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Charlotte Observer

For 2nd Ward, a Home Run?

By Doug Smith
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A Charlotte neighborhood that fell to urban renewal in the 1960s would be remembered in a redevelopment proposed for Second Ward.

Brooklyn Village, a name derived from the former African American neighborhood of Brooklyn, would include “affordable” housing among office, shops and restaurants.

Charlotte’s Spectrum Properties wants to develop the \$135 million urban village for its client, Mass Mutual, as part of a public-private land swap.

Marshall Park and the neighboring board of Education property would go to the developers in exchange for a public park site in Third Ward.

The county’s existing Third Ward park property would become home to a \$30 million to \$35 million baseball stadium to be built and privately owned by the Charlotte Knights.

The land swap (see the explanatory box) requires city and county approval and after several months of negotiations is far from a done deal.

Up until now, the stadium, which would require about \$7.8 million in public money mainly for street and sidewalk improvements, has generated debate and attracted most of the attention.

Both the other side of the deal- the potential to ignite Second Ward’s revival – might be a Next Big Thing waiting to happen.

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Brooklyn Village would include 420 condos, 300 apartments, a six- to seven-story office building, a 5-acre park, six to eight restaurants, a small grocery, shops and office condos.

“We’ve seen the pie in the sky,” said City Council member James Mitchell, whose District 2 includes Second Ward. “This is the first reality plan we’ve had.”

He said he hasn’t decided how he will vote on the land swap, but as for Brooklyn Village, “I’m going to champion it as much as I can.”

The master plan accompanying this story is the public’s first glimpse of how the village components would fit together.

The protect would cover about 8 acres of a larger redevelopment Charlotte-Mecklenburg planners proposed in a sweeping Second Ward master plan adopted about four years ago.

Planners foresee a dense mixed-income community of 3,000 to 5,000 residents, parks and grand boulevards within a 114-acre area bounded by Third Street, Brevard Street and Interstate 277.

Critics of the land swap might argue that the momentum is strong enough uptown to carry over into Second Ward, but planners have estimated that piece-meal development could take 20 years or more.

Getting started soon is important. The city wants to make Brevard Street more pedestrian friendly and build connections in Second Ward to the planned NASCAR Hall of Fame and the convention center.

And citizens who participated in a Second Ward master planning study begun in 2001 – including City Council member Warren Turner – are tired of waiting.

Still, he said, he needs more specific information about Brooklyn Village and the land swap before he makes a decision.

Spectrum Properties chairman Jim Dulin believes Brooklyn Village could accelerate the Second Ward development process and point the way for others.

He said the developers would adhere to the neighborhood master plan, embrace the history of Brooklyn and emphasize diversity in housing pricing and construction hiring.

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Council member Mitchell said that’s why he likes it.

For more than 70 years, Brooklyn was an active and economically diverse community with businesses, schools, a library and meeting places.

Longtime Charlotte residents remember it as home to some of the city's most prosperous and educated African Americans as well as working-class families.

Second Ward High School, dedicated in 1923, was the first in the county to serve African American teenagers and was regarded as the heart of Brooklyn.

"I want to restore the old Second Ward gym to a fun and active community center, and I want to pursue actively getting a new Second Ward High School in the village," Dulin said.

That's a proposal the school board, of course, would have to embrace and approve.

If the land swap gets the green light by the end of this year as supporters hope, development of Brooklyn Village could start by spring and be completed over three years, Dulin said.

Construction would begin with the office building and accompanying parking deck, so Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' headquarters could relocate there, he said.

Michael Smith, president of Charlotte Center City Partners, is working with officials to win approval of the land swap.

"This really shapes our center city in ways that are more family friendly – affordable housing, affordable family entertainment and a couple of great urban parks," he said.

Proposed Land Swap

Charlotte Center City Partners' proposal for a baseball stadium uptown would involve \$28 million in public land and \$7.8 million in city-supplied infrastructure such as streets and sidewalks around the stadium.

The Charlotte Knights would use private funding to build a \$30 million to \$35 million facility on the former Third Ward park site, bounded by Mint, Graham, Second and Fourth streets.

Third Ward landowner Mass Mutual would make available privately owned land for a new 5.2-acre Third Ward park and a park entrance off South Tryon.

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To make the deal work, government bodies would have to arrange a six-way land swap.

Mass Mutual, represented by Charlotte's Spectrum Properties, would end up with Marshall Park and the Board of Education's office property bordering the park in Second Ward.

The county and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools would get a new school system headquarters in an office building to developed there.

Spectrum Properties would spearhead development of Brooklyn village, a \$135 million mixed-use project that would include the Marshall Park site and school board property.

As part of the redevelopment, a new 5-acre public park would replace Marshall Park.