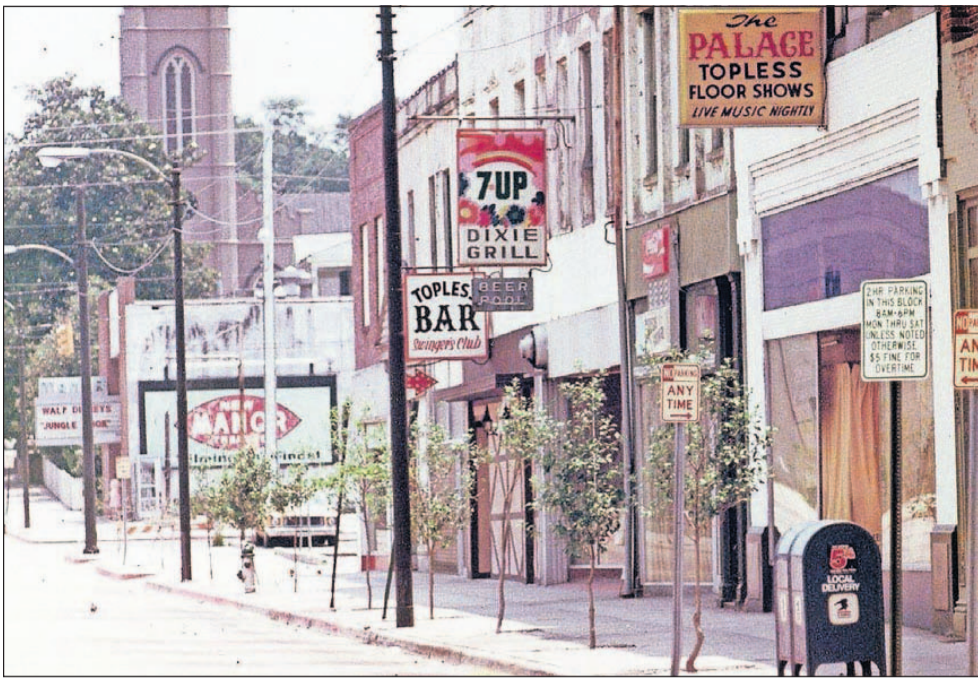


INSIGHT

Scott Nunn, Opinion Editor
910-343-2272
scott.nunn@starnewsonline.com



Market Street looking east toward Second Street in 1978. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



Market Street looking east toward Second Street last week. [SCOTT NUNN/STARNEWS]

DARE to dream

On the group's 40th anniversary, Gene Merritt recounts how Wilmington's Downtown Area Revitalization Effort, Inc. led efforts to transform a dying downtown

By Gene Merritt
For StarNews Media



The riverfront near the foot of Market Street is seen just before work was to begin on what would become the Riverwalk. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



Completed in 2017, the 1.75-mile Riverwalk now runs from Nun Street on the south to the Isabel Holmes Bridge on the north. It is the city's No. 1 tourist attraction. [STARNEWS FILE]

First in a series of occasional articles

It does my heart good to see the crowds of people in downtown Wilmington. But it's not always been that way. Thanks to the efforts of many dedicated people, downtown has evolved into a vibrant place to live, work and play.

On the occasion of the 40th year of Wilmington Downtown, Inc. (formerly Downtown Area Revitalization Effort, Inc.), it's a good time to look back at how we reached this level of success.

In the early 1970s, while leading the Greensboro United Arts Council, I worked on a variety of projects in that city's downtown. That work opened my eyes to the need for downtown revitalization, through historic preservation and other means, as well.

When I returned to Wilmington -- my hometown -- in 1975, I began running campaigns for local politicians, among them Ben Halterman. In 1976, Ben, a city council candidate, upset incumbent Mayor Herbert Brand.

Based on my experience in

Greensboro, I urged Mayor Halterman to push for revitalization in struggling downtown Wilmington. As the effort began to take shape, a research firm undertook an extensive study of downtown. The consultant recommended the establishment of a public/private partnership to address

how urban sprawl and suburbanization had affected downtown Wilmington, which had seen its role as the commercial hub of the city wither.

Mayor Halterman asked me to chair this new committee, but my employer at the time, the N.C. State Ports Authority, would not allow me to

accept the post. I continued to work with the mayor as an unpaid consultant, and urged him to choose Rick Willetts of Cooperative Savings and Loan to lead the group. In 1977, Wilmington's Downtown Area Revitalization Effort, Inc. (DARE) was incorporated and I served as its registered agent.

We wanted DARE to be a true public/private partnership and to share in the expense of the operations, which meant fundraising was an early priority. The city and county agreed to participate on a one-third-each basis, and with DARE covering the other third, operations began in July 1978.

With Rick Willetts serving as president, DARE worked closely with the city's Planning Department, notably Sara Caldes and Roger Frankoff. Both played an important role in the organization's establishment and Frankoff served for a short time as assistant executive director.

As with any fledgling organization, there were stumbles for DARE. When the first executive director didn't work out,

See DARE, C4



The south side of Market Street between Water and Front is seen just before downtown revitalization efforts began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today, the buildings are home to (from left) Kilwin's Ice Cream, William E. Poole Designs, Caprice Bistro (with arch) and the Black Cat Shoppe. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



OPINION | C2

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Does the #MeToo movement risk making the workplace more of a boy's club?



OPINION EXTRA | C6

THE MISSING TRUMP CARD

There's one number that Donald Trump needs to keep his otherwise successful presidency on track — 51%