

Whither Chapel Hill?

People-oriented growth planning

by Mary Ellis Gibson
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Chapel Hill is no longer a village. Most people would agree with that.

But the plans for the growth of Chapel Hill date back to the early 60s when the town was still a village. As alderman Ross Scroggs has put it, "Those plans have been out of whack for years."

Looking back on the growth of the town over the last 10 years, the Board of Alderman, the Planning Board, the Chapel Hill Planning Department and citizens have become concerned with what will happen to the town in the next 10 years.

"We need to know projections for the future in a more reliable way," said Alice Welsh, one of the Aldermen. "Everyone says eventually the growth of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill will be one million people," Welsh said. She feels that this does not need to happen. "We need some better direction about where we should be 15 years from now," she said.

Scroggs said he feels a comprehensive plan cannot be drawn up for such a long period but that a plan that can be reviewed and changed every three to five years should be initiated.

In trying to construct a new, long-range look at the area, the results of two on-going programs and a long-range policy plan will be used. The two programs are PITCH and the Central Business District (CBD) study. The long-range policy plan was developed in a year's study by Art Berger of the Planning Department.



Aerial view of Chapel Hill in 1919

PITCH is a program sponsored by the Planning Board and headed by Peg Parker. It is designed to get townspeople involved in planning for the future of the town through a series of hearings. The first will be held March 1 in the Municipal Building.

Representatives from nearly 140 organizations, ranging from church groups to men's clubs to PTAs, have been asked to come to the meeting.

At the meeting, Parker explained, slides, graphs and charts of the town's growth will be presented in order to show how the town has grown and what problems it is facing.

"Basically, what we want to ask people is, 'Do we go along the same, speed up or slow down?' in the years ahead," explained Parker.

In preparing for the hearing, four members of the Planning Board, five students and Berger worked in collecting details on such things as people, cars and houses, Parker said.

"What we need to find out is exactly what people think about the future growth of the town," she explained.

While the PITCH program is seeking input for the planning for the whole town, the CBD study is looking specifically at what should be done in the CBD area, the height of buildings and the effects of the public transportation system," said James Wallace, head of the CBD study.

The study is concerned with the direction that the downtown will go in the next few years and what can be done to keep it "people orientated," Wallace said.

The 20-member task force that is doing the study meets every three weeks and is about two-fifths done with the study. "The results should be out in late May or early June," he said.

One of the attempts to gather statistics were the student questionnaires that were passed out when students registered for spring semester.

"We had really good returns," said Wallace, explaining that about 50 per cent of the forms had been returned to Robert Leary and Associates, who are doing the study.

"Our program is solution orientated," Wallace said. "It is not just one like the 33 studies that have been made around town."

When the program statistics and aims are finalized, a set of recommendations will be drawn up to present to the Board of Aldermen and the Planning Board.

One of the programs initiated this fall was the GOALS program, which was set up as a committee of the town government officials, working to set out specific long-range goals. Berger, one of the members of that committee, said that it was disbanded because of a lack of consensus among the members.

Berger's long-range policy plan states policies and the implementation of those policies for the planning area of Carrboro, Chapel Hill and the subdivision districts of the two towns. This area is about 19 square miles.

The 74-page document is based on a policy that would center on specific centers of growth in Chapel Hill and the area such as the CBD, Glen Lennox, Eastgate and others. Berger's plan is now being considered by the Planning Board, although no specific action has been taken or will be until after PITCH collects more information from the townspeople, according to Planning Board member Parker.

Armed with the information from these studies and the hearings, the Planning Board will then be able to take a better look at what the people of Chapel Hill want and what the area needs in planning for the next decades.

Village? The image and flower ladies pushed into alleys as Chapel Hill mushrooms into a Triangle city

by Mary Ellis Gibson
Feature Writer

People said Chapel Hill as a village would be destroyed when the flower ladies were relegated to an alley, when Eastgate opened and when the University began raising its enrollment to accommodate the baby boom.

Now the tone is different, as businessmen predict that a new shopping center will solve some traffic congestion and preserve the village atmosphere.

But most people sigh and shrug while remarking resignedly that Chapel Hill hasn't been a village in years.

The "village" is, indeed, inhabited by some 12,000 townspeople and about 19,000 students, according to the 1972 Chamber of Commerce estimate. Chapel Hill natives complain that life in the "village" is beset with anonymity.

The village myth has been replaced by a four-lane Franklin Street, the brick and glass towers of Granville and the North Carolina National Bank.

The NCNB building, shopping plaza and parking deck went up amid both cheers and cries of dismay and a short walk down Franklin Street reveals that reactions to growth are still mixed.

"I've lived in Chapel Hill for 21 years," one clerk said. "And I don't like that big building down the street, but it's there and we have to accept it."

"Growth is inevitable and we have to change as the times change," she added.

Another businessman took an even more favorable

attitude, predicting happily that the shopping plaza will bring new customers downtown.

Across the street, however, sentiment was different. Did you like the Chapel Hill atmosphere better five years ago, I asked a clothing merchant.

"Five years ago? I liked it better 15 years ago," he replied. "Five years ago it was just as big and busy as it is now."

Another merchant, who is moving his business to the new University Mall to open this summer with 52 stores, declared downtown Chapel Hill is no longer a village at all but a hodgepodge of "banks, boutiques and hot dog stands."

Some signs of change are already apparent. Central Carolina, First Citizens, First Union National and North Carolina National banks are already located on Franklin Street. Wachovia will soon move into the building now occupied by the electric store. Northwestern Bank is still seeking a location on the street.

The shuffle and deal does not stop with new banks. The electric store is moving to the present location of the Carolina Barber Shop, and the barbers will occupy space in the NCNB plaza.

Downtown businesses may also be affected by the opening of the University Mall, says Joe Augustine, executive director of the Chapel Hill Chamber of Commerce.

The business most acutely affected by the opening of the Mall will be clothing stores, because their merchandise will compete on an item for item basis with

the same products in the shopping center, Augustine said.

A manager of a downtown clothing retail store asserted that the growth of shopping centers signaled the death of downtown Chapel Hill. Other merchant predict that the area is growing fast enough to support both the Central Business District and shopping centers. Despite students' complaints of high prices, several merchants cited the importance of foot-traffic customers, students without cars who must rely on downtown businesses for their needs.

Though some people still characterize Chapel Hill a rural, souther Arcadia, these visions are now incongruously mingled with prospects of urban problems.

Traffic, public housing, out-migration of shoppers and home owners and waste disposal are problems of a metropolitan nature that the "village" Chapel Hill must begin to consider.

Growth of the town has had major consequence recently, but future development may bring even more complications with the expansion of the Research Triangle. The Census Bureau predicts cities with populations between 50,000 and 200,000 will experience exceptionally fast growth rates during the next 25 years.

Meanwhile, Chapel Hillians can stoically accept the transformation of their town into a smaller version of Durham, or perhaps active citizen participation in city planning will preserve a breath of the original "village" atmosphere.