

Historical society president

'Optimistic' Suiter says city not out of woods yet

By Terry Calhoun
Staff Writer

After talking with Chris Suiter a few minutes, no reasonable person would accuse him of being a cockeyed optimist. On more than one occasion he has seen enthusiasm for historic preservation come and ... fizzle.

Suiter, president of the Southport Historical Society, seemingly has little faith in the ability or readiness of even the most committed preservationist to maintain the energy and motivation to see projects through to completion.

But the word Suiter chooses to characterize the current atmosphere in local preservationist politics is "optimistic."

The words he chooses to characterize the current state of affairs, however, are words like troublesome, scary and crazy.

"As things are now, we could wake up one morning to the sound of bulldozers anywhere in town. Anywhere. And tomorrow they could start building a Wings store."

To Suiter, the most positive aspect of the new Wal-Mart Superstore is that it is being built "in the pines" and not on the waterfront. "They could have built it anywhere that they could have acquired the property," he explained.

'With the election of mayor (Norman) Holden and with the first of what might be several more changes in the board, we showed how much effect an involved electorate can have on the local scene.'

Chris Suiter, president
Southport Historical Society

Current Southport ordinances do nothing to prevent the overnight destruction of any property, including that which the historical society considers on nearly sacred ground, and its replacement with new commercial or residential structures.

Suiter's hope for the future is grounded in two recent developments that he points to as critically important.

"The most important day for Southport was election day," he said, smiling. "With the election of mayor (Norman) Holden and with the first of what might be several more changes in the board, we showed how much effect an involved electorate can have on the local scene," he said.

Does he feel like the mayor is in his hip pocket? No, he says, but does suggest that there is an expectation that campaign rhetoric will translate into positive action.

When mayor-elect Holden was asked this week to answer questions about his vision for his administration, he said he would prefer to wait until he is officially in office — "out of respect for the current mayor."

The second item on Suiter's list is the presentation last Wednesday by J. Myrick Howard to the meeting of the historical society. He said the fact that Howard — "a heavy hitter in preservationist circles" — was here and the informational and educational value of his talk were important in their own right was encouraging enough, but the fact that the city wanted to be a part of the evening to the point of co-hosting the event was both "amazing and exciting."

Is this the dawn of a new day in historic preservation in Southport? Even the optimistic Suiter is not prepared to say so, having experienced the effects of lost momentum in the past, and city manager Rob Gandy was reluctant to make any statement characterizing his viewpoint, deferring to the new board of aldermen.

Both Gandy and Holden were introduced to the audience Wednesday night at the Southport Community Center. At least one member of the board of aldermen also was in attendance.

Suiter's immediate goal is modest. He is hopeful that the new board will find the idea of establishing a waiting period, possibly with a hearing review process, before a home or business owner could demolish or substantially modify a structure in the historic district.

Suiter agrees that few owners would want to see detrimental commercial development in historic Southport, but doesn't have faith that the current unrestricted environment will guard against that possibility. In fact, he is almost sure that, left as is, current city law will lead to that eventuality — if not a Wings store, at least something that someday will be seen as an unfortunate change in the landscape.

He hopes that in years to come those who live in Southport and who love Southport will not look around and say, "Isn't it a shame what's happened here."

