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Stanhope-less: How a lovely village plan in West Raleigh blew up

By Bob Geary



Photo by Jeremy M. Lange

A new student housing complex will be ready when students return to N.C. State this month.

Once upon a time, there was a visionary small-area plan for a tract of once-industrial land on the south side of Hillsborough Street between N.C. State University and the Stanhope neighborhood. The plan was incorporated into Raleigh's comprehensive plan by a unanimous City Council vote.

The plan came from the Hillsborough Street Partnership, a civic organization formed to reimagine the street and champion its rejuvenation. Community meetings in 1999 attracted some 500 residents who huddled with city leaders over a period of weeks.

The participants were brimming with good ideas. One of their best was to designate a portion of the industrial tract next to Stanhope for a new, vibrant "urban village." Done well, they said, the village should have enough housing diversity and retail pop to begin the job of patching—literally and figuratively—the town-gown divide that haunted Hillsborough Street.

That divide, people said, led to the street's deterioration even while N.C. State's student population exploded in the '80s and '90s. The problem: The students lived over here, the neighborhoods were over there—and they never mixed. But in a village built on the university side, with different kinds of housing to appeal to students and non-students, maybe they'd start to mix.

Also, a village scale of two- to six-story buildings would offer a graceful transition between the larger campus buildings and the compact one- and two-story houses in the century-old Stanhope community.

It was an exciting idea as far as Tom and Mary Hennessy were concerned. About to retire—he from the insurance industry, she was a nurse—they sold a bigger house in North Raleigh and bought a smaller fixer-upper on Stanhope Avenue that they've turned into a jewel over the last decade. They liked the idea of being downtown, close to State (where Mary could take graduate English classes) and walking distance from bus transit. They very much looked forward to seeing the dreary industrial tract brought to life.

"We wanted to be where the action was," Mary says softly. "Little did we know."

What the Hennessys didn't know then, but say they've since learned from painful experience, is not to trust that the City Council—or a majority of it anyway—will follow its own plans, let alone a neighborhood's wishes. Not if developers want something else.

Today, they look out from their front porch and see a giant parking deck looming over them. There's no village there. No graceful transition to Stanhope. There's only a huge student housing complex, much bigger than the small-area plan contemplated, with a deck that abuts Stanhope like an invading force. And as for the council members who allowed it, well ...

But the Hennessys had talked about what *not* to say to a reporter. And they'd agreed, Mary says: "Watch your language!"

Ironically, the small-area plan remains an official part of the Raleigh comprehensive plan. But what's been built on the site so far—and what's been approved for development of the remainder—runs roughshod over any village identity. The plan, in a word, is dead.

It's sad. More than sad, it's a cautionary tale as Raleigh attempts to turn away from its history of suburban sprawl and toward—armed with its comprehensive plan and a new zoning code now being considered—its intended future of urban growth and redevelopment downtown.

Raleigh's growth plans are rife with concepts like placemaking, transitions, having open space and pedestrian-friendly realms between tall buildings, and mixed-use—all variations on the theme that, yes, the city wants big projects, but they should "fit in" and enhance what's around them, not overwhelm and degrade what came before.

Placemaking is what the Stanhope plan intended. Now, as Valentine Commons, the phase-one student housing project, prepares to open for the fall semester, it's worth recalling how that concept was abandoned.

Act 1: A celebrated plan

Following the community meetings in 1999, the Hillsborough Street Partnership hired a local planner-architect, Russ Stephenson—he would later become a city councilor—to devise a Stanhope Village small-area plan. It took two years of negotiations, Stephenson recalls, but finally his work was endorsed by all of the key stakeholders: the developer who owned most of the tract, nearby business owners, neighboring residents in Stanhope and University Park, N.C. State officials and the partnership itself—which included representatives of all of the above.

In 2002, the council adopted the Stephenson plan by an 8-0 vote.

Stephenson's plan featured a large, grassy commons and a realigned Concord Street that would function as a main avenue for pedestrians coming into the village from Hillsborough Street. Concord Street would be widened to allow for diagonal parking on both sides. For special events, it could be opened up in street-fair fashion.

The plan gave the landowner-developer, Melton (Val) Valentine, what he wanted—the right to build another large, private housing complex and parking deck for N.C. State students. Previously, Valentine had developed University Towers and its parking deck off Dan Allen Drive.

To avoid the monoculture of students—only on the university side of Hillsborough Street, though, the Stephenson plan located the student housing at the back of Valentine's tract and limited it to seven stories, and a

total of 160,000 square feet. The rest of the tract, including the frontage on Hillsborough Street, was laid out as a village-scale mix of shops, office space and townhouses around the spacious (34,000 square feet) commons and the redesigned Concord Street.

A four- to five-level parking deck would fit in the middle, between the student housing and a long, two- to three-story building facing Hillsborough Street with street-level retail and residential units on the upper floors. The deck was supposed to be "wrapped" by townhouses so that, from Concord Street or the commons, you wouldn't know it was there.

Act 2: The first betrayal

No sooner was Stephenson's plan adopted, though, than the same City Council began to violate it. In 2002, it approved Valentine's application to build a bigger student housing project than the plan intended, with a bigger deck—and he wasn't required to build anything else. One key to successful urban mixed-use projects: Don't let the developer build all of what he wants until he builds some of what the city and the community want. The 2002 rezoning blew that notion away.

