

# Chapel Hill street to get face-lift

## Amber Alley to be renovated

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STAFF WRITER

JULY 3 — One of Chapel Hill's most famous alleyways will be renovated soon with the hope of making it safer and more prepared to handle its large amounts of foot traffic.

Amber Alley, which runs between Bandido's Mexican Cafe and the building that used to hold the famous Rathskeller restaurant, is a popular cut-through for pedestrians going to Franklin Street from Wallace parking deck.

"The alley is considered a major gateway to Franklin Street," said George Draper, owner of the building that houses Bandido's and the popular club Players.

Draper said talks to improve the alley have been going on for years but really took steam near the beginning of 2008.

But one of the main problems was finding the funding to support the renovation project, he said. The alley is privately owned, with Draper owning half and the owner of the building that houses the Rathskeller owning the other half.

"Most people don't even think of it as private property," he said. "Police even use it. People mainly use it as a cut-through."

Draper said that the original plan was to give the property to the town but that the town's attorney decided the town didn't need the liability. Instead, Draper proposed that the town help pay for the renovations but not take control of the property.

On June 25, the Chapel Hill Town Council passed a resolution setting aside \$60,000 for the renovations from the town's Streetscape bond funds. Draper said alley owners also will put up around \$43,000.

Town Council member Sally Greene said that the project is an important one, and that she hopes it will encourage cooperation between the public and private sectors.

"I think it's an excellent use of the Streetscape bond fund," she said. "This is a good example of the kind of public-private cooperation that the town wants to continue to see."

Draper said the development plans are in progress right now.



Though Amber Alley is a convenient cut-through between Rosemary and Franklin streets and provides quick access to the Rosemary St. parking deck, many users find its dark, damp atmosphere disconcerting.

"We are trying to get it all done before fall session starts," he said. "Now is the best time."

Though the walkway, which gets slick when wet, sometimes can be tricky, the back stairs closest to the parking deck are an area of real concern, Draper said.

"The back stairs are worn down and can be dangerous," he said. "There is about a 30 degree slope after the last stair. So they'll probably excavate and add about three steps to the bottom."

Draper said the owners of the alley also will replace the awnings and improve the lighting in the alley.

Some who frequently use the alley are concerned about what renovations might do to the character of the alleyway, and some question if they are necessary at all.

Kirk Francis, who recently graduated from UNC, said he doesn't think the alley is too unsafe to use.

"I think the stairs kind of weed out anyone who would be susceptible to falling in wet conditions," he said. "But I guess the stairs would be hazardous when wet."

Charles Jones, who grew up in Durham, has been using Amber Alley almost all of his life.

"I've never been worried about slipping and falling or anything,"

Jones said. "I like the fact that it feels funky. It's old Chapel Hill. I'd miss the old stairs if they took them out."

Jones said a lack of lighting shouldn't be such a concern anyway. "If my daughter was coming home from the bars at 2:30 a.m., I'd tell her not to take an alley anywhere."

Draper said one of the main challenges of the renovation project is to make the walkway safer but "keep the old flavor."

"We're trying our best not to change the character," he said. "Just clean it up."

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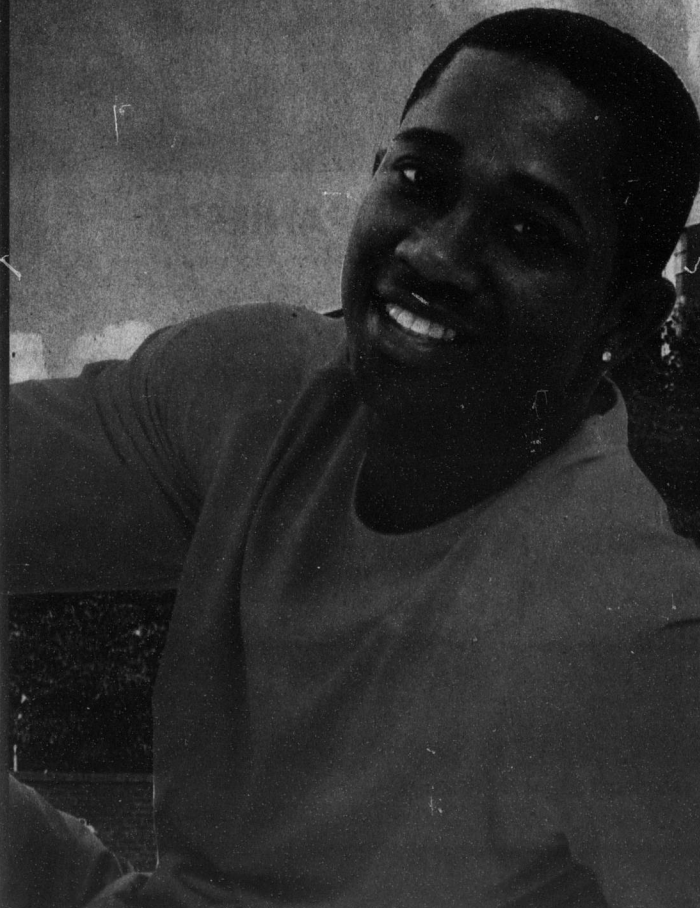
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