Old Cities,

New Life
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ON THE COVER: For four years, Mandy Bryant has lived in North Charleston’s “old village” neighborhood, which is making a strong comeback since the city and Noisette Co. began a partnership to build a new downtown on the former navy base. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

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FACE-LIFT. Isaac German, working for his contractor father, repairs a house near the former navy base in North Charleston. Many homeowners in the city’s Noisette-planned area are fixing up homes that have fallen into disrepair. PHOTO/WADE SPEES

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FAR-SIGHTED. Developer John L. Knott, Jr. (right), CEO of the Noisette Co., and Kurt Taylor, North Charleston councilman and mayor pro tem, view construction of a walkway leading to an open-air amphitheater at the city’s new riverfront park, due to open this summer. “This park,” says Knott, “will bring North Charleston back to the waterfront in a positive way, ending a 105-year separation from the river.”

PHOTO/WADE SPEES

Old Cities, New Life

By John H. Tibbetts

Stroll down the shaded slope under giant live oaks, past the renovated officer’s quarters, to the water’s edge along the Cooper River in North Charleston. Here the sky opens above the brand-new riverfront park featuring picnic shelters, green recreational spaces, a garden, a concert pavilion, and, in the distance, walking trails through a nature preserve.

That’s the city’s vision for a new $6 million park, a work-in-progress on the northern end of the former Charleston Naval Base, one part of a huge, 20-year rehabilitation effort across North Charleston’s oldest neighborhoods.

In 1996, the U.S. Navy closed the base, leaving behind hulking, aging buildings. On the waterfront, boat wakes washed over ragged clumps of salt-marsh grass in front of a deteriorating seawall. Nearby, the abandoned nine-hole golf course turned to weeds.

But, in March 2005, construction began on the three-quarter-mile-long park, which will eventually include a reconfigured riverbank, restored marsh grasses, and walkways to a new downtown. The park opened in July, but work will continue after that.

The park is only five miles upstream from historic Charleston, an inspiration for some of the best and brightest thinkers on civic culture and urban planning. Now, North Charleston leaders hope that a refurbished waterfront will be part of the region’s next model of quality city design.

The South Carolina coast is poised on the edge of an urban revolution. Innovative developers are resuscitating rundown neighborhoods and formerly polluted industrial and military sites, blending homes, civic buildings, commercial spaces, and historic elements into sophisticated city fabrics. Builders are finding inspiration in cityscapes created before the advent of the automobile, yet also using up-to-date development and “green” construction techniques.

Some are deep-pocketed investors building mixed-use communities with multi-story residential buildings and commercial space. Others are constructing a few dozen houses on small plots within struggling neighborhoods.

In every case, though, they’re building “infill” projects—development in underutilized, derelict, or forgotten urban areas—without displacing many long-time
residents. Infill projects are notoriously difficult. Developers in many cases have to fight a gauntlet of problems: rigid zoning ordinances, high land costs, troubled urban schools, historic-preservation ordinances, and neighborhood objections.

Despite these challenges, new infill projects over the next decade could add thousands of acres of higher-density residential growth in the Charleston area, which is becoming a national leader in growth variously called “new urbanist” or “smart” or “sustainable.”

The region’s most ambitious redevelopment plan can be found in blue-collar North Charleston, one of the metro area’s first-ring (or first-tier), post-war suburbs. First-ring suburbs were the first ones built outside of center cities.

Many of North Charleston’s oldest neighborhoods, constructed mostly in the World War II era, have been in decline for decades. But they were hit especially hard by the base closure. Five thousand jobs were lost. Property values plummeted. Businesses moved away. Crime rose, and the community’s future looked bleak.

Then, in 2001, Mayor Keith Summey of North Charleston and developer John L. Knott, Jr., founder and CEO of the Noisette Co., announced a partnership to revitalize the area. Knott specializes in ecologically sound development such as that on Dewees Island, located north of the Isle of Palms.

Noisette, collaborating with the city, created an ambitious master plan to guide rehabilitation of some three thousand acres of neighborhoods and commercial corridors, including the former base. The master plan’s boundaries nearly match the original footprint of North Charleston when it was incorporated in 1972.

In 2003, Noisette and the city finalized the sale of about 300 acres of the former base’s northern section in a $9.6 million deal. Another 50 acres will be transferred to Noisette later.

