



Keeping arts, music in NoDa

Projects include saving 2 deteriorated mills

The next three projects planned in NoDa could help infuse the north Charlotte neighborhood with some of its original historic and artsy flavor.

In a key initiative favored by residents, the deteriorated Johnston and Mecklenburg Mills would be preserved.

Tuscan Development and its partners say that in addition to saving the old mills they would add new structures, an arts venue and affordable housing if the City Council approves their recommendation by a committee that evaluated proposals.

More music is about to fill the air in NoDa, too.

Rock musician/songwriter Johnny Colt, an original member of the Black Crowes, and his partners plan to open a rehearsal facility for musical groups by mid-November in a renovated warehouse building on North Davidson Street.

And more live entertainment also is in the works.

The Comedy Zone's partners plan a comedy club, live entertainment venue, coffee shop and restaurant in the restored Highland Park Mill No. 3's old dye house next to loft apartments on North Davidson Street.

The former mill village traces its origin to the early 1900s when homes and businesses sprang up around Highland Manufacturing Co., a textile mill.

Businesses and services clustered in the area, creating a North Davidson-and East 36th-streets hub once dubbed Charlotte's second downtown.

The neighborhood gained renewed life in the 1970s and 1980s as dancers, musicians, actors and artists moved in and restored blighted houses in what eventually became the eclectic North Davidson Arts District.

But in recent years, the community's texture began to change as condo developers moved in and investors gobbled up tracts along a proposed transit line for dense residential projects.

That touched off concern in the neighborhood that NoDa was losing its artsy ambience and affordability. They worried that longtime residents might be forced out by gentrification.

The new projects might not reverse a long-term trend toward a transit-oriented community similar to emerging South End, but they could help maintain some of NoDa's character.

And that would be a Next Big Thing.

"I love NoDa," said City Council member Patsy Kinsey, whose District 1 includes the neighborhood. "I think what's happening is great."

Kinsey said she's pleased that Tuscan's proposal includes restoring the old mills. The City Council will make the final decision, "but I hope it all works out," she said.

Hopefully, Kinsey said, the momentum will bring back some of the art galleries.

DEVELOPMENT

NoDa Mills Proposal

A selection committee chose a proposal by Tuscan Development and its partners for reviving the Mecklenburg and Johnston mills from four submitted by developers to the city. Tuscan President Ray "Rip" Farris III said Tuscan will co-develop the estimated \$38 million to \$40 million project with Banc of America Community Development, which will have a 50 percent interest.

The Housing Studio will design the redevelopment, which includes preserving the buildings — if a study confirms it's feasible.

The mills, which date to the late 1800s, failed as city-backed affordable housing, and the city assumed control in 2006. Decaying wood and termite damage forced officials to close them.

Tuscan says its NoDa Mills project would be a mixed-use, mixed-income transit village including 174 rental apartments, 31 new for-sale residential condos starting at about \$145,000 and 6,500 square feet of retail condo space. Seventy-five residences would be affordable rental units.

In addition, Farris said, the developers would convert a former boxing academy to a catering/restaurant facility operated by Mama Ricotta's owner Frank Scibelli and create artists' space, a gallery and offices in another with guidance from Suzanne Fetscher, president of the McColl Center for Visual Art.

The selection committee's recommendation goes to the City Council's Housing and Neighborhood Development Committee for consideration on Oct. 24.

The City Council would make the final decision.

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Tuscan's team is offering the city \$475,000 for the property based on the inclusion of 75 affordable rental units.

Otherwise, Tuscan said, it would pay \$2.475 million and develop a project that would be entirely market-rate housing with no affordability requirements.

If the city goes with Tuscan's proposal, Farris said, condo sales would begin in January and the arts building probably could open by summer.

The entire project would take about 30 months to complete, he said.

Comedy Zone

Partners in the Comedy Zone are heading to NoDa to replace the uptown club that closed early this year.

But this location will offer more than comedy in the 9,000-square-foot former dye house building at Highland Park Mill No. 3, said spokesman Craig Russing.

The comedy club will seat about 500, and a live entertainment venue will accommodate a standing crowd of about 1,000, he said.

As part of the plan, the complex also will include a sports-bar like eatery and a coffee shop catering to residents of the neighboring Highland Mill Apartments on North Davidson Street between Mallory and 33rd streets.

The Comedy Zone will keep its name, but the partners are still working on a name for the entire venue, Russing said.

Figuring in time to get permits and do interior construction, the facility probably won't open until early March, he said.

One of the big pluses of the location, Russing said, is that unlike the old uptown club, the Comedy Zone will have its own parking lot. "We really feel like we are part of the arts district here; we are making sure the arts stay alive in NoDa," Russing said.

Bob Silverman of Winter Properties, which renovated Highland Park Mill No. 3 and is leasing the space to the partners, said arrival of the Comedy Zone "elevates the entertainment here. It takes the whole thing up a step."

With the Comedy Zone on one end of North Davidson and NoDa Studios on the other, he said, the arts district is being extended.

Michael Vance of Regal Commercial represented Winter Properties in its lease with the Comedy Zone.

NoDa Studios

Rock musician/songwriter Johnny Colt believes NoDa is the ideal place for young musicians to network and get a start in the business.

To help make that happen, he's renovating a former warehouse at 3713 N. Davidson St. as a band rehearsal facility called NoDa Studios.

Colt was a founding member of the Black Crowes and now plays with Train and Rockstar Supernova. He and business partner Chris Connor are teaming with Bob Silverman of Winter Properties on the estimated \$2.1 million renovation.

They plan 41 rehearsal rooms plus two larger performance rooms and a lounge area in the 25,000-square-foot warehouse building.

Colt said it will be a secure, 24-hour building with security cameras and controlled by electronic key access for bands to use and network.

"Young people need to find their way — they need a safe, secure, comfortable environment to create their art," he said.

Rooms will rent for \$225 to \$450 a month depending on size. "In this situation, you can't hold people to leases," Colt said. "These groups sometimes create and dissolve almost immediately."

This will be his seventh rehearsal facility nationwide. "They are places where a type of peer pressure helps create a healthy, competitive spirit," Colt said.

NoDa Studios should be operating by mid-November, he said.

Pimsler Hoss Architects Inc. designed the project. Bradley Construction is the contractor.

• Information: www.myspace.com/nodastudios.

DEVELOPMENT Doug Smith Doug Smith: 704-358-5174; doug-smith@charlotteobserver.com