

## Neighborhood tour shows residential, commercial improvements

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BY TYLER CONFOY; tmconfoy@gmail.com; (813) 810-4022

DURHAM — The house that sits at 1224 N. Roxboro Street in Durham's Old Five Points neighborhood used to be a run-down "shoebox," said Etna Claro, housing project manager for the Latino Community Development Center.

Now, after six months of rebuilding, the former duplex has been transformed into a bright green home with a bright red door, and it smells brand new.

"I love the bright colors," Claro said. "I think it's happy, just to see, OK this is something new. Something is happening here.... It's a kind of motivation."

On Wednesday, a group that included the mayor, county commissioners and community members stood inside the new home. It was the fourth stop on the Old Five Points Neighborhood Tour, a two-hour event that highlighted the area's residential and commercial improvements.

"The whole point of the tour is to show [that] private interests, nonprofits and the community can all come together and work together without really gentrifying the neighborhood, and we call it 'smart growth,'" said Stephen Hopkins, neighborhood organizer.

Peter Skillern, executive director of Reinvestment Partners, hosted the tour, which also included a visit to a renovated corner store, an improved transmission shop and a housing center for veterans.

The Roxboro home, which Claro said is a 90 percent reconstruction, is the Latino CDC's first completed project. The Latino CDC is a nonprofit associated with the Latino Credit Union, which anyone can join.

The house, originally built in 1982, was one of three houses on one lot that Skillern bought last year from BB&T after a foreclosure. Skillern's agency tore down one of the houses to make the property viable for building. His agency sold the other two

houses to Latino CDC at cost for \$30,000.

It took six months and \$90,000 to renovate the 1224 house, Claro said. At 1,266 square feet, it will sell to members of the credit union for a minimum of \$110,000 and a maximum of \$140,000. It is available to families of different sizes depending on the family income. For example, to be eligible to buy the house, a family of three's income cannot exceed \$37,125.

Claro wants to show members the perks of living in this "forgotten" area, including its proximity to downtown Durham.

Skillern said he remembered showing his friend Luis Pastor, president of the Latino Credit Union, around the neighborhood when the Roxboro house was still rundown. At one point, he said, a prostitute came up to their car window.

"I'm like, 'Not now, I'm trying to get this credit union investing in the neighborhood,'" Skillern remembers.

The neighborhood did get the investment, but it's those kinds of traits, like prostitution and drug dealing, that people like Skillern and Hopkins, the neighborhood organizer, are trying to overcome.

"This was the neighborhood in hell," Hopkins said, adding that junkies could often be seen on Geer Street.

Hopkins said Express Mart, the renovated corner store, creates a better community. There are no longer drug dealers or drive-bys there, and people don't get robbed in front of the store anymore, he said.

"We were able to remove some of the security fencing and some of the deterrents that were hindering this corner's growth, and kind of give it a look to be more consistent to what it was some 50 years ago" said Frank White, owner of Express Mart's property.

The corner store's renovation was funded in part by the City of Durham, Skillern said. Funding from Durham's Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Program also went to Mike's Transmission Service and a commercial office building at 1201 N. Roxboro St.

County Commissioner Wendy Jacobs said she's impressed by the revitalizing efforts of nonprofits and private partners.

"They're doing it with, sometimes, some help from city and county government," Jacobs said, "and a lot of times just partnering and networking, getting grants, being resourceful, and it's really inspiring."