On the former base, Noisette plans to build a 350-acre “River Center” urban core adjacent to the riverfront park, with about 4,000 housing units and eight million square feet of commercial retail space. The downtown would provide a new identity for a municipality that sprawls across 76 square miles.

Noisette has the responsibility to redevelop only the 350-acre portion of the former base, but the company’s planning effort addressed 2,700 acres beyond the base and required hundreds of community meetings with residents.

“The idea was that over a multi-year period,” says Knott, “neighborhood people would be integrated into the research and planning and thinking about what this place ought to be.”

The master plan encourages greater housing density in many redeveloped neighborhoods, improved walking access among homes, schools, shops and workplaces, greater transit options, and expanded open space.

“Noisette whole-heartedly involved everybody in the neighborhood,” says resident John Pharis, former president of the Olde North Charleston Neighborhood Council.

“We wanted to create a new model” of urban rehabilitation, says Knott. “And we wanted to do it in a way that the city would not have to put up money” to hire extra planners and other professionals.

“We basically treat this (process) as part of our land costs for the 350 acres we bought—and as a reinvestment in the community.”

In early 2004, Noisette handed over the master plan to the city, which has responsibility for implementation. The company remains a planning advisor.

Although the company spent years and $2.5 million on community planning, Knott expects this effort to bolster the company’s bottom line.

“The typical approach is, ‘We will (develop) our piece, and the ripple effect will go out.’ But improving neighborhoods outside the new center city will also benefit Noisette. “Here we sit on the (former) navy base, and if the rest of the area stays the way it is, we’ll be successful. But we’ll never be as successful as we could be” if the rest of the surrounding neighborhoods were not improved.

North Charleston and Noisette are attempting the largest urban reclamation underway anywhere in the country, Knott says. “We, as developers, need to see ourselves as being responsible for buildings that we put on the land but also for the connections to all of the natural systems, to the infrastructure, and for how the community works as part of an organic system.”

Still, this gigantic project has hit a few bumps. Residents have complained about redevelopment’s slow pace, while the company has fought red tape in acquiring military base property.

“We did not anticipate this length of time to transfer base property” from government ownership to private ownership, says Art Titus, a Noisette partner and vice-president of operations.

“We had to fight and scratch every step of the way” to get base property transferred, says Mayor Summey.

After the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the nation’s commercial real-estate environment temporarily changed. For a time, investors became “more conservative in regard to this kind of innovative, challenging venture in redeveloping a former military facility deemed to be a blighted area,” says Titus.

In March 2005, the city and Noisette had a public rift over a contractual dispute involving loans.
FRESH START.

Chris Morgan (foreground) and Geoff Mills of Sherwin-Williams Co. apply a no-VOC, low-odor paint at the Sustainability Institute, a nonprofit organization located in the Noisette-planned area of North Charleston. The institute helps people in Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester counties learn environmentally healthy techniques of home restoration and construction.

PHOTO/ WADE SPEES
SCHOOLS MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

Many families are fleeing center cities and older suburbs in expectation of finding better schools in communities on the metro fringes. “A great deal of motivation for sprawl is a perception that center-city school systems have failed,” says Richard Baron, a developer and CEO of McCormack Baron Salazar, based in St. Louis.

Many redevelopments in center cities and older suburbs focus almost exclusively on drawing on single young people. But this is a flawed, short-term solution, says Baron. Unless urban schools are improved, Baron says, “singles and young professionals are going to leave eventually when they start families.”

Some forward-thinking builders understand that urban redevelopment strategy must address public schools. “We need to get young couples with young children,” says downtown Charleston developer Jamie Price. “We’re never going to get it completely right until we get the public schools improved.” He points out that few families can afford a large mortgage and the price-tag of a private school.

Partly in an effort to help local schools, the city of North Charleston in 2001 approved three tax-increment finance (TIF) districts on about 560 acres in the Noisette-planned area, which is slated for extensive redevelopment over the next 20 years.

North Charleston will reserve 25 percent of the revenue from TIF districts to fund improvements of school facilities. New schools must be designed according to building standards of the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification program. North Charleston already has the state’s first LEED-registered elementary school.

that Noisette took out on base properties. In May, the partners reached a financial settlement and both sides said the conflict will not affect base redevelopment. Some residents, however, are asking whether the partnership can be repaired and whether Noisette has the financial resources to rehabilitate the former base into a new urban core.

