

## **From the Nov. Issue of the Greater Charlotte Biz magazine**

By Casey Jacobus

University City is not, exactly, a real city. It is a community in the northeast section of Charlotte, stretching from Interstate 77 to the Cabarrus County Line, surrounding the University of North Carolina at Charlotte campus. It is neighbored by the town of Harrisburg to the east and the city of Concord to the northeast. The Charlotte Motor Speedway, Concord Mills Mall and the Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre are on its outskirts.

The community began to emerge in the mid-1960s, after UNC Charlotte was established as the fourth campus in the University of North Carolina System and the concept for the University Research Park was created. These two institutions are the anchors around which University City has developed. By the time University Memorial Hospital (now a major hospital in the Carolinas HealthCare System) opened in the mid-'80s, the farms that once populated the area had all but vanished.

The intersection of W.T. Harris Boulevard and North Tryon Street has become both the center of University City and the northeast gateway to Charlotte itself. The four corners of the intersection are occupied by the hospital; the Hilton, a major hotel and convention center and part of the 745,000-square-foot center known as University Place; the Grande Promenade Village, a mix of shops, restaurants and service establishments; and the 46-acre University Executive Park.

Today, University City is the largest "noncity" in the Carolinas. It is home to more than 150,000 residents, provides 74,000 jobs and, according to a recent study, contributes more than \$8.4 billion annually to the regional economy.

In 2003, the Charlotte City Council established a Municipal Service District (MSD), beginning at the Highway 29/49 "weave," and bordered by Interstate 85 to the west, Mallard Creek Church Road to the north, and University City Boulevard on the east. North Carolina law allows cities to establish MSDs to offer services beyond those normally supplied by the city. MSDs are funded by an additional tax on the properties in the district, with University City's tax equaling 3 cents per \$100 valuation.

### **Designated Advocate**

Soon after the MSD was designated, University City Partners was formed to advocate for and coordinate marketing and other activities in the new district. Mary Hopper was chosen as its executive director. Hopper, who holds a Ph.D. in Romance Languages from the University of Missouri and has lived in Charlotte since 1967, brought a wide range of experience and personal contacts to the job.

After teaching Spanish for five years at Queens College, Hopper moved on to manage public relations for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library. She served eight years on the Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission.

Her work there included authoring the first report on Big Box retail and leading two summits on regional planning. She was a consultant on the city's original

2025 Plan and gained firsthand experience with street design, road planning, and transit projects.

Hopper also had direct experience with MSD start-ups, having served eight years on the board of the Charlotte Uptown Development Corporation (predecessor to Charlotte Center City Partners) and helping get SouthEnd organized and financed. She even served on the board of directors for the North Carolina Zoo. Mary Hopper was the perfect person to head up the new University City Partners (UCP).

“I was in that specific time and place in my life for a reason,” says Hopper. “I was poised to help retrofit an area developed as a suburban area into a thriving commercial urban center.”

The original MSD covered roughly 1,300 acres, 1,000 of which didn’t pay taxes. With a budget of only \$150,000, UCP had to operate out of Hopper’s home and could afford only part-time staff. Nevertheless, UCP accomplished several community improvement projects in its first five years.

It sponsored a street design competition and funded the Urban Boulevard Study, which took a ground-breaking look at University City’s transportation needs. UCP also created a University City Area Plan, which was approved by the city council in 2007, and led efforts to remove construction roadblocks that were delaying much needed improvements to the “29/49 weave.”

Throughout its first seven years, UCP worked continuously to plan for the transformation of University City into a transit-supported urban center. It kept the mass transit issue front and center in public attention with frequent testimony before the Metropolitan Transit Committee and by bringing national transit-oriented development experts to annual conferences. The Area Plan it developed includes specific recommendations for station locations in University City.

“We’ll have rail; we just don’t know when,” says Hopper. “We can’t not do this or we’ll have to give back \$40 million. It will come.”

### **A Collaborative Effort**

From the beginning, UCP benefited from strong partnerships, which helped it tackle University City’s needs. Among UCP’s many partners are the Charlotte Chamber University Chapter, University City Community Building, UNC Charlotte, Carolinas Medical Center-University and neighborhood leaders. Under Hopper, UCP has also cultivated excellent working relationships with a wide range of government and community groups.

“We take the name ‘Partner’ very seriously,” says Hopper. “We believe in advocacy in collaboration.”

In 2008 the Charlotte City Council expanded the boundaries of the University City MSD to include University Research Park, a 2,200-acre office and industrial park that houses more than 20,000 employees in 80 buildings, and adjoining office and retail development.

Drawing on the research park’s tax base, UCP’s budget jumped to more than \$600,000 in 2009. UCP moved into offices on Mallard Creek Boulevard and hired permanent staff. It also jumped into some new projects, designed to promote the University City Area.

