

Scenes from a poverty tour – Part I



On this trip, truth was much easier to find than hope. The bus carrying participants in the NAACP-sponsored Truth and Hope Tour of Poverty in North Carolina took us to places where you'd have to try pretty hard to ignore what a struggle it is to survive. The tour's dozen or so stops scattered along a loop of our northeastern counties are places with long-term, crushing, systemic poverty – places that are now reeling hard from the effects of the Great Recession and a safety net too threadbare to hold the weight asked of it. There's hope to be found, but it's worn down by generations of trials and the exceptionally cruel downdraft of the past several years.

We have our own poverty challenges here in Orange County, and there are places not far from where you're reading this where straits are just as desperate. But we have some things going for us here that are in short supply elsewhere. We've a plan and we have resources. Of course there are never as many resources as we'd like, but relative to our brothers and sisters out east, we are especially blessed.

The tour wasn't about resources or programs or even solutions. It was about putting a face on poverty, about reminding us of what happens when the poor become invisible; about what happens when we accept widespread poverty as normal and then something comes along that makes it all far worse than we can imagine.

'On the Solid Foundation'

A few blocks in from the historic waterfront in Elizabeth City, Tony Rice, pastor of New Beginning United Fellowship Church, waited on the porch steps of New

Beginning, a men's shelter in a modest two-story home. With him was a group of five residents of the shelter along with a few supporters. You wouldn't know it was a shelter except for the sign in front, which includes the house slogan "On the Solid Foundation."

Rice used to work in corrections. He said almost all of the prisoners he met wouldn't have done what they did if they'd had food to eat, clothes on their backs and a place to call home.

"Poverty," he said, "is a poison."

Inside, the group had just finished dinner and the house smelled of food. Behind the dinner table was a handmade poster showing the barriers each ex-con faces and the two roads ahead – one to a better life (Restoration Drive) and one back to incarceration (Familiar Lane). The better life is defined like this: "Employed, Drug Free, Restored Self Esteem, Restored Family Relationship, Positive Outlook on Life."

As we walked through the place, a neighbor stopped by to assure us the place was well kept and the residents well behaved.

At the first stop in each county we'd get a fact sheet from the N.C. Justice Center with the area's poverty statistics. The tour's focus was on faces and not statistics, yet each time you read one was like a kick in the gut. In Pasquotank County, 23 percent of the people are living below the federal poverty line of \$22,314 for a family of four. Unemployment in Elizabeth City is around 15 percent on average and even greater if you're black or Latino. Rice told us that if you have a record, particularly a felony conviction, it's nearly impossible to find work.

From the porch of New Beginning, the men who lived there talked of losing families, fighting

addiction and hopelessness and finding almost nowhere to turn even when they wanted to rise above life in the shadows. The tour wasn't supposed to be about numbers, but Rice relayed some too piercing to ignore.

Seven people were housed at the shelter – seven, out of an estimated 1,000 homeless people in the area, who found somewhere to go to start a better life.

"I turn away 15 to 20 guys a night," Rice said. New Beginning is the only men's shelter for 100 miles.

Rice is a big man, a veteran who served in the 82nd Airborne. He said when he got out of the service, he soon realized how much Elizabeth City had deteriorated over the past decade. People were going without electricity and living in places not fit to live in.

"I didn't realize the real war was in my backyard," he said.

He struggled with what to do. After discovering that an unemployed bricklayer named Arthur Bonds was sleeping in an abandoned house behind his car lot, Rice said the two struck up a friendship and Rice started checking in on Bonds, who had a variety of ailments.

One day Bonds told Rice he was going to check himself into the hospital for warmth and food. A week went by, Rice said, and no sign of Mr. Bonds.

He finally went up to the abandoned house, and as he started into one room, he saw Bonds' legs and thought he was sleeping. He wasn't. He'd died cold and alone.

Rice said he decided then he had to act, and after talking it over with his wife, they converted their rental house into an emergency shelter. It doesn't house a lot of people, Rice said, but even if it helps one person get their life back, it's worth it.

"We've got to rise up and make a difference," he said.

Considering tall buildings

BY JACK HAGGERTY
This is the second in a three-part series of essays about Carrboro development.

Many of us opposed what came to be called "the tall-building ordinance" when it was proposed. It allowed an increase in building heights, from two and three stories to four and five stories, in the downtown districts. In a previous essay, I wrote about the horizontal development of Carrboro ("Established boundaries," *The Carrboro Citizen*, 1/19/12); this essay is about the vertical development of Carrboro. I am convinced now the tall-building ordinance was of no benefit to Carrboro. I believe the passage of it had the opposite result of what its advocates told us to expect.

The public debate over the ordinance was contentious. Those in favor of it were of one voice: highest, best use; think big, think up; the future's ahead, and it's "tall buildings."