“I’m for the Noisette (River Center) project, but we need to ask what kind of money this company has, and whether it can go forward,” Gayle Frampton, president of the North East Park Circle Civic Club.

“The company is financially solvent,” responds Knott, who is seeking to reassure neighborhoods in the area. “To the community, I want to say we’re as committed as ever.”

“The state of the union between the city and Noisette is strong,” says North Charleston Mayor Pro Tem and Councilman Kurt Taylor. “The conflict has been overblown, and we’re moving forward.”

Noisette, meanwhile, has continued rehabilitating historic properties and existing buildings on the former base, while waiting for final transfer of the remaining land.

For a time, controversies overshadowed the fact that the Noisette master plan has drawn high marks overall from neighborhood associations throughout the area. “Housing values are going up, people are taking pride in their homes again,” says Frampton. “We’re on the rise, and that’s due in large part to Noisette.”

The master plan has already encouraged other developers to invest in old North Charleston. The I’On Group purchased a 44-acre site that included 350 rundown rental units, originally built as temporary housing for World War II-era shipworkers. These units are being razed.

There could be as many as 950 new units built on this site, including a “really broad palette of housing types” from 500-square-foot flats all the way up to 2,500-square-foot single-family homes, says LeGrand Elebash, chief operations officer of the I’On Group, which has a reputation for building high-quality, new-urbanist developments.

Noisette’s master plan was “kind of a catalyst for the area,” says Tim Keane, planning consultant for the I’On project. But even before the master plan was released, the developers saw the site’s potential. “It’s so well-located in the region, and there are wonderful ‘bones’ here, with connected streets.”

Planners often talk about the good “bones” or the “skeleton”—referring to the existing street pattern—of old North Charleston.

In the nearby Palmetto Gardens neighborhood, a community of modest homes, residents are excited about the I’On project but also worried about increased traffic and higher property taxes. “There are a lot of older people here, and they won’t be able to afford their homes if their taxes go up,” says David Taylor, president of the Palmetto Gardens Neighborhood Council.

Still, residents are grateful that rundown rental properties will be razed and that new businesses are locating in nearby commercial corridors, he says.

Consumers nationwide are showing greater interest in higher-density urban villages, particularly infill projects within cities and aging suburbs, according to Emerging Trends in Real Estate 2005, an annual report published by the Urban Land Institute and PricewaterhouseCoopers. “Mounting traffic,” the report states, “and a lack of mass transportation in many built-out suburbs focus attention on infill and mixed-use town center projects with pedestrian-friendly design.”

But mixed-use—blending residential with commercial and retail—has a negative connotation in some circles. Many Americans don’t like crowded living spaces, and they don’t want to live near a grocery or hardware store or a busy restaurant. Says Joel Channing, a developer with the Florida-based
Cooper River

Urban Core

Open Space/ Park

Urban Core

MASTER PLAN. Noisette Co. organized a community-planning effort for 2,700 acres of neighborhoods and commercial corridors outside the former navy base in North Charleston. The resulting plan is highly detailed as seen in this map. Noisette Co. also plans to build a 350-acre downtown for North Charleston adjacent to a riverfront park that opened in July 2005. A high-density downtown, with 4,000 housing units and millions of square feet of commercial space, could provide a new identity for the sprawling city.

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF NOISETTE CO.

For descriptions of map zones and districts, download the Noisette Master Plan at www.noissettesc.com/res_keyproject.html
Channing Corporation: “Mixed-use has known more failures than successes.”

Noisette and North Charleston are nevertheless defying the odds. The city expects to use the Noisette master plan to blend living and working areas in new developments. The great majority of existing neighborhoods, however, will remain single-family, detached housing.

The master plan calls for creeks and marshes to be restored to support wildlife and recreation. Roadways and other public areas will be redesigned to minimize runoff pollution into creeks. Streets will be reconfigured with traffic-calming techniques to make walking a safer option. Schools could become public libraries and community centers in evenings.

Museums and monuments would recognize local history. Public centers would showcase performers and artists. The new riverfront park will give residents significant access to the Cooper River for the first time in a century. Noisette has also set up the Sustainability Institute, a nonprofit organization that helps residents learn environmentally friendly techniques of home restoration.

