

# Northside Rising: The road from vacancy, blight to inclusionary community redevelopment

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## After decades of decline, a community rallies to create the most ambitious neighborhood revitalization in Spartanburg history



*Note: Later this year, the Northside Development Group will mark its 10th year since it was founded to be a land bank to guide development and protect the community's interests on the Northside. The NDG partnered with the Northside Voyageurs, Northside residents and the City of Spartanburg to launch the Northside Initiative, the most comprehensive neighborhood revitalization effort in the city's history. This is part 2 of our article series. [Follow this link to read part 1.](#)*

**By Will Rothschild**

Former Spartanburg Mayor Bill Barnet had been asked to lead the Northside effort by his successor, Mayor Junie White, shortly after White took office in 2010. For the next three years, no plans were drawn up and nothing was built. The work during this time ran on two tracks: building trust in the neighborhood and building partnerships in the larger Spartanburg community.

In meeting after meeting with Northside residents, Barnet and city officials listened to their concerns, learned about their experiences growing up and living in the Northside and about their hopes and dreams for what the neighborhood could be. Moore, Thomas, and a number of other longtime residents received leadership training and formed a new neighborhood leadership group.

They named their group the Northside Voyageurs. Their role then remains the same today: to ensure the vision of the people who live in the Northside is the driving force behind the Northside Initiative. The Northside Voyageurs would ensure that residents' concerns and priorities took precedence in planning and development decisions.

While the Voyageurs made sure the NDG, the City and other partners in the Northside Initiative were keeping the wishes of residents at the forefront, they also worked in the other direction, keeping residents informed and engaged in the process. They organized community update meetings, neighborhood cleanups, and get-togethers.

“The thing that was very different from the way things had happened in the past was that they actually came to us and they asked us what we thought and what we wanted for our neighborhood,” Moore said. “They didn’t just do things without asking. We were put in a position to lead.”

## Building trust and partnerships

At the same time the voices of residents were being lifted up and driving the vision for the Northside’s future, Barnet and city officials were forging important partnerships with institutions such as Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System, Wofford College, the Mary Black Foundation, the Spartanburg County Foundation and Spartanburg School District 7.

The school district made a major early investment in 2011 when it extended Cleveland Elementary School’s calendar to 195 days per school year, the first elementary school in the state of South Carolina to do so. At the same time, it renamed the school the Cleveland Academy of Leadership and adopted *The Leader in Me* education model based on Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Over the course of 2010 and 2011, Barnet raised more than \$2 million from private philanthropists and the local foundations to fund the work of the newly formed Northside Development Corp. Later renamed the Northside Development Group, the non-profit organization was created to serve as a land bank that would acquire key pieces of property throughout the Northside and hold the land until the community had a chance to coalesce around a comprehensive redevelopment plan.

In 2012, following the death of the local industrial giant Roger Milliken, his family’s foundation made a \$2.5 million gift to the NDG.

So the NDG’s work was well underway when Barnet ventured to Charlotte later that year to meet with Jerry Richardson, then the owner of the Carolina Panthers. Richardson had deep ties to Spartanburg: a graduate of Wofford College where he was a star football player, he returned to Spartanburg after his NFL career and opened the first Hardee’s franchise with business partner Charles Bradshaw. Richardson had made financial contributions to many Spartanburg non-profit organizations and charitable causes over the years, and every summer his NFL team spent several weeks in Spartanburg during their preseason training camp on the Wofford College campus.

Barnet’s intention for the meeting was to share with Richardson the vision for the Northside, update him on the progress, and to ask him to make a financial contribution to the NDG.

## A million-dollar fax

“What do you want from me?” Barnet remembers Richardson asking him.

“I didn’t want to be too aggressive,” Barnet said. So he “only” asked for \$250,000, to be paid over the course of three years. Richardson asked him to send him a letter detailing the request, and a few minutes later Barnet was on I-85 heading back to Spartanburg.

That was on a Friday afternoon. Before Barnet could get the letter written and mailed on Monday morning, he received a phone call from Richardson’s assistant, asking for his fax number. A few minutes later, a fax arrived with Richardson’s commitment — only it was for four times the amount Barnet had asked for. A check for \$1 million arrived a few days later.

Richardson’s gift is part of the roughly \$17 million that has been raised in philanthropic dollars since the Northside Initiative started. That money has mostly been used by the NDG to purchase property in the Northside. Those parcels of land have become home to the Brawley Street Model Block, Harvest Park, Northside Station, the Dr. T.K. Gregg Community Center, The Franklin School, and other developments that represent more than \$140 million in investment.

