

## DARE

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Willetts asked me to step in. I left my job as special assistant to the N.C. Secretary of Cultural Resources and went to work for DARE in the summer of 1978. Mary Gornto came on board as assistant director. (She would later become Wilmington's city manager.)

With a decaying downtown, DARE had a huge challenge before it. In 1978 Belk and Penney's moved to Independence Mall, meaning the major retail component of downtown was gone. (Sears had left earlier for Hanover Center). I once remarked "you can fire a cannon down Front Street at 5 p.m. on any day and not hit anyone." I wasn't exaggerating. With the major retailers gone, topless bars, adult book stores and prostitution flourished.

When local attorney Bill Shell became president of DARE, we worked with the city to tightly regulate the location and density of adult-entertainment businesses. By making strategic purchases of buildings, we were able to remove many of the businesses that had sullied downtown. In a year or so, we had effectively solved the problem.

About the same time DARE was formed, Joe Reaves and Mal Murray had opened the Cotton Exchange, which became an anchor for the north end of the main downtown business district. Soon after, Thomas Wright Jr. established Chandler's Wharf on the south end. It started with one small shop selling sandwiches, and quickly blossomed into what it is today. Like Joe and Mal, Thomas Wright Jr. was a true downtown-revitalization



**Katie Holmes on the set of a "Dawson's Creek" shoot on Market Street. When the film industry came to Wilmington, downtown quickly became a popular filming location.** [STARNEWS FILE]

pioneer. (He also signed banknotes that enabled DARE to buy the buildings housing topless bars and adult bookstores.)

An early part of DARE's strategy was to promote the downtown riverfront for non-industrial uses. Part of that vision was to have four downtown festivals, one for each season. It took a few years, but I was able to sell the Azalea Festival on the idea of hosting a street fair after the annual downtown parade. DARE formed Old Wilmington Riverfront Celebration, Inc., created what would become Riverfest. Bill Shell had served as president of Residents of Old Wilmington, and drew on volunteers from that group to help run

Riverfest. (Two other ideas, a downtown Christmas festival and a boat show, never materialized.)

As people in the area began to see the riverfront as an entertainment, recreation and tourist destination, DARE worked with the city to begin the Riverwalk, with construction starting in 1979 and the first section opening at the foot of Market Street. Realizing the unfulfilled potential of the riverfront, DARE and the city envisioned a Riverwalk spanning from bridge to bridge, which it essentially does today. (Completed in 2017, the 1.75-mile Riverwalk runs from Nun Street on the south to the Isabel Holmes bridge on the north. It is the city's No. 1 tourist attraction.)

interests on the river and ignored the longterm ramifications of allowing a coal pile downtown.

Running out of good options to stop the coal site, I came across a state statute that allowed local ordinances to be amended by voters. Upon the petition of 10 percent of the number of people who had voted in the most-recent municipal election, a special election could be held to change the city code. We needed 600 signatures, and we got around 1,300. We could easily have gotten more, but time was running out — the coal supporters were pushing hard to quickly close the deal.

On June 29, 1982, Wilmington voters decisively chose to amend the city's zoning

ordinance to ban coal piles in M-1 manufacturing areas. The vote was 3,304 to 1,876, not far from a 2-to-1 decision. I adamantly believe this wise, forward-thinking ultimately vote saved our riverfront and moved downtown in the direction of the what we enjoy today.

That episode, however, proved to be the first of two battles over coal. A decade later, we learned that Carolina Power & Light Co. (now Progress Energy) planned to bring a coal ship to downtown Wilmington to the same site. I was told that the city had changed the zoning back to its original designation.

My father and I hired a legal team and were able to get a restraining order that resulted in the coal ship weighing anchor at the WR-4 sea buoy while the case was argued. CP&L officials were infuriated, and threatened myself and my father with financial ruin, stating that they would charge us \$75,000 for every day the ship was not allowed to dock at Almont.

We took our complaint to Superior Court, and it did not take long for one of our attorneys to learn that, by state law, city code amended by a vote of the people could be changed only by another vote of the people.

Victory was ours. For the second time we had saved downtown Wilmington from a coal pile and kept it moving in a better direction.

DARE, Inc. soon was recognized by the International Downtown Development Association as the prototype small-to-midsize town business model. We also ensured that downtown's revitalization wasn't just about redevelopment, but, rather, stressed historic preservation.