The project for which Valentine applied was never built, but the details of the rezoning case began to undermine the village plan. One such detail allowed Valentine, until he built something else, to turn the middle of the site into a graveled "ValPark" lot for students' cars. Meanwhile, he'd acquired the six closest houses in Stanhope—small shotgun houses on Stanhope Avenue—and he tore them down, using the lots for parking.

Act 3: Enter Capstone

In 2008, Valentine sold the back of his site to Capstone, an Alabama company that builds private student dorms. The council, by now desperate for something besides a graveled lot in this strategic location, approved Capstone's first-phase development plan for an even bigger student housing project with an even bigger deck. The complex, named Valentine Commons, is 10 stories tall (up from the planned seven) and 375,000 square feet (up from 160,000).

Then, told that the soils in the center of Valentine's tract couldn't hold a parking deck, the council went along with Capstone's idea to move it to where it abuts the Stanhope neighborhood—part of it sitting on the lots where Valentine had torn down houses. The approved parking deck can hold 782 spaces, about twice as many as the deck in the small-area plan. The vote on council was 6-2, with Stephenson and Thomas Crowder voting no. (Crowder also voted no in 2002.) Until the last moment, it appeared that the project would be rejected on a 4-4 split, councilors Rodger Koopman and Nancy McFarlane having promised the Stanhope neighbors that they'd support the small-area plan and oppose the project. Then they switched. Koopman is no longer on council. McFarlane was elected mayor in 2011.

Between this approval and the one in 2002, the grassy commons was eliminated. So was the widened Concord Street. Indeed, as Stephenson says, all of the plan's "pedestrian-friendly public amenities" were gone. Concord still exists, but the 2008 site plan leaves no room for parking on either side, let alone diagonal parking on both.

Act 4: The Kerr Drug caper

With the Capstone project under way, Valentine returned in 2011 for another rezoning of his remaining land. It added three lots on Hillsborough Street that were covered by Stephenson's small-area plan but which Valentine had not included in the 2002 rezoning case.

Stephenson's plan called for a continuous two- to three-story building façade on Hillsborough Street with first-floor retail and all surface parking hidden from the street. Valentine's new plan called for a five-story building anchored by a Kerr Drug store, and a separate three-story building for which no uses were specified. A 125-foot-wide surface parking lot was between the two. The fact that the parking lot would be visible from Hillsborough Street, another violation of the small-area plan, was presented as a non-negotiable deal-breaker for Kerr Drug: Without visible parking, a Kerr spokesman said, the drugstore would withdraw.

At the site plan hearing, Mayor McFarlane did ask why there were no pedestrian amenities in the plan. Where were the parking spaces on Concord, she wondered.

The council removed them when it approved the Capstone project in 2008, planning staffers told her. McFarlane, one of them added, made the motion to approve it.

Finally, that parking deck that couldn't go in the middle of the site because of the sub-standard soils? It's still on the drawing boards and, as approved by council, can now be much, much bigger: up to eight levels (from the original four to five) with a total of 1,037 parking spaces. However, only 350 spaces can be leased for "commuter parking." All others must be designated for the student housing, for future townhouses, if built, and for Kerr Drug and anything else built on Hillsborough Street.

Council approval was by a 7-1 vote. Crowder was the no; Stephenson, throwing up his hands, voted yes.

Act 5: Farce

In a new rezoning application submitted this month, Valentine is asking that the three-story building on Hillsborough Street now be permitted for nine stories. No other details were offered; city planners have responded with a list of questions. The application may not be ready for the next scheduled public hearing date, which is in October.

To some, the evolution that turned Stanhope Village into Valentine Commons is a good sign for Raleigh's future. The city is growing; bigger is better. The fact that the 160,000-square-foot student housing project of 2002 has morphed into the 375,000-square-foot project now renting for the 2012-13 academic year isn't cause for alarm but for celebration. That's certainly the view of the development industry, most members of the Raleigh planning commission and, since 2002, most city councilors.

Even Stephenson, who laments the loss of the best elements of his original plan, points on the positive side to the fact that a thousand more N.C. State students will walk to class—or ride the Wolfline—and not be clogging the roads with their cars. Or clogging them as much.

That's the upside of the project, though in a further irony, N.C. State officials are now talking about closing (gating) Dan Allen Drive to through traffic during daytime hours. So many cars are driving around the university, they've told city officials, that the Wolfline buses can't stay on schedule.

Certainly for the residents of Stanhope, what's come out of the ground is a nightmare—one that, thanks to a parking deck a few yards away, comes with all-night illumination. "It's just so overpowering, it violates your senses," Tom Hennessy says. "It's like that movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*"—he whistles the theme music—like a spaceship so bright, you can read your newspaper by it at 4 a.m.

After the 2008 vote, the Hennessys filed a lawsuit trying to get the City Council to follow the small-area plan. But they quickly gave it up, unwilling to spend their retirement savings in a losing battle. "We hated," Mary says, "to just let them thumb their noses at everything that was about community." She trailed off, and Tom finished the thought. "But ultimately, we were shown that development is what the City Council votes for."

Tags: Wake County, Stanhope, Wake County, Raleigh City Council

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