

DARE

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The long process had begun.

As major retailers moved out of downtown, a seedier side moved in. An early focus for DARE was to eliminate the adult-bookstore and topless-bar businesses that had taken hold downtown. Also in those early days, DARE established Riverfest and persuaded the Azalea Festival to add a downtown street fair. Perhaps the biggest accomplishment was the beginning of construction of the Riverwalk, giving people a reason to come downtown and enjoy its greatest asset — the Cape Fear River.

(It's hard to believe now, but it had been many years since the river and riverfront area had played a vital role in the life of downtown.)

And DARE wasn't focused simply on revitalization; the non-profit group's vision has always made preservation a priority. Working with County Commissioner Karen Gottovi, we solicited and coordinated the location of the New Hanover County Public library to downtown Wilmington in the former Belk building. DARE fostered mixed-use and adaptive re-use of historic buildings, as spaces above businesses became residences.

Working closely with the City of Wilmington, The Historic Wilmington Foundation, Inc. and the Residents of Old Wilmington, DARE quickly became an effective conduit for positive change.

When I stepped down as DARE's executive director in July 1982, Mary Gornito began a successful two-year tenure as the group's leader. Mary ultimately became Wilmington city manager. Her background at DARE and passion for revitalization efforts and historic preservation made Mary an important player as downtown began to blossom.

(On a personal note, I would like to say that Mary is one of the finest public servants I have ever known. Her contributions to downtown, the City of Wilmington, New Hanover County, and the State of North Carolina have been significant.)

Another early leader at DARE was Bob Murphrey. As vice president of a local commercial real estate company, he became involved in the sale, renovation and leasing of two large buildings downtown — the upper floors of the Masonic Temple building (21 N. Front St.) and the entire Iron Front building next door.

As a result of his downtown involvement, Bob was appointed to represent the Wilmington Board of Realtors on the DARE board and he later served as board president. In the fall of 1984, Bob stepped down from his real estate post and accepted the job as DARE's executive director. With years of experience in both the retail-sales business and commercial real estate, Bob was a perfect fit as DARE worked diligently to get businesses and investors committed to downtown.

The mixed-use vision

The renewed interest in downtown in the early 1980s prompted entrepreneurs Charlie and Nelda Illick and Bob Jenkins to purchase and renovate a neighboring pair of small two-story buildings at the foot of Market Street. These Wilmington urban pioneers housed their businesses on the ground floors and lived in residences above. Their successful efforts led to a number of other "mixed-use" projects over the next several years, including the multi-unit residential projects at "Pontiac Place" (a former automotive dealership at 311 N. Second St.), and "The Livery," a former horse stable at 118 Dock St.

Some projects also benefited from a new federal financing program provided loans of up to \$100,000 for the commercial component of a project and \$33,000 per unit for the residential portion. Such programs helped spur mixed-use projects, bringing not only businesses back into the central business district, but residents, as well. That was a vital part in making central downtown a place not



10 and 12 Market St., where Charlie and Nelda Illick and Bob Jenkins were urban pioneers in downtown Wilmington. (STARNEWS FILE)



A view of the Masonic Temple, on North Front Street, in 1913. (NEW HANOVER COUNTY LIBRARY/DR. ROBERT M. FALES COLLECTION)



Actor Dennis Hopper in his apartment at the Masonic Temple on North Front Street. When the film industry came to Wilmington, downtown became a popular spot for location shoots and also a good place to spot film and TV industry celebrities. (STARNEWS FILE)



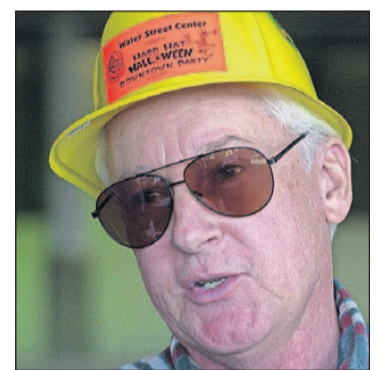
Pontiac Place, 311 N. 2nd St., took its name from the former auto dealership at the site. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



A modest convention space and hotel (pictured) paved the way for today's larger Wilmington Convention Center and adjacent Embassy Suites hotel. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



The Livery on Dock Street turned an old horse stables into a mixed-use development. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



Bob Murphrey used his background in commercial real estate to bring new business tenants downtown. (STARNEWS FILE)

just to work, but also a place to live and play.

