

## Zoning and entrepreneurs are transforming Catawba Avenue



Oct. 9. By Dave Yochum. From Smithville Park to the Cain Center for the Arts site just west of the police station, Catawba Avenue has a growing retail landscape with a hipper vibe than ever.

It's become more of a main street than Main Street.

"The Catawba Avenue redevelopment is really exceptional," said Wayne Herron, assistant town manager and former head of planning for Cornelius.

"The retention of the residential character while providing a beautiful quaint environment for small business to flourish is a great transition into the future Arts District and promotion of arts-related uses for the future," he said.

Catawba—no, it's not East Catawba, just Catawba—is morphing partly in anticipation of the new \$25 million Cain Center for the Arts, and partly because of the shifting retail landscape. Brick and mortar is tough for national chains, more doable for highly specialized, and experiential retailers.

Take Celeste Driscoll, owner of the new Merle Norman store at 21030 Catawba. She closed up in Birkdale Village and built her own 2,100

square foot building not just for cosmetic sales, but for a ladies' boutique and six spaces she can lease out to hair dressers and an aesthetician. All six spots are taken, a great thing come mortgage time.

### **Moved from Birkdale**

Rents are notoriously high in Birkdale Village where Driscoll only had about 550 square feet of space. She's still getting a handle on foot traffic in old Cornelius—it was virtually continuous in Birkdale—but as a destination business, it might not matter on Catawba.

“I love the small town feel and everybody knows each other,” the Cornelius resident said, explaining that merchants up and down Catawba are neighborly and support each other. Birkdale Village is strong on franchises, sometimes with absentee owners, not so much Catawba.

A few doors east, wife and husband team Georgia and Mark Ferguson have opened Inspired at Lake Norman in a perfect 2,000 square foot cottage style home within easy walking distance of the future Cain Center. They sell jewelry, gifts, home furnishings and art—real art, not the sofa-size pieces you might see at Marshall's. It's a full-time undertaking for them both.

“We never considered this business venture to be anywhere except here,” the Cornelius residents say.

### **Talking about the car wash**

Some of the retail renaissance is taking place at a car wash of all places.

Jamie Francom has invested \$50,000 in a soda shop on wheels. She parks right in front of the LKN Car Wash, 20833 Catawba, most Thursdays through Saturdays in the afternoon until 7:30 pm, offering up custom soda fountain drinks ranging from Coca-Cola (or Dr. Pepper) with pineapple, coconut and cream to gourmet cookies.

Walk-up and drive-up traffic are brisk.

The business, called Soda South, is a new concept here, not as new in Salt Lake City where there are a lot of shops that sell baked goods and custom sodas. That's where the Francoms moved from. “We both missed it so much we had to start one,” said Jamie, whose husband Trevin is an air traffic controller.

“It’s a really good location,” Jamie said, explaining that they did not look at Birkdale Village. In fact, their original location was on the other side of I-77.

David Dunn, the new owner of LKN Car Wash, asked her to bring the soda shop on wheels to the car wash, to help create a street-level ambiance akin to an open market. In fact, Dunn family members chime in with a flower cart and seafood tent when the weather is right.

The former vice chancellor of UNC-Charlotte says Catawba is “going to be the place to be” in Cornelius. Says Dunn: “It will rival Davidson’s pedestrian friendly atmosphere.”

The Cornelius resident says the resurgence on the east side of Catawba Avenue is driven in part by a strong pool of entrepreneurs who are following a particular dream of their own, not so much the homogenous, sterilized franchise model that looks the same in Denver, Colo. and Denver, N.C.

## **Entrepreneurs**

Catawba is the “inevitable counter-culture environment to what’s happening on the other side, with that plethora of national chains cluttering up West Catawba,” Dunn says.

Of course there are entrepreneurs up and down West Catawba, ranging from micro-brewers and a wake board shop to another car wash and independent, non-chain restaurants, but what’s happening on Catawba to the east is not just new and different, it repurposes existing real estate. Twenty years ago Catawba was almost all residential, some of it down at the heels. There was a massive old mill still standing where the Food Lion and live-work units are just west of Town Hall. Potts Barber Shop has been downtown for decades; the Walgreen’s was the last Cashion’s grocery store.

The Shoppes at Home Heart & Soul, The Rivens Business Center, which at one time included an ice cream shop, and the Deborah Young Photography Studio were among the pioneers on retail Catawba. Now the Rivens Business Center has a new real estate business.

The long-term disappointment is the concept behind the three-story, live-work units just west of Town Hall, where traditional retail has not thrived due to a requirement that the proprietor live upstairs.

## **Smart zoning**

Dunn said a newer brand of “smart zoning by the town” resulted in the creation of the Transitional Residential Overlay District (see box) which encourages local retail but mandates the preservation of the residential appearance of the buildings.

“The primary purpose is to allow for a seamless transition from residential to small commercial. It requires commercial to maintain a residential appearance. Also, the only signs allowed are the arm signs that you currently see up and down Catawba and N. Main Street,” Herron says.

Dunn says the Catawba renaissance is still in the infancy stages. Indeed, Tonya Rivens, who acquired the Rivens Business Center property in 2003, says Catawba will redevelop into “an extension to the main corridor of Davidson with its classic construction and quaint style businesses.”

## **More on the way**

Entrepreneurs Kas Matos and Justin Flanagan had planned to open Thigs Cocktail Lounge, a “smaller, cozy European-influenced cocktail bar,” at 21234 Catawba Ave. until the governor issued restrictions on bars due to the pandemic.

Matos, who owns two used car businesses, and Flanagan, who is the finance director at McLaren of Charlotte, had their eyes on the site for some time because it had the right “vibe.”

The opening is on ice for now.

“We would love to give an exact date but due to the governor’s executive order we do not want to commit to an exact date. Under normal circumstances we would be ready to open now but we have taken this time to invest our energy into the finest details to make the experience at Thigs exceptional. We are super excited to open the doors and will let everyone know the exact date when we are capable of doing so,” Matos says.

## **Discussion**

**No comments yet.**

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