There were contrary positions: Carrboro was a little town – big buildings typically need big corporate tenants and chain stores, and that's not Carrboro; the existing two- and three-story limit was appropriate, friendly and more in keeping with our sense of Carrboro; the town infrastructure wasn't up to the potential size and intensity of uses that would be allowed; and, lastly, and what was most on point, where was the demand for all of this space?

The discussion started in the late '90s, gained momentum and the ordinance passed, and we're surrounded by the result; rather, there wasn't any result. The bust economy does little to explain this, as there were a number of boom years following the passage of the ordinance before the crash. If we hadn't wanted so much, I think we could have had much more than we currently have.

The passage of the ordinance had a number of foreseeable consequences, all of which hindered development in the downtown and still do today. There was an inflation in downtown land prices

in anticipation of the boom, and the expectation created was unrealistic (we were going to get towers of low-rent artists' studios powered by windmills and solar collectors). The cost of submitting a project application became a considerable expense and one that was multiplied by the time it took town staff and citizen committees to review the application before it was sent to the board. And, mistakenly, and worst of all, the goal of a bustling downtown (who wouldn't want that?) became linked with taller buildings.

I understand a busy downtown bestows manifold benefits, from a lively and desirable atmosphere to businesses and real estate that provide a welcome and significant portion of the tax base, but the taller buildings weren't required to achieve that goal.

Carrboro is not built-out at a two- and three-story level, not even near it. The goal of doubling the commercial square footage listed in the town's Vision 2020 document in no way requires the taller buildings; the increase could be accomplished with two- and three-story buildings. A build-out at the existing scale of two- and three-story buildings would be a natural progression for the town. Two to three stories is a comfortable scale, one familiar to Carrboro residents. By staying with the then-existing height limitations, we would have removed fractious and anxious arguments about height issues from the approval process. The tall-building advocates wanted downtown Carrboro to go, by analogy, from third grade to high school. It's hard to see how that could go well.

Other considerations were overlooked in the haste to pass the ordinance. Four- and five-story buildings are typically made of concrete and steel – expensive materials. They have elevators. These buildings require a certain economy of scale to bring the higher material costs even within sight of reason. That's why you rarely see taller buildings with small footprints, and with the small lots in Carrboro,

an economy of scale is difficult.

Combining these requirements with the inflated land prices and expensive applications that require long reviews full of costly revisions, four- and five-story buildings turn out to be quite expensive to build. That also makes them costly for users – whether the user is buying space or renting it. The shopper in a tall building carries the cost of that building in her basket as she walks to the register to pay for her purchases. Someone dining in a restaurant in a tall building lifts that cost to his mouth with every bite.

Two- and three-story buildings, on the other hand, can be built of brick and wood, a considerably less costly (and greener) way to build. If the zoning ordinance allows only a two-story building of 20,000 square feet rather than a five-story building of 50,000 square feet, the cost of the project for both owner and user will be less. Less space will be given up to paved parking and less rainwater runoff will hit our watershed. And because the consequences of smaller buildings are fewer and have less impact, the permitting approval process is easier, cheaper and quicker.

Smaller buildings are of a scale manageable to local developers; giant loans and faraway banks aren't required. The money can originate and stay in the community, and we are less subject to the national economy. There is less of a chance of overbuilding, and the edge can be kept on demand. Does a mom-and-pop store need a five-story concrete parking deck? I thought we were in favor of affordability – both commercial and residential.

The result, I believe, in staying with the two- and three-story limit would have been a more built-out downtown, a denser and more vibrant downtown, with more businesses built and owned by local folks – in short, the downtown we "visioned" more than a decade ago.

Jack Haggerty is an architect who lives in downtown Carrboro.

Community Meetings

Mental Health, Intellectual/Other Developmental Disabilities, Substance Use/Addiction

Valuable information and answers to your questions about:

- PBH/OPC Collaboration
- Medicaid Waivers

Orange County
Monday, January 30, 2012
1:00 - 3:00pm

Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church
Fellowship Hall
1712 Willow Drive
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

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The Orange County Human Relations Commission invites you to Human Relations Month Forum 2012

Sunday, January 29, 2012
3:00 PM – 5:00 PM

THEME:
"Defining Marriage in North Carolina by Constitutional Amendment: What are the Implications?"

PANELISTS:
ROBERT L. CAMPBELL Chairman, Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chapter NAACP
MAXINE EICHNER Professor, UNC-CH School of Law
BRETT WEBB-MITCHELL Visiting Associate Professor, N.C. Central University

MODERATOR:
MILAN PHAM Attorney, Nicholson-Pham Attorneys at Law

PLACE:
Carrboro Century Center
100 North Greensboro Street
Carrboro, NC 27510

Refreshments served. Live Music by The Moaners at 2:30 PM.
The public is invited. For more information, call (919) 245-2487.

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