

INSIGHT

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The conservative divide



Jonah Goldberg

The idea holding together the conservative movement since the 1960s was called “fusionism.” The concept, which always worked better as an organizing principle than a philosophical one, was that freedom and virtue were inextricably linked. Virtue not freely chosen wasn’t virtuous. Or as Frank Meyer, the foremost architect of fusionism, put it: “Truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings about conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny.”

This idea may have passed its sell-by date. The intellectual right (like the intellectual left) has always had more internal fault lines than outside observers realized. These cracks were mostly paved over by opposition to communism throughout the Cold War, but they started to re-emerge once the Berlin Wall fell. Pat Buchanan’s 1992 call to revive the “Old Right” vision of economic protectionism and socially conservative statism was more of a harbinger of the un-fusing of fusionism than was widely appreciated at the time.

Today, conservative forces concerned with freedom and virtue are pulling apart. The catalyst is a sprawling coalition of self-described nationalists, Catholic integralists, protectionists, economic planners and others who are increasingly rallying around something called “post-liberal” conservatism. By “liberal,” they don’t mean contemporary progressivism as represented by the Democratic Party. No, they mean classical liberalism, the Enlightenment worldview held by the Founding Fathers.

What the post-liberals want is hard to summarize beyond generalities. They seek a federal government that cares more about pursuing the “highest good” than protecting the “libertarian” (their word) system of individual rights and free markets.

On the other side are more familiar conservatives who, like George Will in his brilliant new book, “The Conservative Sensibility,” still rally to the banner of classical liberalism and its philosophy of natural rights and equality under the law.

“American conservatism has a clear mission: It is to conserve, by articulating and demonstrating the continuing pertinence of, the Founders’ thinking,” Will writes.

The match that lighted the current conflagration was a tweet and then an essay by Sohrab Ahmari, the Iranian-born op-ed editor of the New York Post, who is a passionate convert to Catholicism. Outraged by an ad for a “Drag Queen Story Hour” at a Sacramento-area library, Ahmari lashed out not at the event organizers, but at conservative writer David French for somehow representing conservatism’s failures to prevent such moral slippage in our culture.

French, for those who don’t know him, is a devout Christian conservative who, prior to becoming a full-time writer for National Review, spent most of his career as a prominent litigator fighting for religious liberty and free speech on college campuses.

French’s allies — including

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Crowds walk down The Riverwalk in downtown Wilmington during a warmer than normal Thanksgiving weekend. [STARNEWS FILE PHOTOS]

DARE TO DREAM

New century brings unprecedented progress in revitalization of downtown Wilmington



The cast of the national tour of “The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical” performs recently at the Wilson Center in downtown Wilmington. National entertainment acts now regularly make stops here, thanks to the Wilson Center.

Downtown blooms with Wilson Center, convention center, completion of Riverwalk; new riverfront park on way

In the late 1970s, DARE (Downtown Area Revitalization Effort) led efforts to save a dying downtown Wilmington. The public-private partnership transformed blocks of empty, rundown buildings into the vibrant downtown we enjoy today. Gene Merritt, a DARE founder, is looking back at the group’s work.

Fourth in a series

By Gene Merritt
For StarNews Media

In the early 16th century, the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano recognized the natural beauty and unique geography of what would eventually become Wilmington. Nearly 500 years later, Wilmington embraced the 21st century with a rediscovered downtown.

The period of downtown revitalization from 2001 to the present has seen the experience of the 2008 recession, the corresponding recovery and the blossoming of downtown Wilmington into its current state.

After 17 years of successful public service

See DARE, C4



Construction on the Embassy Suites Hotel next to the Convention Center in Downtown Wilmington in 2017. The full-service hotel is now complete. [STARNEWS FILE PHOTOS]



GRAMMAR GUY | C6
GOING SHOPPING
A grocery cart full of invisible letters



JOHN KASS | C6
WHERE DOES IT END?
Put coward Florida cop in prison, and who’s next?