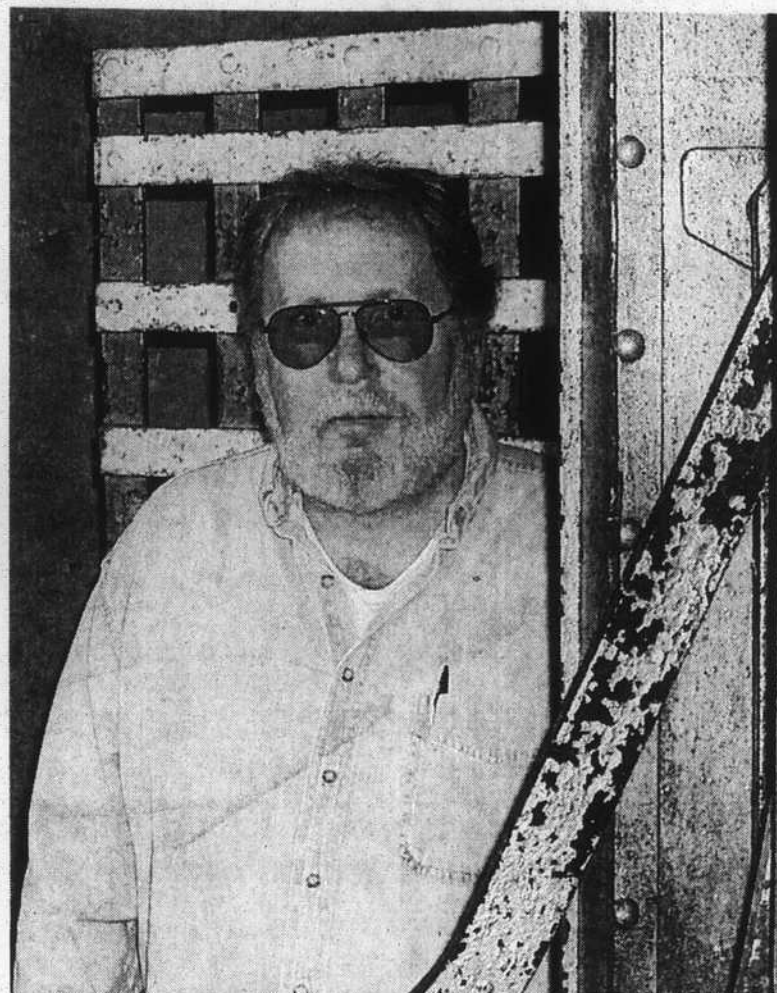


Photo by Terry Calhoun
Chris Suiter, president of the Southport Historical Society, says election of new city board members may signal a change of direction in how the city addresses its past.

Southport faces growth versus tax issue

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Southport last Wednesday at the Southport Community Center.

Howard also called for strong historical districting action to protect existing properties and sounded an alarm that irrevocable loss is imminent if such action is not taken.

Calling change unstoppable, he warned the gathering of more than a hundred that the future of Southport, which he called a "city with a special character," hinges upon the answer to another question: "What kind of growth is best?"

The Outer Banks, in Howard's estimation, can serve as a case in point.

"I really don't enjoy visiting there like I did 25 years ago," he said.

Howard's vision of a future grounded in smart growth is one centered around the needs of the pedestrian rather than the automobile, and toward "community rather than isolation." He tutored the crowd on the benefits of the preservation of existing structure over new development in maintaining a strong revenue base, pointing out that existing neighborhoods do not require the level of expenditure for roads, sewers and schools that both the developers and residents of new subdivisions have come to expect and demand from local governments.

"New development does not pay for itself," he said emphatically. He referred to studies he says show new development does not generate enough taxes to provide services. He said cities are getting "good money" for historic preservation and cited a 1,300-percent increase in property evaluation in his own Raleigh neighborhood over the course of the last 20 years, without costly infrastructure spending.

Gauging the political climate in the upcoming gubernatorial election, Howard predicts that smart growth will be "on the radar screen."

Pointing to the attention given nega-

tive effects of uncontrolled growth in contributing to destruction caused by the flooding in the wake of Hurricane Floyd earlier this fall as a bellwether in support of that forecast, he characterizes the issue as, "We've got to grow differently. Can we build a tax base in a different way?"

Howard answers his question with an affirmation that historical preservation is key. He says state government, and specifically Gov. Jim Hunt, are "finally getting the message."

Preservation North Carolina has been recognized by the National Parks Service as the "premier statewide preservation organization in the South, if not the nation...."

Founded in 1939, it is the state's only private, non-profit, statewide historic preservation organization. With a stated mission of protecting and promoting building, landscapes and sites important to the heritage of North Carolina, the organization was called "the model organization of its kind" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Essentially the trustees of a revolving fund dedicated to rescuing endangered properties and promoting their revival as viable assets, Preservation North Carolina is underpinned by a diverse membership of nearly 5,000.

PNC boasts of saving more than 400 endangered historic properties, generating an estimated \$80 million in private investment. As its executive director, Howard has become a visible and outspoken advocate for not only the kinds of entrepreneurial enterprises leveraged by PNC, but also for other efforts aimed at preservation and revitalization of existing properties. He especially advises the leadership of Southport to work toward vigorous historical districting.

"I hope like the Dickens Southport gets a historic district," Howard said, and predicted unwanted "teardowns" if that path is not pursued. He warned that

Southport citizens could literally wake up one morning to find cherished properties eradicated and that, under current local ordinance, nothing could be done to hinder, or even slow down, the bulldozer.

Howard was referring to the type of district that may be established by local ordinance and may be as limited or as extensive as the political will of the local population desires. Some districts, he explained, require no more than a delay in construction or destruction of property, pending planning board review. Other local plans dictate architectural design standards.

Howard made no recommendation as to the scope of any future Southport ordinance and emphasized the local flexibility.

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