“Noisette was one of the primary reasons we moved here,” says Hanna Goss, who lives with her husband, David, in the “old village” neighborhood nearest the former navy base. “We believe in smart growth. Now we’re walking places instead of driving, we’re meeting our neighbors, and that’s the kind of lifestyle we wanted. Old North Charleston is a diamond in the rough, with a lot of character.”

**OLDER COMMUNITIES FACE DECLINE**

First-ring suburbs like North Charleston are frequently in worse repair than other parts of metro areas, including center cities, experts say. Many people—especially the young—are drawn to downtown areas, where walkable, historic, higher-density neighborhoods have strong appeal. But generally fewer
people are moving to first-tier suburbs, especially once they start to decline.

Most first-ring suburbs were built from the early 1900s to the 1950s, when workers bought homes near industry and other employers. In recent decades, however, employers relocated to newer suburbs, and many middle-income families followed.

Over the past 50 years, expanding government subsidies in suburban highways and home mortgages have offered major financial advantages to “greenfield” development on the metro fringes, placing older communities at a severe disadvantage, writes William H. Hudnutt III, former mayor of Indianapolis and now a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, in his 2003 book, _Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America’s First-Tier Suburbs._

Hudnutt points out that older suburbs face a daunting array of problems: “Their populations are growing older...; their tax bases are either shrinking or barely holding their own; their infrastructure is deteriorating; their homes cry out for reinvestment; their commercial outlets are faltering; their households are growing smaller in size and income; their resources to deal with change and decline are limited; their jobs are moving elsewhere and they find themselves isolated from nodes of economic growth; and their human and social capital is frequently wanting.”

Nevertheless, a coalition of developers, planners, community-development corporations, preservationists, architects, environmentalists, and local officials are calling for a massive reinvestment in older suburbs and center cities, part of a “re-urbanization” of America.

“Real progress has been made, in fits and starts, in many older communities across this nation,” says Parris Glendenning, a former Maryland governor and now president of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute. “They’ve done this quietly, making systemic change with many people and organizations.”

Successful redevelopments of older neighborhoods, says Glendenning, have one thing in common: a comprehensive approach. “You have to talk about the whole community—transportation, good governance, making infill possible, parks, schools, and housing.”

**NORTH CHARLESTON’S ADVANTAGES**

Some older suburbs have important assets that savvy developers find attractive. The oldest section of North Charleston, for example, has an excellent location in the metro area, a good road network, a responsive city government, several stable neighborhoods, an underutilized waterfront, and an intriguing history.

The Noisette-planned area is located near the geographic center of the Charleston metro area and its major populations and growth areas: downtown Charleston, Mount Pleasant, West Ashley, Daniel Island, and Summerville. It’s a short car ride from both I-26 and I-526, and only a few miles from the region’s major airport.

Many first-ring suburbs, once built for much denser populations, have valuable infrastructure, particularly roads, already in place. This is the case in North Charleston where some existing arterial roads, such as along southern stretches of Rivers Avenue, could support far larger traffic volume.

The city of North Charleston, meanwhile, has garnered praise from innovative developers. “The mayor and his staff were welcoming and cooperative,” says Elebash of the I’On Group. “We’re used to operating in an environment where governments are an impediment to what we want to do. The city of North Charleston has been a breath of fresh air. Noisette laid the groundwork for three years to create this environment, to help the city form their vision.”

Another developer drawn to old North Charleston is Monarch Develop-

**DEVELOPERS TUNE-IN TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES**

Many middle-income Americans have only one practical housing choice: they can live in sprawling suburbs where homes with large yards are designed primarily for couples with children.

For years, though, the American household size has been shrinking, even in suburbia, but housing has not changed with this trend. Suburbs still attract traditional households (defined as a married couple with children), but increasingly they also draw the kinds of people who generally lived in higher-density urban places two generations ago: singles, widows and widowers, divorced parents with young children, and empty nesters.

Meanwhile, more women than ever are working; people are marrying later; and couples are having fewer children per family. In the 1990s, two-thirds of all new households were nontraditional. By 2010, about 80 percent of all new households will be nontraditional.

These demographic changes could be a boon for developers who cater to smaller households looking for convenience. Higher-density housing near businesses can offer residents shorter commutes, parks and amenities, and lower home maintenance.

New projects such as Magnolia in Charleston’s Neck area and Noisette in North Charleston could provide this choice: higher-density, middle-income neighborhoods suitable for many of today’s smaller households.
ment, which purchased an 18-acre site, including a shopping center, only a few blocks from the former base.