Tapping into tourism and the river

Having identified downtown's riverfront as a major component of a downtown resurgence, in the mid-70s the city began preliminary work on a Riverwalk, with the first phase being constructed at the foot of Market Street. (The longterm vision was for the Riverwalk to extend from bridge to bridge, which it essentially does today.)

In the past, downtown had been a place to work or shop. It had not, however, been considered a tourist destination, especially when compared to the Battleship North Carolina, Fort Fisher and the beaches. But with the Riverwalk being developed and unique shopping areas, such as the Cotton Exchange and Chandler's Wharf, emerging, that was changing.

In fact, an eye-opening study made clear that downtown could play a big role in growing the tourism economy. A river taxi was started to ferry battleship visitors over to downtown Wilmington, where new shops and restaurants were taking hold. DARE recruited a horse-drawn carriage tour operator and supported other initiatives, such as the Henrietta II riverboat and the walking tours offered by Bob Jenkins and other entrepreneurs.

After a 1980 effort to establish a publicly funded convention center failed, DARE led an effort to pursue a downtown convention center and hotel based on a public-private model. Realizing the importance of increased convention business to the downtown economy,

DARE ultimately purchased two old ACL railroad buildings. A "request for proposals" to local, regional and national developers led to an agreement with a development group to purchase and develop the property as a 10,000 square foot public convention center, a 50-room hotel and additional restaurant and commercial space. The \$6.5 million project would utilize private investment, historic tax credits and an Urban Development Action Grant from the federal government. The project was completed in 1990, and its success paved the way for the Wilmington Convention Center and adjacent hotel, now located nearby.

Master plan for parking

As was — and remains — the case, parking is a four-letter word in any downtown. Recognizing that, DARE initiated two major parking studies in the 1990s that identified a critical need for additional parking and a funding mechanism. A pilot program to demonstrate parking efficiency was conducted by DARE on a private parking lot behind the DARE offices on Market Street, demonstrating that current parking was being underutilized and better management could increase utilization of existing spaces by as much as 50 percent, plus increase revenues.

Additionally, the potential for development of a new bank building on Third Street would require more parking to support the private investment. DARE, the developer and City of Wilmington worked closely to identify a plan to construct a multi-story parking deck to

support the private development while also providing additional public parking. The deck would be initially owned and financed by DARE through a special financing arrangement with a local bank and underwritten by the city. It was completed and opened with the 50,000 square foot new office building.

The cost of multi-level parking facilities generally exceeds the ability to support the cost through reasonable parking fees, so additional revenues are needed. Installing on-street parking meters offers the most feasible solution, since those fees can help underwrite the higher cost of parking decks. Thus the establishment of the Downtown Parking Management Plan and the Parking Advisory Committee, originally managed by DARE and eventually by the City of Wilmington through a private parking management firm. Although parking meters were a highly unpopular move, they were and are a necessity if downtown is to be able to provide adequate parking.

PPD Project/Water Street parking deck

The site of the city-owned Water Street parking deck, sitting directly across from the Cape Fear River, had long been seen as a prime redevelopment site. In the mid-90s, DARE was authorized by the city to market the site for redevelopment. A national marketing effort was unsuccessful. Meanwhile, it was learned that PPD, downtown's largest private employer, with 300 to 400 workers, needed to consolidate several downtown Wilmington properties in Research Triangle Park, near

Raleigh. It would be a big blow for downtown Wilmington's comeback as an office hub.

DARE helped obtain a commitment from PPD to build its headquarters on the site of the Water Street deck. The city entered a redevelopment agreement with PPD. However, due to political pressure, the agreement was dissolved and PPD was forced to relocate to a suburban site, returning to downtown Wilmington several years later to build a 10-story headquarters building on the riverfront, bringing 1,500 employees to downtown.

The later acquisition of the deck site and development of Water Street Center Condominiums on a portion of the site by Gene Merritt and John Sutton provided a vision for what the site could be. Although the remainder of the site was repurchased by the City of Wilmington, the project currently underway, River Place, appears to realize the potential for redevelopment of a major site in a prime location on the downtown riverfront, bringing more residents downtown.

As these anecdotes illustrate, the revitalization of downtown Wilmington has been — and remains — a work in progress, changing as needed to meet current demands. With the Riverwalk fully completed in the past several years, the foundation has been laid for even bigger and better things, as people once again flock to a downtown commercial area that 40 years earlier had been rapidly dying.

Next in the series: Downtown's revitalization effort moves north to the old Brooklyn neighborhood; Cape Fear Community College becomes a bigger player.