## A medical school for the Northside

By the time Richardson sent his million-dollar fax to Barnet, the NDG had been working in earnest for a couple of years. After the years of working in the neighborhood in fits and starts, a more cohesive effort that came to be called the Northside Initiative was underway, kick-started by the successful recruitment in 2009 — led by former Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System CEO Ingo Angermeier and Wofford College — of the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine’s Carolinas Campus to the site of the former Spartan Mills.

Based in Blacksburg, Va., VCOM was set to put its Carolinas Campus in Charlotte before Angermeier convinced school leaders to give Spartanburg a look. The Northside location wasn’t the only place in Spartanburg under consideration, but ultimately its proximity to Wofford and Spartanburg Regional Medical Center won the day. The City conveyed the site to the school for \$1 and VCOM went on to build a state-of-the-art \$30 million facility there, opening to its first class of students in the fall of 2011.

At the time, it was an unconventional decision — locating a medical school in a neighborhood marked by the highest crime rates and lowest property values in the city. And it would have been easy for city officials at the time to simply use VCOM to facilitate a student housing development nearby, then sit back and hope it led to further organic redevelopment in the area.

Instead, city leaders saw VCOM's decision as an opportunity to leverage something much larger, a comprehensive effort to revitalize what at the time was the most challenged neighborhood in the city.

"I remember thinking we can't mess this up," former City Manager Ed Memmott said.

Following his election as mayor in late 2009, Junie White was brought up to speed on VCOM's decision and the opportunity it presented by Memmott and then-Community Services Director Mitch Kennedy. White, Memmott and Kennedy agreed the work would need someone to lead it, someone who could work to identify how best to leverage VCOM's investment into further neighborhood revitalization while earning the trust of the community and building the public, private and non-profit relationships that would be needed to support an undertaking that might take years to show results.

The opportunity was clear, but the challenges and potential pitfalls were everywhere. The idea needed someone to champion it and pull the community together around a vision.

Former Mayor Bill Barnett, they decided, was that person.

That, too, was unconventional — a newly sworn-in mayor asking his immediate predecessor to helm the most complex and comprehensive neighborhood revitalization effort in the city's history. But when it came to the Northside at this particular moment in time, everyone from City Hall to neighborhood residents to non-profit and business leaders agreed about the need to do things differently.

The Northside's history and the challenges it was facing at the time of VCOM's decision had opened a window of opportunity unique in the city's history.

## The NDG's approach

The Northside Development Group first started buying abandoned and vacant properties in the Northside in 2011 after raising an initial \$2.5 million in philanthropic donations. At the time, the thought process was that by acquiring strategic pieces of property — corner lots or parcels in the middle of blocks, for example — it could ensure future developers would have to work with the community to develop the vision for any large-scale projects.

For decades, much of the property in the Northside had been owned by investors who, as the fortunes of Spartan Mills declined and people left the neighborhood, swept in and gobbled up entire streets of former mill village housing. When the NDG started contacting these investors, most of them were willing to sell on one condition: that NDG purchase not only the corner lot they originally were interested in, but the entire block of properties they owned.

The NDG was not interested in buying owner-occupied homes or rental units that were occupied because it did not want to displace anyone living in the Northside. That wasn't very hard at the time — upwards of 80 percent of the single-family parcels in the neighborhood contained either vacant or abandoned properties.

“There was a fundamental hard line that we were only buying vacant properties,” explained Tammie Hoy Hawkins, who worked first as a consultant and then as the first director of the Northside Development Group. “We did not want to displace anyone. When we started buying vacant properties, investors who owned them would say ‘That’s fine, I’ll sell you this one, but you’re going to have to buy all six (that I own on the street). So within a very short time, we went from owning zero properties to owning 60, to owning 80.”

That led to other opportunities. Once most of the blocks of properties owned by absentee investors had been acquired, the NDG started to purchase other Northside properties at delinquent tax sales. But the “fundamental hard line” that Hawkins described against purchasing occupied properties remained in place.

So NDG leaders were surprised when they realized an occupied home on Raindrop Street had been mistakenly acquired at a tax sale.

“It wasn’t our intention and at the same time, the city informed us that this particular property had some major challenges and that it was condemnable,” McPhail said. “So we began this conversation around what we were going to do. We weren’t going to kick (the family) out, so they lived in the house rent-free for a year. ... After about a year, we realized that we really did need them to not live in a house that was condemned ... and the board decided we should charge them some rent.”