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**The Open Mind bookstore, on Dock Street between Front and Second from 1976 to 1980, was one of the many adult-entertainment businesses that operated downtown in the late 1970s.** [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



**South Front Street in the early 1980s.** [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



**The Cotton Exchange in 1973, a year before restoration work began.** [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



**The foot of Market Street is seen during the first Riverfest, started by DARE in 1979, prior to construction of the Riverwalk.** [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

### The coal-pile struggle

We all know the story of Santa leaving a lump of coal in the stocking of a naughty child. DARE had certainly not been naughty, but its vision was jeopardized in 1980, when downtown nearly became the recipient of a giant pile of coal. It would be the most critical issue DARE faced during my tenure.

In late 1980, Clean Coal Terminals of Ghent, Kentucky, announced plans to annually ship a million tons of coal to a site in downtown Wilmington. It would be dumped on the ground then eventually shipped overseas. The dump site was Almont Shipping Company, on the downtown northern riverfront, now the location of the Port City Marina, several restaurants, with new apartments and condominiums to come. Just to the north is the site of the city's new riverfront park. It's unlikely any of that would be happening today had the coal company gotten its way.

It was obvious to me and to many others that the coal site would severely undermine downtown revitalization efforts. My opposition, however, received a mixed reception from the DARE, Inc. board, which had members with business ties to Almont. Those board members tried to discourage my efforts to stop the coal dump.

I decided to keep a low profile on the issue, and called on the help of my father, Gene Merritt Sr., a longtime local business owner who was well respected in both the civic and business communities. We formed the Wilmington Improvement Committee, and began to gather support from various groups interested in the environment. We also got backing from downtown business people who were worried that the coal depot would ruin their operations, notably tourist-oriented businesses.

Although Wilmington was a DARE partner, city council argued that the coal operation could be accommodated as long as "safety precautions" were maintained. It was a bad decision, as the city's leaders caved in to certain business

## Sign this Petition now if you want to help stop the development of a coal pile in Downtown Wilmington.

### PETITION

Petition to the Honorable Ben B. Halterman, Mayor, and the Honorable Margaret F. Fonvielle, Edward A. Pate, Luther Jordan, Jr., Joseph E. Dunn, Ralph W. Roper and William Schwartz, Members of the City Council of Wilmington, North Carolina.

WHEREAS, the undersigned Citizens and Residents of the City of Wilmington believe that the proper development and revitalization of the Wilmington Commercial Business District and the Wilmington Historic District is clearly in the best interest of all Citizens of Wilmington and New Hanover County, and

WHEREAS, this Council has, upon the recommendation of the Mayor's Community Facilities Task Force, unanimously adopted a resolution authorizing the City Manager to begin financial planning for a Civic-Convention Center to be located in the Downtown area of the City, and

WHEREAS, the undersigned believe that the operation of a coal transfer facility in Downtown Wilmington, particularly upon the site now under consideration by Cleancoal Terminal, Inc., Ghent, Kentucky, is totally incompatible with the foregoing and directly contrary to direction and intent of the resolution hereinabove noted and to the goals projected by this Council for the Downtown area of our City, and

WHEREAS, we further believe that the said coal transfer facility will irreparably harm our city by:

1. Endangering the environment by introducing pollutants into the air and water.
2. Seriously impairing the image of our City as one seeking to preserve its rich historical heritage compatibly with tourist oriented attractions and facilities.
3. Diminishing property values of nearby commercial and residential buildings, through visual and noise pollution resulting in substantial lost tax revenues.
4. Removing a potentially ideal location for a Civic-Convention Center or other more compatible use which would provide for many more jobs, the infusion of substantial amounts of tourist dollars, and additional tax revenues.

Now, therefore, we respectfully petition the honorable Mayor and Council Members of Wilmington, North Carolina, to immediately re-activate the Mayor's Community Facilities Task Force with a specific directive that it immediately investigate the proposed coal transfer facility's potential impact on the Downtown area relative to the Task Force's recommendations to this Council, and further, to direct the City Manager to act with all possible speed to implement the Council's resolution adopted on September 20, 1980.

**Gene Merritt says stopping a coal depot from being located downtown in the early 1980s was the biggest challenge DARE faced during his tenure there. This is the petition that ultimately let Wilmington voters make the decision to stop the coal dump.**



**The Third Annual Wilmington Boat Show at Port City Marina in September. In the early 1980s, this location almost became home to a massive, open-air coal depot.** [STARNEWS FILE]