



NEW LIFE FOR NODA HULKS

TIMELY MOVE FORWARD ON MECKLENBURG, JOHNSTON MILLS

They do not look like crown jewels, but in NoDa, Charlotte's arts district, the brick facades of Mecklenburg and Johnston mills connect North Davidson Street's proud past with its hopeful future. That's why City Council was right not to delay picking a company to purchase and redevelop them.

This week council members authorized City Manager Curt Walton to negotiate a contract with NoDa Mills, a company that wants to turn two abandoned textile mills into affordable housing and retail complexes. It's about time. Why the urgency? The city hasn't done a whiz-bang job with these historic buildings. The sooner they go into private hands, the better for city taxpayers - and for residents of a neighborhood on the upswing.

The battered hulks of those mills show the scars of their hard-working lives. They were built a century ago as places of labor, but now stand vacant, boards covering snagged windows. Coveys of vagrants hover. It's not unusual to see a furtive drug deal or offer of sex for hire.

Nearby, NoDa is a neighborhood on the move. Fifteen years ago a few artists had moved in, but crime was forbidding and the business district held storefront churches. Now it holds art galleries and restaurants. Mill houses and bungalows are attracting families and the planned Northeast Light Rail line is attracting developers.

Mecklenburg and Johnston mills are a critical piece of that turnaround. In 1990 the city loaned developers \$6 million in exchange for rehabbing them and providing affordable housing. The project went bankrupt. A year ago, the city of Charlotte foreclosed on empty, termite-ridden buildings. Low-income residents were hurriedly moved out when inspectors found wood decay and structural damage deemed unsafe.

The city won't recover all the money it has invested. Nor will the redevelopment proposal provide affordable housing for the lowest income levels. Yet it preserves all historic buildings on the site, mixes rental units with ownership, integrates affordable housing units throughout the development and - very important - does not depend on further taxpayer investment.

Some City Council members wanted to wait in hopes of a more favorable deal. But these buildings don't need to sit neglected any longer. Nor should residents have to live any longer than they already have with the crime such neglect attracts.

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Johnston Mill, along with Mecklenburg Mill, soon will be redeveloped.