DARE

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as executive director of DARE, Inc., Murphrey left DARE in 2001 to join the Main Street Program of the N.C. Department of Commerce. Great strides were made downtown during his time at DARE.

With Bob’s departure, I was asked by DARE’s board to serve as interim executive director and to help find his replacement. I worked in the position for a number of months and we interviewed a number of prospects. We soon realized that the ideal person for the job was right here in Wilmington — Susi Hamilton.

Susi — at the time a planner with the City of Wilmington — was a dedicated preservationist and a strong supporter of downtown and the surrounding areas that also were starting to have a rebirth. Susi took over the leadership of DARE in August 2001 and served until April 2007. It was during her tenure that DARE, Inc. become WDI, Inc. (She later was elected to the N.C. House and today serves as Secretary of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources).

Downtown continued to thrive as the city embraced a new century. Susi Hamilton’s replacement, John Hinnant, who came on board in May 2007, inherited a vibrant and growing downtown. The outlook would soon become much more challenging, however, as the 2008 recession took a toll on the entire region. Despite the sour economy, good things continued to happen downtown.

Ed Wolverton took the reins at DARE (WDI) in November, 2013, and continues to lead the group through unprecedented growth, especially on the northern end of downtown. Ed held a similar position in downtown Greensboro, which has also seen a rebirth in recent years.

Many changes have taken place downtown since the beginning of this century, and DARE, Inc./WDI, Inc. has been in the middle of all of them, directly or indirectly.

Recommitment to historic preservation

During Susi Hamilton’s tenure, DARE, Inc. (later WDI, Inc.) made a recommitment to using historic preservation as a strategy for downtown revitalization. This was the original approach of DARE, Inc. when we started operations in 1978.

It was also during her tenure that DARE, in 2004, changed its name to Wilmington Downtown, Inc. The organization wanted to be clear that it had evolved from a “revitalization” organization to a full-scale economic development organization.

Riverwalk completion

With Wilmington Vision 2020: A Waterfront Downtown, the city south to plan for a future of downtown that “balances the preservation of community character and natural resources with economic development.” The plan called for the completion of the Riverwalk from bridge to bridge. This plan has, effectively, been executed. On the north, the Riverwalk basically extends to the Isabel Holmes Bridge. To the south, the Riverwalk ends at the Governor’s Landing development. Whether or not to extend to the Cape Fear River Memorial Bridge remains controversial.

Construction of the Riverwalk, conceived of by the city, DARE, and others, has been a major driver of business development and tourism downtown. It has proved to be an excellent public investment in infrastructure. Year in and year out, the Riverwalk is one of the top tourist attractions in New Hanover County. A USA Today survey ranked Wilmington as the country’s best waterfront and best all fresco dining. Our waterfront is very attractive and vibrant and downtown is a fun place to eat out.



Classic cars line Front Street in downtown Wilmington during the 15th Annual Rims on the River in downtown Wilmington in May.



The Nao Santa Maria at Port City Marina in downtown Wilmington in May. The riverfront and related activities remain the biggest draw for downtown.



The convention center hotel is seen under construction in 2017. It is now up and running, one of the many new hotel options downtown. [STARNEWS FILE PHOTOS]

Vision 20/20 Plan

Coordinated by the City of Wilmington and others, including representatives from DARE, Inc., the Vision 20/20 Plan was completed in 2004. The plan won a national award from the International Downtown Association. It called for, among other things, the Riverwalk completion from bridge to bridge. Other main points were:

- More and enhanced public spaces
 - More efficient development pattern
 - Increase emphasis on economic development
 - Strengthen and coordinate marketing/information collection and distribution
 - Infrastructure enhancements
 - Modify development regulations
 - Increase the frequency of special events
- In general, we have been successful in all categories.

Cape Fear Community College expansion

During the period of 2001 to the present, a number of new construction projects were completed by Cape Fear

Community College, notably Union Station and its corresponding parking garage, and the Wilson Center and its parking facility. Both projects boast excellent architectural design and function and have provided great service to our community and to CFCC. The college remains a major “anchor” of downtown.