“We want people to pay attention to University City and to appreciate its positives,” says Hopper. “We want the people who have made the choice to live and work here feel good about their choice and to educate other people about all the things that are going on up here.”

UCP has recently launched a full-scale advertising campaign to highlight University City’s assets, including its diverse population, many international businesses, variety of restaurants and living options and other amenities. Coined as “Great Ideas Live Here”, the campaign includes a series of ads for television, radio, and print. UCP has also redesigned its website to be more visual and interactive. Other marketing efforts are aimed at promoting University City as an area that is innovative, international and, increasingly, green.

The addition of University Research Park to the University City MSD not only increases UCP’s budget and clout, it increases the challenges. If UCP is to achieve its vision for University City as a transit-supported urban center, the Research Park will play a major role in the community’s success.

“The Research Park helps fuel amenities, shopping and residential development in University City,” says Hopper. “Its future is key to the future of the entire area.”

The concept for University Research Park began to take shape about 10 years after Research Triangle Park was developed in the Raleigh-Durham area. When W.T. Harris became president of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce in 1966, he organized a committee to plan the development of a park between UNC Charlotte and Davidson College with a “university city” around UNC Charlotte.

The proximity of Charlotte-Douglas Airport, Concord Regional Airport and Interstates 85 and 77 made the area attractive to potential tenants. Realtors and bankers began assembling a tract of land that would attract a national corporation to establish a research and service center in the area.

The Park’s first tenant was Collins & Aikman Corporation, a textile manufacturer. The second tenant was Reeves Brothers, also a textile manufacturer. In 1970, IBM gave the park project a tremendous boost when it bought 428 acres at \$5,000 an acre and planned to build a facility that would employ 2,500 workers. Unfortunately IBM delayed construction, and development in the park was slow for several years, but in 1978 IBM finally announced it would build its facility.

Philip Morris announced a facility in nearby Cabarrus County and Electric Power Research Institute decided in 1979 to locate in University Research Park. Major investments in infrastructure were made to the area in the mid-1980s, including the expansion of Harris Boulevard and the extension of water and sewer lines. Today, major tenants at URP include Duke Energy Corporation, Fifth Third Bancorp, TIAA-CREF and Wells Fargo.

For a number of years, URP has suffered declining occupancy and use, in part because of company failures and mergers. In 2002, IBM sold its 12-building complex to Blackacre Capital Management and the property was renamed the Meridian Corporate Center. First Charter’s former headquarters is now home to Electrolux North America. Even before the current national financial crisis, available buildings and sites in URP were not selling or leasing at market rates.

Protecting and promoting this \$1 billion-plus asset will be among UPC's most important tasks in the immediate future.

### **Forward Focus**

"We need to focus on commercial development, while conserving URP's beautiful natural setting," says Hopper. "There are still 600 vacant acres in the park and we need to attract future development that will follow sustainable development principles and respect the natural environment."

Wells Fargo's recent announcement that it intends to keep Wachovia's 2-million-square-foot center, known as the Charlotte Information Center (CIC), in the research park was a step in the right direction for protecting the park's future. The CIC occupies 150 acres and employs 9,000 people. And, last March BECO South purchased The Meridian Center for \$42 million, renamed it Innovation Park, and announced plans to spend another \$25 million on the first phase of improvements.

UCP has another important partner in the effort to transform University Center into a transit-supported urban center—UNC Charlotte. The University, which started as Charlotte College in 1946, is the fourth largest among the 17 schools in the UNC system. Its 25,000 students have a spending power of \$88 million. The main campus sits on 1,000 wooded acres between Highways 29 and 49.

In 2000 UNC Charlotte started the development of its new Charlotte Research Institute (CRI) on 100 acres off North Tryon and adjacent to the main campus. CRI is designed to accelerate UNC Charlotte's development as a research university and to stimulate entrepreneurship and economic growth in the Charlotte region.

"UNC Charlotte will continue to grow," says Hopper. "Eventually it will have 35,000-40,000 students. We'll have light rail transport by then with a stop on the UNC campus. The impact of a rail line on both University City and UNC Charlotte cannot be overstated."

UNC Charlotte built a new entrance and is planning more development on the North Tryon side of its campus to accommodate the planned light rail line which will also strengthen its relationships with the community. The pedestrian-friendly high density development that will come with the rail line will provide increased amenities for the students at the University as well as for the residents and workforce of University City.

Meanwhile, UCP will continue its work to prepare the community for the day when Charlotte's Blue Line light rail line runs through University City. In addition to its efforts to help transform the area from a suburban outpost into a transit-ready urban center, UCP will continue to sponsor and fund projects to educate people on the major assets of the community it champions.

"I feel like I have to be Mother Goose," says Hopper. "I have to grab people by the lapels and tell them the story of University City."

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