Jamie Price, Monarch’s managing partner, plans to create mixed-use development there, renovating the shopping center and building condos for “people just starting out, artists, people who can’t afford to live on the Charleston peninsula. North Charleston is welcoming good development.”

But Old North Charleston’s blighted areas need improvements to attract more investors. That’s why the city wants to finance a comprehensive upgrade of streetscapes, parks, and public amenities throughout the master-planned area. Some efforts are already underway, but others are on hold while the city awaits tax revenues from base redevelopment. “As the base is improved, we’ll have more money to pay for those improvements,” says Kurt Taylor.

Old North Charleston’s future, in short, relies on Noisette’s successful development of a new downtown. “It’s the center of everything,” says Kurt Taylor. “Once it’s built, the benefits will move outside of the (former base’s) gate.”

NORTH CHARLESTON’S HERITAGE

Starting in the 1980s, architects and historians began studying older suburbs in an effort to understand their unique qualities—their social history, economic history, natural history, and architecture. Planners began incorporating historic interpretation of older suburbs as part of the redevelopment process.

The idea is to help residents recall the history and struggles of their communities, and out of that knowledge they can decide what to preserve and what to change. This was a central theme in Noisette’s planning effort. “We hoped to get the community to understand and see for itself the value of the place where they are already living,” says Knott.

It turns out that Old North Charleston, despite its gritty reputation, has an elegant pedigree, having once been touched by two highly influential community planners—Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Ebenezer Howard.

In 1896, Olmsted, the son of the co-designer of New York City’s Central Park, began planning a 600-acre Chicora Park in the unincorporated North Area for the city of Charleston on the Cooper River’s west bank. The park opened in 1897, and it was a popular attraction. But in 1901 and 1902, most of the park was turned over to the U.S. Navy, which built the naval base at that location.

The new riverfront park offers public access to that section of the Cooper River for the first time in a century.

The Park Circle neighborhood, in addition, was originally one of a small number of “garden-city” developments planned or built in the United States.

The garden-city model was the brainchild of Ebenezer Howard, a late-Victorian English visionary town planner. He advocated modest-sized, circular, self-sustaining communities, featuring shops, factories, and rowhouses located on the outer edges, and beyond that, farmland. At the garden city’s center would be a circle of open space surrounded by single-family homes. The idea was to provide walking access among homes, shops, workplaces, and farms.

Numerous garden cities were constructed in Great Britain, and Howard’s ideas influenced American railroad suburbs in the early twentieth century.

In 1913, the P.J. Berkmans Company designed a garden-city plan for the North Area that emulated Howard’s design. Dirt roads were apparently constructed for Berkmans’ project. Extensive development did not begin, however, until World War II, when the base expanded and homes were built at last around Park Circle. Even today, street patterns around Park Circle reflect much of Berkmans’ original plan.

Now developers are studying the 90-year-old garden-city plan to gain insights on the area’s rehabilitation. “The (Park Circle) park was intended to be the quiet space,” says Keane, the planning consultant for I’On. “And farther away from the park you would have had a main street, rowhouses, workplaces. We’re trying to complete the original idea.”

Berkmans’ original plan called for two traffic circles, one 300 feet in diameter and one 900 feet. Today, only the 900-foot roundabout remains.

The Noisette master plan recommends that the size of Park Circle’s 900-foot roundabout be

Reading and Web sites


Noisette: www.noisettesc.com

Urban Land Institute: www.uli.org
reduced to a 300-foot one. Roundabouts that function best, the plan points out, are relatively small. The current roundabout breaks up parkland into fragments, while a smaller circle would free up larger green areas.

But this proposal sparked protest from residents. “We want Park Circle to be the same size and be community-oriented as it’s always been,” says resident Gayle Frampton. “We like every other part of their plan, but we didn’t want the size of the circle to change.”

Jim Augustin, Noisette’s neighborhoods liaison, says, “If we were doing it again, we would have a lot more dialogue with people about this before we put it in the master plan.”

Mayor Pro Tem Kurt Taylor says that the master plan’s recommendations for the Park Circle roundabout have been discarded.

The city now has a blueprint to restore neighborhoods and commercial streets near the former navy base. There are two big questions remaining, though, according to Kurt Taylor: “When do we make these improvements happen? And how do we pay for them?”

