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City sees potential in West End



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Winding his small, gold truck through the streets of Lenoir's West End, the Rev. Ike Perkins points out where he'd like to see change.

He stops in front of a once-white house, now dirty and gray, on Hillcrest Street. Its windows are broken and grass overgrown, and vines climb over the brick walls along the falling brick wall lining the driveway.

It's a scourge to the neighborhood, as are many abandoned properties, because there's no one to take care of it, Perkins said.

When the residents of the house passed away several years ago, no one was named to inherit it, Perkins said he discovered. That's what he found when the brother of the owner approached Perkins about figuring out who owned the house -- there was no clear owner to care for it, and there is little to do about it.

As a city council member and as the pastor of Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church, which has a large presence

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in the West End community, Perkins faces questions like this from residents all the time. They want to see a crumbling house fixed up, they want to make property owners take care of their lots, they want to see new development, and Perkins does too -- but the solutions he can offer to the community he grew up in are often lackluster and few and far between.

"They think you can just go and present the problem (to the city) and snap your fingers and it'll be fixed," Perkins said.

"But what can you do? Really, what can you do?"

Perkins would like to see the neighborhood like it was while he was growing up -- thriving, lively and cared-for. But as many longtime homeowners passed away over the years, and their heirs long gone from the area, houses have fallen into disrepair.

At nearly every crumbling house, Perkins can tell the back story, which is often the same -- the children inherited the house, and they have no interest in Lenoir anymore and let the property fall to pieces.

An emerald green house on Wheeler Street was left to the owner's son, but he's in a nursing home, and the house continues to degrade, Perkins said. Grass grows over the metal fence, creeping above the stone picnic table in the yard. With some care, it could be beautiful again, Perkins said.

He sees the potential in many of the abandoned houses and in the neighborhood as a whole, and others in the community have bright visions too, but none have come to fruition.



There are no good things (coming in), but there are good ideas coming in," Perkins said.



Lenoir Planning Director Jenny Wheelock wants to help those good ideas flourish and become a reality.

She's planning a "small area plan" -- a plan that sets out a vision for development in a particular area -- for West End, hopefully starting within the next year. Unlike the small area plan for North Main Street, which was done in 2015 and made code and zoning changes to encourage particular types of development, the plan for West End would consider each individual parcel and lay out a path for them to be improved.

"This plan is really going to be a community development plan to try to make a better case for improving the properties in West End," Wheelock said.

The first step will be to figure out who owns each property and reach out to make sure they know they own the property and gauge their interest in the area.

For those who are truly uninterested in renovating or caring for the properties, Wheelock hopes to connect them with developers or others who are interested in owning homes in the area and would want to invest.

For owners who are on the fence, Wheelock wants to use the small area plan to help convince them to start investing in their homes and show them the potential of West End, she said.

"Maybe we can inspire a little hope to come back home," she said.

The investment wouldn't necessarily mean "flipping" a house -- renovating them and then selling, Wheelock said. She thinks renting properties in the area has a lot of potential, and she wants to show landowners that.

"It's a chance to kind of educate people," Wheelock said. "A lot of people look at (these houses) and think (the investment) is not worth it. ... But because it's so affordable as far as a potential acquisition price and because we have such a need for better quality rentals, you can probably make a lot of projects work based on rental income."

The small area plan will mean a lot of communication with stakeholders in the neighborhood, Wheelock said. She wants to encourage people who already own properties to invest in them as well as bring in new owners, rather than only bringing in outside investment.

"I want to respect the history and help it be everything we want it to be," Wheelock said.

One route to kicking off investment may be to connect families who own multiple properties and suggest they renovate and build at the same time, she said, so no single property owner is going out on a limb.

To start off the study, Wheelock plans to hold a neighborhood walk-through, where the community will be invited to walk her and other city officials through the neighborhood and point out where they'd like to see improvements or let her know about the history of the neighborhood.

While encouraging changes, Wheelock wants to take into account the visions of the neighborhood's longtime residents like Perkins. He can point to empty lots where stores, restaurants and businesses used to stand, one where his old home once was and ones where he pictures brand new housing coming in.

Wheelock said the neighborhood has a lot going in its favor, including a new greenway coming through it, so the small area plan would be poised to restart growth.

"It was once a thriving community of all different incomes -- there are larger houses, there are houses built with expensive finishes, and there are smaller homes," she said. "That neighborhood has everything going for it."

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