



## VENTURES MAKE AREA OPTIMISTIC ABOUT RENEWAL

A Charlotte developer is proceeding with two projects — a condo complex and a personal storage center — in hopes of igniting a revitalization in Optimist Park.

Ray "Rip" Farris III of Tuscan Development is focusing on a city block about four blocks north of the Brookshire Freeway, between uptown and NoDa.

The initial condo project — dubbed Opt12 — will include 12 "edgy" one-bedroom, one-bath units priced from the \$120,000s to \$130,000s at Caldwell and 15th streets.

But Farris plans 68 more units within two to five years on the same block, bounded by Caldwell, Davidson, 15th and 16th streets.

Probably by late fall, he said, Tuscan will announce — in partnership with Frank Martin of Landcraft Properties and Ron Leeper of R.J. Leeper Co. — 42 more units in four small projects across Caldwell from Opt12.

The new housing should be a boost to the neighborhood, whose leaders have been pushing — with public and private assistance — to reduce crime and eliminate blight.

Henry Heath, president of the Optimist Park Community Association, said Tuscan's plans are "a beginning, a motivating factor for us to continue beautifying and cleaning up the neighborhood." He lives about two blocks from the development site.

The neighborhood's efforts captured the attention more than a year ago of Advantage Carolina, formed in the late

1990s by business and civic leaders to strengthen the economy and improve the region's quality of life.

A study it commissioned in May 2003 saw the potential in Optimist Park and neighboring Belmont for \$900 million in investment, including 5,000 homes, 450,000 square feet of offices and shops, a greenway and a lake.

The study, conducted by the Harvard School of Design, the UNC Charlotte college of architecture and the UNCC MBA program, noted that the neighborhood is expected to have two light-rail stations by 2020.

"People see what's coming," said developer Martin. "The city is stepping up with incentives for home ownership, neighborhood residents are working together, light rail is coming and the park and recreation department is studying the Sugar Creek Greenway for that area."

Opt12, valued at \$1.8 million, was designed by David Furman Architecture, recognized for its funky, eye-catching urban projects.

The 790- to 851-square-foot condos will have exposed concrete-block walls and corrugated metal on parts of the exterior.

"We've talked about lighting up the large roof overhangs and allowing residents to change colors, if they want," said Steve Barton of David Furman Architecture.

Farris said buyers have reserved six units in Opt12, expected to be started this fall and completed in summer 2005.

The storage center — whose entrance is off the 16th Street side of the block — is

in the 36,000-square-foot former Martin Transfer & Storage building.

Tuscan, which spent \$2.8 million on the renovation, now calls the building Urban Stash. The climate-controlled facility is to open in October for personal items ranging from family heirlooms to documents.

Farris believes uptown residents will support it, "because other personal-storage businesses near uptown are virtually filled up."

Tuscan announced plans about two years ago to convert the building to offices and shops. That plan was shelved, the developers said, because economic conditions weren't right.

Structura, a general contracting firm owned by Farris and Martin Kerr, did the Urban Stash renovation and will build Opt12.

First Charlotte Properties is handling condo sales from its main office on East Morehead Street.

City Council member James Mitchell, who represents the district that includes Optimist Park, welcomed the new projects.

"City Council has made Optimist Park a priority for redevelopment," he said. "The only thing missing was a private developer willing to step up. (Farris) and his partners have done that."

\* \* \*