



Growing outside the box

Left: Mary Hopper, executive director of University City Partners, joins UNC Charlotte Chancellor Phil Dubois in front of the Charlotte Research Institute.



By Mike Savicki
Photos by Richard Rudisill

University City Partners is reshaping University City

A lakefront town

or coastal resort it isn't. Nor is the area of North Carolina with the second largest number of hotel rooms the Triangle or the Triad.

And it might seem hard to imagine, but the area of Charlotte that has an annual economic impact of more than \$8.4 billion and that maintains more than 73,700 jobs and more than 131,400 residents is not the center city, South Park or Ballantyne.

University City is tops in these state and local categories, and if a small, grass-roots organization named University City Partners — which recently began its fourth year — continues its Herculean reshaping efforts, the once-isolated agricultural region around UNC Charlotte will become even a stronger asset to the Queen City's overall attractiveness.

A region takes root

According to Mary Hopper, executive director of University City Partners, the idea of creating a "University City" in northeast Charlotte was conceived in the late 1960s when most eyes were focused on the fast and furious growth in developing areas to the south and east of Charlotte's urban core. Local planners saw the development of University City as an opportunity to counterbalance this growth and to formulate a master plan around UNCC.

As envisioned by planners and advocates, University City would include the development of the multi-acre University Research Park and a uniquely designed



Mary Hopper looks at a map of Charlotte's first suburban municipal service district.

mixed-use "town center" that would be accessible to both the research park and the university.

"When I moved to town nearly 40 years ago, it was simply out of the question to live near UNC Charlotte because there was basically nothing out there," Hopper said. "However, with the new corridor that was established and a push to bring business to the university, the eyes of the city shifted to the north."

Under the leadership of Bill McCoy, past president of UNCC's Urban Institute, a study of University City was conducted in 2002

to better understand the area's changing demographics, growth and increased focus on business. The strategic plan also identified the antiquated zoning laws that limited efficient development and planning. It also made recommendations to promote better and more efficient transportation within the region.

"The strategic plan became necessary because of University City's coming of age," said McCoy. "Here was a large stretch of what the county had always referred to as an agricultural property that was transitioning from a suburban, ex-urban region into an urban setting."

A municipal service district

North Carolina law allows cities to establish municipal service districts (which are also known as business service districts in other states) to services in addition to those are provided by the city, according to McCoy. The plan suggested the formation of Charlotte's first suburban municipal service district in University City.

It also recognized that University City's population was larger than that of any of the six towns in the county, and it had no voice of its own. It became clear that an advocate was needed for University City.

Soon after the municipal service district was designated, University City Partners was formed to advocate for and coordinate marketing and other activities for the new district. University City Partners was authorized by Charlotte City Council in July 2003 as Charlotte's first suburban MSD.

To pay for these additional services, an ad valorem tax was imposed on property in the MSD's defined area.

UCP's tax rate is now 3 cents per \$100 valuation. It generated about \$167,900 in 2006.

It is important to note that UCP operates on a limited budget. "The budget that UCP has to work with, especially after you remove the administrative costs, is negligible," said McCoy. "You aren't going to build roads and sidewalks with the funds they have . . . but you can bring people together in a meaningful and purposeful way to change policy and foster growth. That's where they really stretch their dollars," he added.

An MSD typically is defined by major transportation corridors. The UCP district begins at the N.C. 29/49 "weave" to the south, continues to I-85 to the west, Mallard Creek Church Road to the north and the neighborhoods along University City Boulevard to the east. The intersection of Harris Boulevard and North Tryon Street serves as the district's center, with the Shoppes at University Place acting as the "town center."

While a suburban MSD may be new to

Charlotte, it is not new to other cities across the nation. Hopper cited Bellevue, Wash. (a suburb of Seattle), the University District of Philadelphia and the Woodlands suburb of Houston, Texas, as close parallels.

"And although they are structured a bit differently," Hopper added, "there are definitely things we can learn from the Cumberland, Midtown and Perimeter areas of Atlanta, especially around transportation management."


Plans for the future

"My vision is to create a flourishing town center that will serve as a civic gathering spot and create a bridge and connection between UNC Charlotte, University City's commercial core and the rest of University City," said Hopper, reflecting on her years ahead in leading University City Partners. "I want people to know what is happening at the Charlotte Research Institute, and I want to see University City continue to be economically viable and strong in the region. And it is most important to give people a transportation choice so they don't have to

move around in a car so much."

"Mary's vision is one that is shared by many of us in University City," said UNCC Chancellor Phil Dubois. "It's so compelling and Mary is so committed that one has to feel good about our future."

Dixon Fleming, University City Partners chairman, agreed. "If University City had its own city or town identity, it would be the seventh-largest city in the state. We have a huge job base right next to a series of popular residential neighborhoods. We have an existing network of roadways leading in and out of the city, and we have a strong commercial base that leaves a large economic footprint. We need to capitalize on these assets."

While University City Partners is an organization that operates on a grass-roots level, the board of directors, as well as the many area supporters and advocates, are passionate about moving University City outside the box. "Our goal is to create an urban community that residents embrace as a great place to live, work, recreate and relax," Fleming concluded. 

Who is Mary Hopper?

Besides having lots of energy and zest and an outgoing demeanor, Mary Hopper is a passionate advocate, a proven urban planner and a well-respected leader. She boasts a list of accomplishments that have helped build the Charlotte skyline for nearly four decades.

What really makes Hopper unique is how she conducts business. Her style is both personal and professional. When she's involved in a planning project, neighborhoods have personalities and questions have names. "That's a Bill McCoy question," Hopper replied when asked about the lack of sidewalks along the roads that surround UNCC and how the proposed light rail system might help foster a more pedestrian-friendly environment. "I could tell you what I think, but Bill has the data and the facts to support your answer. . . ."

Mary Hopper builds coalitions, establishes networks, embraces creativity and involves those leaders and thinkers with the expertise that can make the difference. "If finding the answer requires a trip to the city offices, Hopper knows where to go and what doors to open," said McCoy.

A Georgia native and Georgia State University graduate, Hopper earned a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia before relocating to Charlotte. She immediately decided to get involved in the city's changing landscape. On her list of civic involvement is serving for eight years on the Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission, the final two as chairman.

Hopper's skill lies in a deep understanding of public policy issues and familiarity with the people and agencies that can bring positive change. "I love Charlotte," she said, "and I have a tremendous respect for UNC Charlotte and the institutions around University City." Hopper continued, "You know, UNC Charlotte is better known outside of Charlotte than it is locally, and as big business continues to focus its eyes on University City, it won't be long before people around here take notice at how viable an economic resource the area really is."

"Mary is just about the best friend we have," said UNCC Chancellor Phil Dubois. "She's absolutely determined to shine the spotlight on the university as the home of University City. That's exactly the message we need Charlotte to hear."

UCP fast facts

- University City Partners is Charlotte's first suburban municipal service district, encompassing the commercial core as well as UNC Charlotte and Carolinas Medical Center-University.
 - A 25-member governing board focuses on developing, sponsoring and supporting initiatives that sustain and grow University City's economy.
 - Since 2003, UCP has funded numerous studies, including the University City Area Plan, Traffic Study and Urban Boulevard Study. It held four large conferences on topics as diverse as building and branding a University City Town Center, the Road to Rail and multi-jurisdictional planning for the Northeast Corridor. UCP hosts regular breakfast briefings; is active in transportation, political and economic planning, collaboration and advocacy; and serves as a contact for outside businesses, developers and planners who seek to establish a presence in the MSD.
- Visit www.universitycitypartners.org or call 704-549-4141.