



BIG INFILL

Developers wedge larger projects into urban areas

At first glance, site work at a west Charlotte development called Lela Court might look like just another subdivision.

But this is something different. This planned 147-home development is big infill.

The 13-acre project, under way adjacent to the Wesley Heights Historic District, illustrates just how far one of the urban core's hottest trends has come in 30 years.

In the early days, developers dabbled in small infill - filling in gaps in established neighborhoods with new homes or condos generally on small vacant or underused lots.

Small-scale infill is still occurring citywide, but these days many developers are thinking larger, even though big tracts are harder to find and more expensive and time consuming.

In Wesley Heights, NoDa, Optimist Park, Cherry, Second Ward and the Belmont neighborhood, plans are under way or under discussion for residential projects ranging from dozens to thousands of units.

Big infill is getting a lot of attention in close-in neighborhoods today, thanks in large part to Charlotte's growing infatuation with living in the urban core.

First Ward's Garden District pointed the way for developers about seven years ago. There, a public-private partnership adopted the big infill philosophy, transforming 12 acres from a crime-plagued public housing project into a new and desirable neighborhood of apartments, condos and houses.

The cost of land in and around the center city is rising as urban pioneers take gentrification to older neighborhoods.

To make housing affordable in such areas, infill developers typically must squeeze as many units on a site as possible and bite the bullet on price.

Frank Martin, whose Landcraft Properties is spearheading Lela Court, said that because of the popularity of living close in, some developers now are "willing to pay the prices land owners had hoped to get."

His company paid nearly \$1 million in 2003 for 25 acres between Stewart Creek and Woodruff Place and spent more than he's willing to disclose on transforming rough undeveloped terrain into residential building lots.

"It had more fleas on it than a country hound dog," said Martin, who donated 12 acres of floodway land along the creek to the county for a future greenway.

"What we saw was a sizable piece of land and a growing demand in that neighborhood," he said. "There is such a premium today on living close in with the amenities we have uptown and the traffic getting worse throughout the region."

Charlotte's Tuscan Development - the first of four builders to announce detailed plans in Lela Court - is gearing up to build 21 houses there. It expects to receive its development lots in April and finish its first houses in six months.

Tuscan partner Ray "Rip" Farris III said companies like his are intent on finding close-in tracts to build on regardless of whether the tracts are large or small.

For many involved in infill development, large is preferable. The challenge of getting a small tract rezoned generally is no easier and no less time consuming than taking a large tract through the petition process.

"The headache of rezoning a half-acre is the same as doing 8 and

a half acres," said Babak Emadi of Urbana Urban Design & Architecture.

His firm is working with a land owner to transform 11 acres of industrial land in NoDa to 190-residence Herrin Towers.

Private planning consultant Walter Fields often helps developers get land rezoned.

"Infill has taken on a whole new character in Charlotte and it's about time," he said. "I've been telling people for 15 years that someone could make a really good living by doing infill development."

Fields said that when he arrived in Charlotte in 1977 to work for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission the buzzword "infill" hadn't emerged, but some developers were practicing it by building multifamily housing along major thoroughfares.

"It's not so much a planning challenge as a neighborhood and political challenge," he said. "The political process is still the most important factor in where and how it is done."

Infill typically raises concerns among neighboring home owners worried about density and property values. But urban planners, in general, favor such projects. By using existing infrastructure, infill developers mitigate major problems associated with urban sprawl: traffic congestion, air pollution and massive clearing of trees and farmland.

In Second Ward, the political winds seem to be blowing in the infill developers' direction. Local leaders have rallied behind a plan to create up to 4,000 households there over the next few decades.

The blueprint developed by Charlotte-Mecklenburg planners and consultants envisions a dense mixed-income community with parks and grand boulevards.

Developers are excited about the prospects of building there, but it might be a while before anything happens.

One of the most desirable sites - next to Marshall Park - is occupied by the Education Center, which would have to relocate for residential development to occur.

"The school board would like to sell their property at market value and have someone else build them a new facility," said Dan Thilo, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission's urban design program manager. "But that's going to be difficult to do."

He describes the situation as "sort of like a puzzle. One piece of the puzzle has to move before the others can move."

If the residential development succeeds in Second Ward, the neighborhood might be sharing the spotlight with several other projects on the horizon.

A study commissioned two years ago saw the potential in Optimist Park and neighboring Belmont for \$900 million in investment, including 5,000 homes.

Also in the Belmont neighborhood, the city is counting on a \$20 million federal grant to help it bring in 940 new homes. That total includes 242 public housing units to replace the old ones lost in the redevelopment of Piedmont Courts.

And near uptown, a condo developer is working with the Cherry neighborhood next to Midtown Square to buy up and replace many of the old houses.

Big infill. For Charlotte's inner city, it looks like the next big thing.