Pilot program focuses on blighted area of city

By Robert J. Warren
STAFF WRITER

Thirty years ago the city of Greensboro's version of urban renewal for its E. Market Street corridor consisted of tearing everything down to the ground.

"It happened in a lot of communities," Greensboro Community Planner Sue Schwartz said, "They wiped out a section of the city - usually the worst section - and rebuilt. With that, they wiped out the heritage and culture. It's evident in how it looks and functions."

This time around, the city plans a less disruptive approach toward urban renewal on the E. Market Street corridor. A national city planning group - the National American Planning Association (AP A) - is coming to Greensboro to work with the local community and provide expert suggestions for revitalizing a one-mile stretch on the corridor.

An APA planning team will arrive in Greensboro today. The association selected Greensboro as the first recipient of the pilot program.

"Because this is a service and they are not getting paid, they use a different eye and perspective," Schwartz said, "It makes it an event and there is also a different focus from the community. It's not another thing the 'city' is doing. This is people with a sincere desire to help the community make something happen. They're not here to tell us what to do, but to share their experience."

The city of Greensboro is paying for the team's expenses, about $25,000, for services that would normally cost more than $100,000, Schwartz said.

The seven-member team will meet with city staff and students and faculty of N.C. A&T State University today, tour the E. Market corridor Friday, meet with community workshops Saturday and then make recommendations for renewal Monday. Schwartz said the preliminary issues the team plans to address are:

- Economic development - There is a lack of retail and commercial services available on E. Market Street. Even with 8,000 students at N.C. A&T, there are no pizza parlors and very few college-oriented businesses.
- Design and safety - When it was redeveloped 30 years ago the city put in a six-lane major thoroughfare. Pedestrian safety for area businesses and college must be addressed.
- Execution - The traditional approaches are not working. The area needs new, creative partnerships. The challenge for the planning team is how to implement their recommendations.

The planning team has a three-year commitment to the project.

"We need something that is practical and do-able, but creative," Schwartz said. "They're not going to just hit and run with recommendations; they're going to stick it through and help implement their recommendations."

The E. Market corridor was the first urban renewal court case in North Carolina. Area residents at the time protested relocation, but lost and the city tore down several blocks.

"They did take out a lot of run-down buildings, but they also took out good architecture and pieces of history. This was the center of the African-American business district. You just don't rip out a neighborhood and expect things to come back nice and perfect."

Aesthetically, Schwartz said the E. Market corridor leaves much to be desired - there's a lot of asphalt and wires. In addition, many of the buildings are empty. What used to be a shopping center now only houses a crime-ridden nightclub.

Schwartz was president of the N.C. APA last year when the national chapter initiated the pilot program. She submitted the E. Market corridor for the experimental APA project just as she finished her term. Greensboro is one of four cities the APA eventually selected for the project, but the other cities are only in the formulating stages.

"This is a big deal; it's the first in the country," Schwartz said. "A lot of cities look at ways to renew urban areas; we're hoping this is a fresh way of doing it. We're trying to brainstorm with the community."