Residents await further progress on the new downtown. Can Noisette complete its ambitious project to build a mixed-use urban core on an abandoned military base? Can older neighborhoods of North Charleston turn themselves around? Noisette and North Charleston view this redevelopment as a 20-year partnership, which inevitably will have more bumps in the road.

“The city is committed,” says Mayor Summey, “to make this area of the city a landmark of redevelopment.”

MOVING ON. Movers haul furniture from North Charleston’s Calhoun Homes neighborhood, which included 350 run-down rental units that had outlived their use as temporary housing for World War II-era shipworkers. Renters had to find new homes because these structures are being razed. A developer purchased the site to build as many as 950 new units. The Noisette Co.’s redevelopment plan calls for displacing as few local residents as possible. PHOTO/ WADE SPEES

In 2001, the city of North Charleston established three tax-increment-finance (TIF) districts covering 560 acres in its oldest neighborhoods near the former navy base. In addition, the state legislature has designated the entire base as a TIF district.

TIF is a device that allows municipalities to use projected increases in property taxes in a given area over a specified time to pay for public improvements. In a sense, a TIF is a municipality’s loan to itself.

Usually a city declares that a certain area is “blighted” and needs redevelopment. The city finds a developer willing to work on a revitalization project and creates a special district in accordance with state law.

The city usually issues a bond within a new TIF district to pay for infrastructure—parks, roads, sidewalks, or urban beautification projects. And the developer, in turn, can take advantage of these improvements and build new developments there. All future increases in property taxes generated beyond the pre-TIF level are held in a special tax pool, and are used to pay back the bond.

The catch is that a municipality must first find a developer who is willing to risk building homes or commercial space in a blighted area. North Charleston has attracted some innovative developers to the Noisette master-planned area, but city leaders wish they could bring in more investors and speed up redevelopment.
Charleston’s Calhoun Street was once a sharp dividing line between more prosperous southern sections of the peninsula and the mostly struggling, minority neighborhoods in the north area, which stretches for more than two miles to the city of North Charleston’s boundary.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, some neighborhoods north of Calhoun Street found rebirth and stability. But many others experienced a frustrating lack of redevelopment.

Today, three projects, including 117 new homes in primarily African-American neighborhoods, are being built or planned north of Calhoun in the Morris Street area a few blocks west of King Street. All three are mixed-use, infill projects typically built on vacant land.

Monarch Development is constructing 35 single-family homes on a 1.2-acre site, previously a dirt parking lot. A corner building will house offices and upstairs apartments. The three-story homes, selling for about $400,000, fit neatly into the cityscape. “We’re putting neighborhoods back into neighborhoods,” says managing partner Jamie Price.

By adding complex layers of zoning restrictions, most cities have inadvertently discouraged infill development. To address this problem, the city of Charleston has established a new provision in its zoning ordinance that allows developers to mix various housing types and commercial space for infill projects.

“The hard part is getting developers who are willing to work on infill projects,” says Christopher Morgan, interim director of planning for the city of Charleston. “It takes time, effort, and patience to deal with disparate groups of owners and neighbors, put the properties together, and get approvals for new construction. But we want to make infill as easy as possible, though building in the midst of other neighborhoods requires a lot more scrutiny. Infill can be very workable with the right attitude.”

“Charleston was very rigorous,” says Price. “The city wants to keep Charleston as Charleston. It was a prolonged process. We met with community groups, which is part of the process. We showed them what we were doing all along. There were changes made for both the city and the community groups.”

Monarch homes have attracted young professionals, investors, and buyers who live on resort islands such as Kiawah Island and want a home in the city, says Price.

In another infill, mixed-use project, Reavis-Comer Development is building 28 buildings, including duplexes, commercial spaces, and 23 single-family homes just a few blocks away. The single-family homes will likely sell for $400,000 and up.

“I love downtown, and I’m a big urbanist,” says partner George Reavis. “I don’t want to go out and build tract houses in Mount Pleasant. I would quit my job if I had to do that.”

The developers met extensively with community groups. “Gentrification always comes up,” Reavis says, “but we don’t see ourselves as gentrifiers because no one lived on the land we’re developing; it was vacant. We’re not moving people out.”

Neighbors particularly expressed concerns about parking and property taxes, says Rev. Sidney Davis, pastor of the Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church.

