

CHARLESTON CITY PAPER

Developers hope renovation of 1600 Meeting Street will spur creative corridor

by Erica Jackson Curran

What's next for the neck?

Driving north up the neck of the peninsula, the three-story brick building at 1600 Meeting Street Road is hard to miss. Set among strip clubs, train tracks, and industrial warehouses, the 1920s-era structure is empty, the lawn overgrown with weeds, a worn "Antiques" sign hinting at a former tenant. But even though it looks like it could be haunted, the building is undeniably beautiful, its vacancy a shame. A symbol of the area's long-forgotten past, 1600 Meeting also inspires hopes of what it could one day become.

The Neck has been a focus of developers for years. The stretch of land connecting downtown Charleston with North Charleston is filled with acres of empty fields, prime waterfront property on both sides, and cheap prices. It's also home to low-income housing, industrial brownfields, and the stigma of an area that's been neglected for decades. Developers have touted big plans for the region in the past (see Magnolia, the Promenade), but various issues, mostly economic, have gotten in the way. Yet slowly but surely, the Neck seems to be finding its niche in a very gradual, organic way. And that big brick building might just play a major role in the development.

Developer Lindsay Nevin fell in love with 1600 Meeting shortly after moving to

Charleston over a decade ago. He put an offer on it in 2007 but it fell through. That ended up working in his favor. When the price dropped significantly a few years later, Nevin tried again, and his offer was accepted. Now with the building under contract, he's just waiting to clear up some issues with the previous owners. The building and surrounding land were originally owned by Exxon, which used the space for offices. When Exxon sold the lot to the current owners, they agreed to be responsible for any issues that might come up regarding old underground gas lines. Nevin hopes, and feels confident that, the contract will convey to him.

In addition to the closing complications, Nevin had to decide what to actually do with the building once he renovates it. That's when his wife Kate, a hedge fund manager, stepped in with a plan. She found her inspiration at Pecha Kucha 7, where Blue Ion's Robert Prioleau presented Parliament's study on Charleston's thriving creative economy. Conducted by consulting firm Regional Technology Strategies, the study found that the creative economy cluster is one of the top five largest employers in the Charleston area and that gross sales associated with the creative industries totaled more than \$1.4 billion in 2009.

According to the study's definition, the creative industries include culinary

arts, performing and visual arts, literary arts and publishing, digital media and design, architecture and urban design, film and radio, and cultural heritage.

"When I saw his presentation that Parliament had pulled together on the economic impact of the creative industries in the Charleston region, I was pretty blown away," Kate says. "That's one of the reasons I love this city so much, because of the power and the exposure and the amazingly diversified talents of the city. When I saw his presentation I thought, that is what should go into this building. There's already this wonderful community and this online ad hoc via Parliament and Pecha Kucha. These people get together and enjoy getting together, so why not offer a bricks-and-mortar site for this sort of collaboration to happen."

She brought the idea to Lindsay, they crunched some numbers, and within a few months they were presenting the concept for the space at Pecha Kucha 10. Their goal is to create an idea center with office space, artist studios, and a design center. They already have potential tenants interested in putting a black box theater in the adjacent building as well as a small-batch distillery and café. The duo is waiting to accept contracts until they've officially secured the space.

As for renovations, Lindsay says the building has strong bones, and work will be mostly cosmetic. After he renovated the Old City Jail in 2009, repairs to 1600 Meeting should be fairly easy, and he can focus on adapting it to their vision of a modern, open, slightly industrial

workspace. He says the renovation should take approximately nine months to a year. If for some reason the building doesn't work out, they're prepared to construct a new, LEED-certified space nearby from the ground up.

While Lindsay has been focusing on the design and renovation of the building, Kate has worked to spread the word, seeking out potential tenants and meeting other Neck residents. And that's how she discovered that they were about to become part of a quickly growing creative community already existing in clusters throughout the Neck area.

"There's this wonderful, creative, industrial community that I feel like all my favorite cities have, this industrial area that's sort of taken over by creative thinkers, frontiersmen who don't mind going to the edge of town," Kate says. "And that's kind of the feel of that area, and as we've begun discussions and talking to more and more people, a lot of people have been wanting and hoping to create a more collaborative neighborhood up there."

Some businesses that have taken up residence in the area over the years include Cone 10 Studios, Ice Box bar services, metalworker Sean Ahern, Leapfrog Public Relations, and Cru Catering. Stylish spots like the Tattooed Moose, One Cool Blow, DwellSmart, and REV Foods' newest venture at the Forge join longtime local businesses like Martha Lou's and Rug Masters. With City Paper offices right on Morrison Drive, staffers have witnessed the slow growth of the area over the years.

Kate spoke at a Lowcountry Local First meeting at Cone 10 in July, and many community members came out to show their support. "Everyone seems very interested in collaborating on what we want that area to look like, what we don't want that area to look like, what it could become. And so that's been a fun dialogue that's come out of simply presenting the 1600 Meeting concept. I feel like there's sort of two themes of creative collaboration going on here, one at this building, and one in the community



at large up there." She's branded the area, loosely outlined between Huger and Pittsburg streets along upper Meeting Street and Morrison Drive, as the Creative Corridor. (We here at the City Paper refer to it as NoMo, but it's your call.)