The NDG made some repairs to the house, and the family paid rent for a couple of years, which the NDG held in an escrow account, before ultimately the family found a home to their liking just beyond the Northside and they moved. McPhail remembers the moment he delivered a check for \$6,000 — the total of their rent payments to the NDG — to the family after they moved as one of the highlights of his time with the organization.

“They didn’t know we were going to return it,” McPhail said. “... I’ll never forget that this family had a strong faith and the lady asked me to pray after giving her the check and I said I’ll be happy to. And they had a picture of Jesus on the wall and she asked if we could move closer to the picture so we’d be closer to Jesus while we prayed. I’ll never forget that.

“I tell that story because ... it articulates some of the complications that folks don't think about when they think about this kind of work.”

## A billionaire and an abandoned intern

The other instance when an occupied property was acquired was the case of Oakview Apartments on Howard Street. Built after World War II to house soldiers returning home from the war, Oakview was a vestige of a bygone era: a privately owned public housing project that had for years been a primary source of drug activity and other crime. Most of its residents were single mothers. Poorly maintained by its New York-based owner, most of the cinder-block buildings had failing roofs, appliances were in barely working condition, there was no central air conditioning or heating, and the plumbing and electrical systems were outdated.

“All conversations (about the future of the Northside) came back to control or change at Oakview,” Barnett said.

Oakview's owner — a New York-based billionaire named Stephen Ross, owner of the NFL's Miami Dolphins — had no interest in partnering with the city and NDG. Ross and his Related Companies had acquired Oakview Apartments as part of a larger portfolio of real estate assets. Ross and his company paid so little attention to Oakview, the first time someone connected with the Northside Initiative spoke to Ross he denied knowledge of owning any real estate in Spartanburg.

At the same time, Related was more than content to collect the revenue derived from the Section 8 housing vouchers that assured market-rate rent payments from the federal government on behalf of Oakview's tenants, who were living in conditions that could only be described as squalor.

“The opportunity for someone like Stephen Ross, who's a billionaire, to own a property in Spartanburg and to be able to charge the federal government an almost market-rate rent for something that residents said this is one small step from being homeless — you've got to recognize that in some capacity the system is screwed up,” McPhail said.

At first, the City and NDG tried to appeal to Ross' charitable side and asked him to consider donating Oakview Apartments to the NDG. That idea was immediately rejected, as were a series of follow-up offers to purchase the property.

At one memorable meeting in a conference room at the Mary Black Foundation, the head of affordable housing from Ross' Related Companies stood up in the middle of a discussion, put on his jacket,

announced he had a flight back to New York to catch, and started to walk out. “Only before,” McPhail said, “the intern who came with him said ‘Hey, how am I getting back to New York?’ And the guy said ‘I don’t know, you can figure it out.’”

“I ended up taking that intern to the airport that night to catch his flight. He just sat in our office wondering like all of us what the hell had just happened.”

## Acquiring Oakview

That meeting was far from the last interaction between the NDG, the City and Ross’ Related Companies. What followed was a long process of trying to encourage Ross to sell the property until the City moved to condemn Oakview Apartments and acquire it via eminent domain.

“I can tell you Mr. Ross did not roll over and say ‘Oh, here you go,’” McPhail said.

After months of negotiations, the two sides agreed on a price of \$1.9 million in April 2016. Oakview’s residents were all given vouchers to use for new housing and moved.

“The challenge was what came after (acquiring Oakview) and that was to live up to what we said, which is we don’t want to displace anyone,” McPhail said. “This was our first foray into a potential massive displacement and there really wasn’t any other choice.”

Though some will choose to remain in their new homes — some even moved to new cities — the NDG has remained in touch with the former Oakview residents, who today remain at the front of the line for any new affordable housing units that become available in the Northside. That includes several families who plan to move into some of the 81 subsidized units at 500 Northside Station that are nearing completion and will start leasing later this year.

## A true community master plan

Today, the former Oakview site is home to the new Dr. T.K. Gregg Community Center — just as the Northside master plan envisioned. And if you spend much time exploring the history of the Northside Initiative or talking to people who have been involved in the work, the subject of the Northside master plan inevitably comes up.

The plan was created following a series of community planning meetings, or charrettes, at Green Street Baptist Church in January 2014. For three days, the church’s fellowship hall was filled with Northside

residents, city officials, affordable housing developers, planners, police officers, business executives and non-profit, arts and religious leaders.