BACK TRACK. Rev. Sidney Davis, pastor of the Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church, admires continuity between new homes built by Monarch Development and older homes in an area north of Calhoun St. in downtown Charleston. “You can drive through here and not even know these houses are new, they blend in so well. We’re trying to blend neighborhoods back together.” PHOTO/ WADE SPEES
Davis is chairman of the Greater Charleston Empowerment Corporation, a nonprofit organization, which includes a cross-section of business owners and 19 neighborhood groups in the region north of Calhoun Street to the North Charleston city boundary.

“We need an effort to redevelop and balance communities,” says Davis. “We need to upgrade where we are while we maintain residents in the community” by helping them adjust. Fortunately, the Morris Street-area projects have not displaced any residents, he says.

THE NECK’S REVIVAL

Developer Robert Clement III and his partners in the Magnolia Development Group plan to build two waterfront, high-density neighborhoods, which could include 10,000 residents within 12 years. Existing industries on the Magnolia site are being transferred to the former Macalloy site on the Cooper River.

REBIRTH. Along the Ashley River, on former industrial sites in Charleston’s Neck area, the Magnolia Development Group plans to build two high-density neighborhoods, which could include 10,000 residents within 12 years. Existing industries on the Magnolia site are being transferred to the former Macalloy site on the Cooper River.

metals in the soils, which have since been cleaned up. Nevertheless, the area’s “brownfields” reputation scared off investors.

Years ago, when Charleston city planners first took Clement on a tour of the Neck area, he was unimpressed with its redevelopment potential. But over time he began to see that a new riverfront community could take advantage of an increasingly uncommon resource.

“Where can you go in the Charleston area and get real marsh frontage and immediate access to saltwater?” asks Clement. “Young people want to live and work as close to nature as possible but live in an urban setting.” A master plan for the two Neck projects should be completed this year.

Existing Neck neighborhoods, split by I-26 during the 1960s, are small and isolated. The Magnolia project, in tandem with the Greater Charleston Empowerment Corporation, is establishing an innovative program to sustain the primarily African-American communities. Although redevelopment will not displace Neck residents, it will likely raise their property taxes. So the nonprofit corporation is building an endowment that would help long-time residents pay for property tax increases during future assessments.

“This is for people who want to maintain their homes and who are in economic distress,” says Rev. Davis. He hopes that the project eventually could be used in other redeveloping neighborhoods such as the Morris Street area near King Street.

The Magnolia Development Group has pledged up to $200,000 for the Staying Put Initiative, which could be set up within 18 months. Davis is also working on a program that would help minorities bid on some of the work on Magnolia’s development. “We’re establishing a database so developers know where the minority contractors are,” he says.

The city and the Greater Charleston Empowerment Corporation are two of the Magnolia project’s “process partners,” organizations that participated in the community’s planning. Other partners include neighborhood groups, the state Department of Transportation, and the Coastal Conservation League.
17th Annual Beach Sweep/River Sweep
Statewide, South Carolina
Sept. 17, 2005

Each year thousands of people participate in Beach Sweep/River Sweep, South Carolina’s largest one-day litter cleanup of beaches and waterways. The S.C. Sea Grant Consortium and S.C. Department of Natural Resources organize the event, and anyone can participate—individuals, families, schools, youth groups, civic and conservation clubs, or businesses.

For more information, including a list of coastal site captains and areas covered, visit www.scseagrant.org and click on Education.

Clovis in the Southeast Conference
Columbia, South Carolina
Oct. 26–29, 2005

This conference will consist of programs, exhibits, and traditional scientific presentations, concluding with a tour of South Carolina’s Big Pine Tree and Topper sites. Presenting a scientific summary of Clovis in the Southeast, the conference will address issues such as Clovis origins, dating, geoarchaeological issues, Clovis technology, and site variation. For more information, visit www.allendale-expedition.net/csc.html

3rd International Symposium on Deep-Sea Corals
Miami, Florida
Nov. 28–Dec. 2, 2005

Understanding the ecosystem role, function, and value of deep-sea corals and associated fauna has become a priority topic for many national governments and international regional resource management bodies. This international symposium will facilitate global exchange of current scientific knowledge on deep-sea corals and associated fauna, and will discuss possible statutory means available to conserve and protect deep-sea habitat. For more information, visit conference.ifas.ufl.edu/coral