LLF Executive Director Jamee Haley is a big supporter of the concept. "I think it's brilliant. I think it's needed," Haley says. "There's so much creative energy in this community that to be able to harness that in one area is very exciting."

But while it's important to encourage new growth in the area, she says it's also crucial to support and honor the businesses that have existed there for

decades, regardless of whether or not they fit into this creative vision. "Part of what needs to happen is working with those businesses to help them with facade, redesign, and that needs to be part of it —how do they make their business so that it is appealing not only to the people in their direct community but to others around them as well."

Artisan woodworker Michael Moran has worked out of a studio in the Neck for seven years, and he agrees with the need to respect longtime businesses. "This area does have some great buildings, and bringing more business and creative business to the area I think will help to revitalize those," he says. "There are also a number of great businesses that

are here now and, over the last seven years, we have seen move in. Between Glass Act, Moonlighting, Mike's Alignment, Boyd Boggs Furniture, the Finish Company, Bob Hines, etc., we really feel like there is a great community existing here already, and I'm sure the new businesses coming in will fit right in."

Moran was initially drawn to the inexpensive prices, spacious buildings, and flexible zoning in the Neck area, in addition to its proximity to downtown. Now he's seeing it grow into something more. "We're really excited about the project at 1600 for a couple of reasons, besides our friendship and faith in the people behind it," Moran says. "One is to see that building revitalized and cared for. We've been a big fan of that building for the last decade and to see it finally used and taken care of is great. It really deserves a good steward. "The other is to see some positive business growth, not just in this specific area, but on the peninsula in general," he adds. "The digital corridor has been such a great addition to the community — the business, creative, and social community. I hope that 1600 can help bring the same things, and I really think it can. We live in a really unique community that fosters the growth of so many businesses that most other communities cannot, and hopefully we can keep charging full speed ahead."

While excitement for the Creative Corridor is spreading, it's just one part of a much larger Neck-area development plan that's currently underway. The Berkeley Charleston Dorchester Council of Governments (BCDCOG) has been developing a master plan for the Neck area, which they've extended to reach from the foot of the Ravenel Bridge all the way up to I-526. Transportation engineers, urban planners, and community stakeholders recently gathered for week-long charrettes, or planning sessions, to talk about the future of the area.

Project Manager Jeff Burns says the charrettes went very well. "This area of

the region is uniquely positioned, and the potential is infinite," he says. "Granted, the national economic climate will be pivotal, [but] the community is strong, the economic generators and potential for job centers are strong, which all creates a strong, realistic vision that can come to fruition. The partnerships established through the planning process will strengthen the existing neighborhoods and create the cohesive framework for prosperity."

An overall theme of the charrettes was the idea of organizing existing infrastructure, enhancing local neighborhoods, creating a framework for economic growth via clusters like the Creative Corridor, revitalizing the now-defunct Shipwatch Square shopping center at Rivers and McMillan avenues, and formalizing the Gateway/Entertainment District around North Charleston Coliseum. Some proposed projects include a high-frequency transit service on Rivers Avenue, a greenway connecting Charleston and North Charleston, and redevelopment of the area around the Joseph Floyd Manor, which would feature shops, condos, and a transportation hub. The design team also developed a parks and open space connectivity plan intended to connect neighborhoods to parks, community business centers, and natural features of the area, like the riverfront.

While such ambitious ideas for the area are nothing new, Burns says this differs in that it builds on plans that have already been developed. "This is an integration plan, stitching together the other plans and preparing an overall implementation strategy," he says. "It creates a unified strategy to leverage resources, private investment, and implement all the plans that have been developed." Community input is also a major part of it. "Once we move through this process, we'll keep adding meat to the bones of this vision, and over the next month and a half we have meetings scheduled with city planning commissions," Burns says. After the plan is hammered out, they'll start seeking supporters from the cities of Charleston and North Charleston,

the state, the State Ports Authority, and private businesses that will be catalysts for the growth.

LLF's Haley, who attended one of the charrettes, says one way to incentivize growth would be to make it easier for new businesses to take up residence in the area. "We're rolling out the red carpet for all the big companies that we're trying to get to come in and offering them subsidies and incentives to be here, and we're doing nothing to help the local guy," she says. "So we could put them on the fast track to make this even more appealing." Kate Nevin also attended a charrette with a group of representatives from the Creative Corridor. "Some of what we discuss and some of the info that could come out of brainstorming sessions with tenants of this area could sort of feed up to this master plan, which is good timing because it gives people an opportunity ... to really speak out on what they want and what they don't want," she says.

But she doesn't want to be the pied piper. "Our project started at 1600 Meeting and this has sort of come out of that. It's not really my idea, it's just sort of a collective collaboration and I'm just trying to get as many people together to talk and then hopefully connect with the larger Neck plan so that people really understand that their ideas can go to inform a plan. We're not just sitting around brainstorming over coffee. ... I think great things could happen simply out of having a conversation about what that area is and what people would like it to become."

Locals have struggled for years to come up with a nicer name for the Neck area, yet its monosyllabic moniker continues to stick. So we'll put it to a vote: What do you think the area connecting Charleston to North Charleston should be called?