It was, in some respects, organized chaos, with attendees organizing themselves into groups and gathering around large circular tables to explore different aspects of community redevelopment, from housing to the arts to education to business creation to transportation to recreation. At each table, a Northside Voyager and a subject-matter expert prompted the discussion and encouraged people to share their dreams for the neighborhood.

Every idea and piece of feedback was recorded. Over the course of dozens of conversations and with the aid of large color-coded maps showing every parcel in the Northside, a picture of what the community wanted emerged. Architects and artists not only drew renderings of the type of housing residents wanted but literally created a new map of the Northside, pinpointing the location of new housing, the new community center and a walking trail meandering next to a newly daylight creek that for decades had been piped and buried underground.

“That third day of the charrettes, I went in there and there were so many people — city people, city leaders, Wofford students and all the people who were concerned about the Northside,” said Thomas, who by this time had become one of the leaders of the Northside Voyagers. “I found myself going from table to table. I just wanted to know what people were doing and thinking. That’s when I really realized the magnitude of what we were about to do and that it was going to be something big. And that’s when all the Voyagers realized ‘You know, hey, this is really going to happen.’”

Indeed, as much as any written document in the history of the City, the master plan that resulted from the Northside planning charrettes lays out “something big” — a sweeping neighborhood redevelopment effort, more than 400 acres in all that would be remade according to the consensus vision of its residents.

And in the seven years since its adoption, it has proven to be more than just an aspirational document. The development and infrastructure improvements that have occurred since almost exactly mirror what the plan lays out. From the T.K. Gregg Center to Northside Station, the new developments people see today are all part of a community master plan come to life.

## Progress through demolition: The Sunshine Inn

The master plan didn’t just include pretty pictures of new development. It also specifically called for two high-profile demolitions: Oakview (to make room for the T.K. Gregg Center) and the notorious Sunshine Inn, which sat on a prominent parcel of land between North Church and Magnolia streets, just south of Pearl Street.



With its location adjacent to the neighborhood and the campuses of Spartanburg Regional Medical Center and Wofford College, the Sunshine Inn wasn't just a prominent eyesore in the middle of one of the City's most important gateways. It was a significant source of drug activity, prostitution, and violent crime, and at various times generated the single-highest number of public safety calls in the city.

Northside residents were well aware of how all the illegal activity at the Sunshine Inn impacted their neighborhood and wanted something to be done about it. Like it did with Oakview, the City found the solution through eminent domain, using the poor condition of the structure to condemn it, acquire it, and demolish it. Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System made a loan to the NDG that it has since forgiven to help underwrite the costs of the acquisition and demolition.

As much as any new building rising from the ground, the demolition of Sunshine Inn helped build trust with Northside residents and added to the growing belief in the Northside Initiative's promise.

"The neighborhood hated (the Sunshine Inn)," Thomas said. "We knew more than anybody else what was going on there. And what was happening there would filter out into our community. ... People were getting attacked and getting robbed because people wanted to go back to that hotel and buy more dope. They would come into our community stealing, stealing kids' bikes, robbing old people, breaking into houses. It was terrible and it all led back to the Sunshine Inn.

"The tearing down of that hotel was as big a boost for this initiative as anything we've built."

The City and the NDG proceeded cautiously after demolishing the Sunshine Inn in 2014, waiting for the right developer with the right project for the site to come along. But things finally look like they're coming together on that site. Later this year, a Greenville-based developer is expected to break ground there on the first major commercial retail development in the decade since the Northside Initiative launched. The plans call for 17,500 square feet of retail space, with spaces for five restaurant or retail operations.

Once completed and people begin dining and shopping there — and maybe even once dirt starts moving on the site thanks to the sheer volume of vehicular traffic on North Church Street — the project will become perhaps the most visible project in the Northside Initiative to date. With its prime location, the new development is expected to encourage further commercial development and jobs to locate in the area, over time introducing scores of people to a Northside increasingly unrecognizable from the decay that once dominated the neighborhood.

"We have made so much progress, but we still have a long way to go," said Thomas recently in his office overlooking Howard Street, where he works as community engagement coordinator for the Northside Development Group. "We have the confidence and trust of the community and we have to keep it to make

sure we continue to make progress. Communication is very important, and we have to keep people engaged and we have to keep listening to them. This is our community and the way to move forward is to do it together. That's why you see all the progress all around us today."

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