Convention center and hotel development

Our first venture into the concept of a convention/conference center was Coastline Center. Although not large enough to handle significantly larger meetings and events, Coastline Center has served us well in the past and continues to do so in the present. The establishment of Coastline Center importantly demonstrated the need for a larger, more comprehensive convention center. After many years of planning, the new Wilmington Convention Center opened several years ago and the facility has been the location of many conventions, meetings, trade shows and social events since its opening. Since opening of the convention center, there have

been several new hotel developments.

- The former Hilton Hotel has been greatly renovated and rebranded as the Hotel Bal-last. The property features full guest services and 272 rooms.
- The Courtyard by Marriott, located at 229 South Second Street, was opened in 2014 and features 120 rooms. It is able to take advantage of the nearby New Hanover County garage to accommodate guest parking.
- The long-awaited convention center-connected hotel, the Embassy Suites, opened last year with full guest services and 186 rooms.
- Aloft hotel is under construction adjacent to the Coastline Conference Center. It will provide 125 rooms with a good view of the Cape Fear River.
- The former Wilming-tonian Hotel, located at Second and Dock streets has been purchased and is under renovation and expansion and will be renamed Arrive. The new project will include a new restaurant.
- Two more hotels projects are in the planning stages at this time. Our long-term goal for first-class hotel rooms to service larger conventions is

1,000 and we are approaching that level.

Apartment and housing development

- The 112-unit City Block Apartments were completed on North Third Street by developer Tom Davis in 2014. They have been fully occupied since opening. Fifty-six additional units will be under construction soon.
- The 278-unit unit Saw-mill Point apartment project was opened beside the Holmes Bridge in 2017 and has been successful since origination.
- Pier 33, located at the marina, is currently under construction and will feature 275 apartments with a great view of the river.
- Construction has also begun on The Flats on Front, a 273-unit apartment complex located on South Front Street above Sawmill Point.
- River Bend, to be located beside the Bank of America building on North Third Street, will contain 120 apartments, a 500-car garage, and 20,000 square feet of retail space on Second Street.
- The Pearl, located at Fifth Avenue and Wooster Street, developed by Plantation Builders, will provide 38 new apartments.
- Dave Nathans is building NoFo, a seven-unit condominium project, on North Fourth Street.
- River Place, located on the old waterfront parking deck site, will feature 90 condominiums, 70 apartments, 25,000 square feet of retail space, and over 400 parking spaces.

Public improvements

In addition to the virtual completion of the Riverwalk, a number of public improvements have been made downtown. The completion of the 2nd Street parking garage by the City of Wilmington has not only provided a convenient parking facility for day visitors, but has served as a major factor in servicing a burgeoning nightlife environment downtown. The revitalization of the North Third Street downtown corridor by the City of Wilmington was completed in 2013 and included underground utilities, new traffic signaling, landscaping and street improvements. The result is an inviting driving experience in the downtown area and an ideal model for this type of improvement in other areas of the city.

Major new developments

In addition to the construction of the PPD world headquarters, Chuck Schoning with USA Investco has been a leader of the rebirth of the northern end of downtown Wilmington. His Port City Marina development has established downtown Wilmington as a home port for the luxury boating industry. The addition of two modern new restaurants (one currently in operation) has added value to that development. He is now working on creating a houseboat community at the marina. Immediately beside the marina, Pier 33 will provide 275 apartments. New city park and entertainment center Close to the marina and PPD, the city of Wilmington is getting ready to start construction on a large performance-oriented park where major concerts can be held as well as family oriented activities. For the first time downtown will have large, open-air space that accommodate a host of activities and events.

Next time

Documenting many of the people, places and events that have contributed to this 40-plus years revitalization effort, and some thoughts about downtown Wilmington’s future. Gene Merritt is a longtime local developer and historic preservationist. He was co-founder and first executive director of DARE, Inc., now known as Wilmington Downtown Inc.