

## New life stirs in Old (or Little) Five Points

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When Peter Skillern asked Virgie Mangum what her north-Durham neighborhood needs, she said, "I'd like to see the sidewalk fixed."

"I've got it," said Mayor Bill Bell, who was in a group of elected officials on a walking tour to see how things are getting better in what has been a depressed, crime-ridden section just a few blocks from the Downtown Loop and Durham Central Park.

Here, a decrepit apartment complex had been spiffed up under new ownership. There, a former drug house had been renovated for an office building. A transmission shop had replaced its chain-link security fence with decorative wrought iron, three vacant lots were becoming neighborhood gardens and a shabby downtown gateway was getting a makeover.

"We want to have elected leaders ... share our optimism and hope," said Skillern, who led the tour through parts of the Old North Durham and Old Five Points (also known as "Little Five Points") neighborhoods last week.

Skillern is executive director of the Reinvestment Partners, a community-development nonprofit with its offices on Geer Street – in the area through which he led the tour from Gurley Street, up Roxboro and down Mangum and over to several blocks near Durham Central Park where 1940s-vintage apartments were being turned into supportive housing for the mentally ill and new single-family homes were replacing vacant lots and eyesores.



Neighborhood organizer Steve Hopkins describes improvements new owner Frankie White, right, has made at his neighborhood



"It has been a tremendous experience ... to be able to change the look and feel of this block and this corner of Old North Durham," said Frankie White, who owns the Nice & Easy Food Mart at the corner of Geer and Roxboro streets.

White has done away with rusty fencing, an oil tank and public telephones, replaced an awning, repaired the parking lot, screened the trash cans, made more room inside for merchandise, added a planter box and engaged new management.

"Two years ago, this was a different corner," said Peter Katz, a nearby homeowner. "There was a lot more crime, the previous tenant at the store was buying stolen goods out of the neighborhood.

"People didn't want to live here because it was perceived as more dangerous, and now we've done a lot of work to try and improve that."

### **Recent revival**

Old North Durham, between Geer Street and the Beltline railroad corridor, has had a neighborhood organization since the early 1980s and has been one of the city's reviving inner-city areas. Revitalization in Old Five Points, just to the south, is a more recent development, boosted by its proximity to downtown, investment opportunities, city money and residents' own efforts.

City Economic Development Director Kevin Dick said the area has received about \$123,000 worth of recent public investment, mostly through grants that are paid after a proposed redevelopment is complete. The Old Five Points intersection itself – Mangum, Corporation and Cleveland streets – is due for a "Neighborhood Commercial Streetscape" makeover similar to that just under way at Angier Avenue and Driver Street in Northeast Central Durham.

UDI, a community-development nonprofit, is rebuilding a run-down retail building at Old Five Points, adding two stories for a mix of retail, office and residential space while restoring the original brick facade and using matching brick in the new construction.

In that, UDI was "influenced" by the Historic Preservation Commission, CEO Ed Stewart said.

"The idea is to maintain the historic value they say exists. I don't see it, but they say it exists," Stewart said.

In November, Skillern staged a press conference at a boarded-up bungalow a few doors from the store on Geer Street. The house had been vacant for six years, its owner having walked out on a mortgage, the bank taking no action and the foreign-owned firm responsible for maintenance leaving the house to vagrants and narcotics dealers.

Since then, foreclosure was completed and, in May, developer Bob Chapman bought the house. Chapman, who owns and has redeveloped several properties at the now-trendy Geer-Foster Street corner, was along for the tour and, Skillern said, "has promised to invest in that to make it the gem it once was."

### **'The whole point'**

"The whole point of this tour is to show how private entities, nonprofits and the community can all come together to work together – without really gentrifying the neighborhood," said Steve Hopkins, a resident sometimes called the "mayor" of Old Five Points.

"The point is, while we're turning we still have vacant houses that have been abandoned or a problem," Skillern said, pointing out examples in a block of Roxboro Street.

"Part of it is because the property values have dropped so low in this neighborhood and they need so much repair. Part of it is, it's hard to get good tenants for the area. ... But what you're finding is some people are realizing this could be a good neighborhood."

John Martin, an Old North Durham homeowner who is president of the InterNeighborhood Council, indicated one of the vacancies.

"A house that looked just like that right around on East Trinity Avenue sold for \$200,000 last fall," he said, "and the people that bought it are a young couple who were delighted to find a house this close to downtown at that price so they've been renovating. So there is a market."

On another hand, there are old-timers such as Virgie Mangum, who has lived in her Roxboro Street home for more than 40 years and came to her door when the tour came by to have a talk with the mayor.

"I did not set her up," said Skillern.

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