Planners see potential on East Market Street

Planners tour East Market Street looking for ways to make it a gateway and make it friendly to pedestrians.

By Jim Schlosser
Staff Writer

Sometimes a city planner must stop planning, if only long enough to stand in line for coffee at Mrs. Winner's on Summit Avenue.

Not Ellen Craine, a county planning director in Steamboat Springs, Colo. While colleagues departed the charter bus for a break at the restaurant, she grabbed her camera and walked up Summit to a row of color-splashed maples between the sidewalk and curb.

She measured the sidewalk with her feet: one, two, three, four steps. She also walked off the space between the sidewalk and the curb. She finally determined that the trees are 25 feet apart, each occupying four feet of space.

"I'm trying to figure out how tight a spot you can grow a tree in in North Carolina," she said, returning to the bus with a maple leaf in hand.

Those stats will help her decide the feasibility of having trees on a one-mile section of East Market Street that passes N.C. A&T University. She and six other planners from government, academia and private business spent three hours Friday inspecting East Market and a wide radius around it.

The bus stopped several times. The planners scurried about with Polaroids and maps, checking out the landscape from many angles.

The planners will offer ways to undo the consequences of a massive redevelopment project in the early 1960s. It destroyed a rundown but lively two-lane East Market that was a town unto itself. Buildings lined both sides and contained cafes, barber shops, beauty salons, pool halls, a theater, doctors' and dentists' offices, and other small enterprises. College students and locals kept the sidewalks crowded.

After the redevelopment bulldozing, East Market was rebuilt as a six-lane street that has become a barrier between the campus and the other side of the street.

"There were a lot of black-owned small businesses put out of business. They were never able to relocate," says Dr. Buford Kidd, an optometrist who was uprooted by redevelopment but managed to rebuild on the street later.

East Market Street looks tidier today than before the 1960s, but the life that once pulsed on its sidewalks hasn't returned. Some retail activity exists, but A&T students tend to drive to Summit and northeast shopping centers.

"There is so much potential not being realized," says Greensboro City Planner Sue Schwartz. "You have 8,000 students at A&T. The street just doesn't seem to be tapped into the campus. There is no 'there' there on East Market."

For advice, city planners appealed to the American Planning Association, which agreed to adopt Greensboro as a model project. The association sent seven planners to Greensboro this week from all over the country to look, ponder and swap ideas.

The goal is to make East Market not only a people-friendly place again but also a pleasing gateway into Greensboro from the east.

Planners don't use the word "challenge" anymore. "Opportunities" is the new buzz word. The planners found plenty as their chartered bus detoured many times from the East Market corridor onto residential side streets. Two residential communities, both with blighted housing, intrude on the A&T campus. The maze of streets through the campus and adjoining neighborhoods seemed to confuse the planners.

"Disjointed — that is the first thing that comes to mind," said Lee Brown, a planner from the Chicago area. "The relationship between neighborhood and the corridor is..."