



## RENOVATION MAY HELP REFRESH 'SODA' 15TH AND DAVIDSON OFFICE-RETAIL PLANNED

In a project reminiscent of South End's infancy 12 years ago, a developer is starting a warehouse renovation that could spur a comeback for one of the urban core's troubled neighborhoods.

Tuscan Development is converting 36,000 square feet in two buildings to an office-retail complex on 15th street, north of uptown between Davidson and Caldwell streets.

Ray Farris III, who owns the firm with partner James Cole, envisions SoDa @ 15th as a lively commercial and residential hub in Optimist Park. The neighborhood is between uptown and NoDa, the North Davidson Arts District.

Tuscan took the project name from the location of the planned enclave, which would be south of NoDa, Farris said.

He's following a development precedent set in South End, where MECA Properties spearheaded transformation of an old industrial strip into a thriving district of shops, restaurants, offices and residences along South Boulevard.

The revitalization wave gained momentum there in 1990, when MECA President Tony Pressley disclosed plans to convert nine buildings in the Atherton Mill complex to commercial uses.

Similarly, NoDa has emerged as an entertainment, arts and commercial hub around North Davidson and 36th Streets in North Charlotte, where old buildings have been remodeled and converted to residences, galleries and restaurants over the past decade.

In SoDa, Farris said, renovation of the old Martin Transfer & Storage buildings is a \$1 million first step toward a much larger vision.

"What we're trying to do is stabilize the warehouse so we can do some housing," he said. "Once that happens, we're planning on developing housing in the \$80,000 range."

He said Tuscan owns about five acres around the warehouse.

One of the company's goals, he said, is to help change the image of Optimist Park as dangerous and participate in neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Neighborhood leader Linda Williams said, "Tuscan's plans fit well into our goals and are in line with the neighborhood plan adopted by City Council."

Earlier this year, residents of crime-plagued Optimist Park raised about \$17,800 to pay for private police patrols.

Farris said Tuscan has offered the Optimist Park Community Association and the Optimist Park Community of Shalom, a United Methodist Church program, space in the renovated warehouse. He also plans to invite Charlotte-Mecklenburg police to open an office in the complex.

Tuscan plans to add a 200-foot walkway and an interior courtyard that will include a tower extending 20 feet above the rooftops.

The tower will house telecommunications equipment, common restrooms and eventually a coffee shop. Perforated metal on the exterior will give it the appearance of glowing at night.

"We want cutting-edge businesses," Farris said. "The design fits creative people who want diversity and urban culture: architects, engineers, designers, musicians, technology firms."

Two tenants have signed. MoRisen Records, a recording studio, will move from East Boulevard to 3,300 square feet of space in the complex. Structura, a contracting firm in which Farris and Cole are partners with Martin Kerr, also will occupy 3,300 square feet.

Farris plans to launch in about a month with Structura as the general contractor and complete work in March or April.

Architect Heather Duncan of Pugh + Scarpa's Charlotte office designed the project so 12-foot-wide industrial doors can be replaced with glass garage doors or bay windows.

Farris said 25-foot ceilings will allow tenants to increase their square footage by adding lofts.

He's quoting a lease rate of \$9 to \$10 a square foot. Tuscan, perhaps best known as a condo developer, is handling leasing until a real estate broker is selected.

SoDa @ 15th is across 15th Street from the Art Transfer Building, a warehouse where another developer, 15th Street Properties, also plans a conversion.

"The current plan is do something with an art gallery like NoDa, a music venue and sculpture-type art, all in the same building," said Danny Plueddemann, one of five partners in the venture.

Farris sees the two projects meshing, perhaps with a public plaza connecting the blocks.

Only four blocks north of the Brookshire Freeway, SoDa likely will appeal to tenants seeking to locate near the central business district without paying pricey uptown rents.