

Bull Street Breakthrough Not Limbo May 2008

I wanted to respond to the article in Sundays *The State* by Jeff Wilkinson “Future of Bull Street in limbo” and give another perspective. I believe that the development of the Bull Street Neighborhood, rather than being in limbo, has seen a breakthrough.

In late 2004, the State of South Carolina and the City of Columbia joined forces through the Central Carolina Community Foundation to hire the renowned designer Andres Duany to lay out the 181 acre Bull Street parcel as a new urbanism development. The private sector under the leadership of Don Tomlin played the critical role in this planning process. The Duany team spent months preparing for and creating an overall vision for the property culminating in a design charrette in May of 2005. The charrette process, opened to all citizens, sought to determine what the new Columbia neighborhood should look like. The plan called for parks, walkable streets, and greenways, and restoring the long piped Smith Branch Creek. Citizens requested retention of some of the campus’s most historically significant buildings and protection of many of the property’s beautiful trees. Participants in the charrette also demanded a mix of housing options that a broad spectrum of residents could afford.

The legal issues surrounding the title to the property were resolved when the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in February 2007 that the South Carolina Department of Mental Health could sell the property. Since that time the Department under the leadership of the Mental Health Commission, State Director John Magill, and their staff has created a task force, that I serve on, to map out the strategy for selling the property.

Great progress has been made since the Supreme Court ruling on two issues. First the Department of Mental Health has developed a three year plan to finance moving the remaining patients from the Bull Street facilities. Secondly, the Department has selected the experienced real estate firm, NAI Avant and Gene Green, to market the property for sale. The Sunday article made a legitimate point that the Department of Mental Health will try to sell the property for the highest amount even if that means not using the Duany plan. Trying to get the best sales price for the property by the Department is a legal

requirement. Under the Supreme Court ruling and a follow up Attorney General Opinion, the law is clear that the Department of Mental Health holds the Bull Street property in a charitable trust and has a fiduciary duty to get the best financial return. The sales proceeds must be used by the Department for the treatment of the mentally ill. The sales price must be approved by the Court. I believe that everyone on the task force believes that the Duany plan will produce the best sales price, but the Department is legally obligated to explore all options and do due diligence to get the best price.

I believe that the Duany plan will produce the best price and best redevelopment. The plan has received approval and support by City zoning officials, the business community, the adjoining neighborhoods, and historic preservationists. The plans calls for density and green space that will be a win-win for all involved. The Bull Street Neighborhood's development will be a huge boon for Columbia and our local economy. This project will be "our BMW." It will enhance the municipal tax base with over 1200 new residences without the growing pains associated with suburban sprawl, and provide hundreds of construction and service related jobs as the property is built out. In fact, in a 2005 report authored by leading economists from Miley, Gallo & Associates, the economic impact of the redevelopment of the Bull Street Campus was calculated at roughly \$1 billion for the Midlands, a significant return on taxpayer investment. The Bull Street neighborhood when combined with Innovista will change our City forever.

Mayor Bob Coble
3333 Heyward Street
Columbia, South Carolina