

## DeKalb

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# Reviving Oakhurst

*Leaders work to duplicate the commercial successes of other thriving communities*

By Vonda Wolcott

FOR THE JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

If Oakhurst had a slogan, it would be "We're Next," says Toby Sanders, one of many activists striving to revive the commercial district in this southwest Decatur community.

These leaders predict Oakhurst's square block of mostly dilapidated or boarded-up store fronts at East Lake Drive and Oakview Road will soon boast shops, restaurants and neighborhood services rivaling those in Candler Park, Little Five Points, Virginia-Highland and downtown Decatur.

Two key groups have taken the lead in this vision. One is the South Decatur Community Development Corp. (SDCDC), of which Sanders is president. It is designing campaigns to encourage residents to patronize the existing local businesses and to attract new businesses.

Another group, the Property Development Team, a city-appointed task force, is targeting the redevelopment of the complex that formerly housed the Scottish Rite Children's Medical Center. The task force was created after residents protested plans to build an apartment complex on the site.

## Better days

Incorporated as a town in 1910 and annexed by Decatur in 1916, Oakhurst for decades enjoyed a bustling commercial district that catered to residents and to the Scottish Rite hospital. But in 1970, when the hospital outgrew the site and left and white flight was at its peak, Oakhurst rapidly declined. Businesses closed and nothing replaced them, neighbors became strangers and, eventually, drug dealers took over.

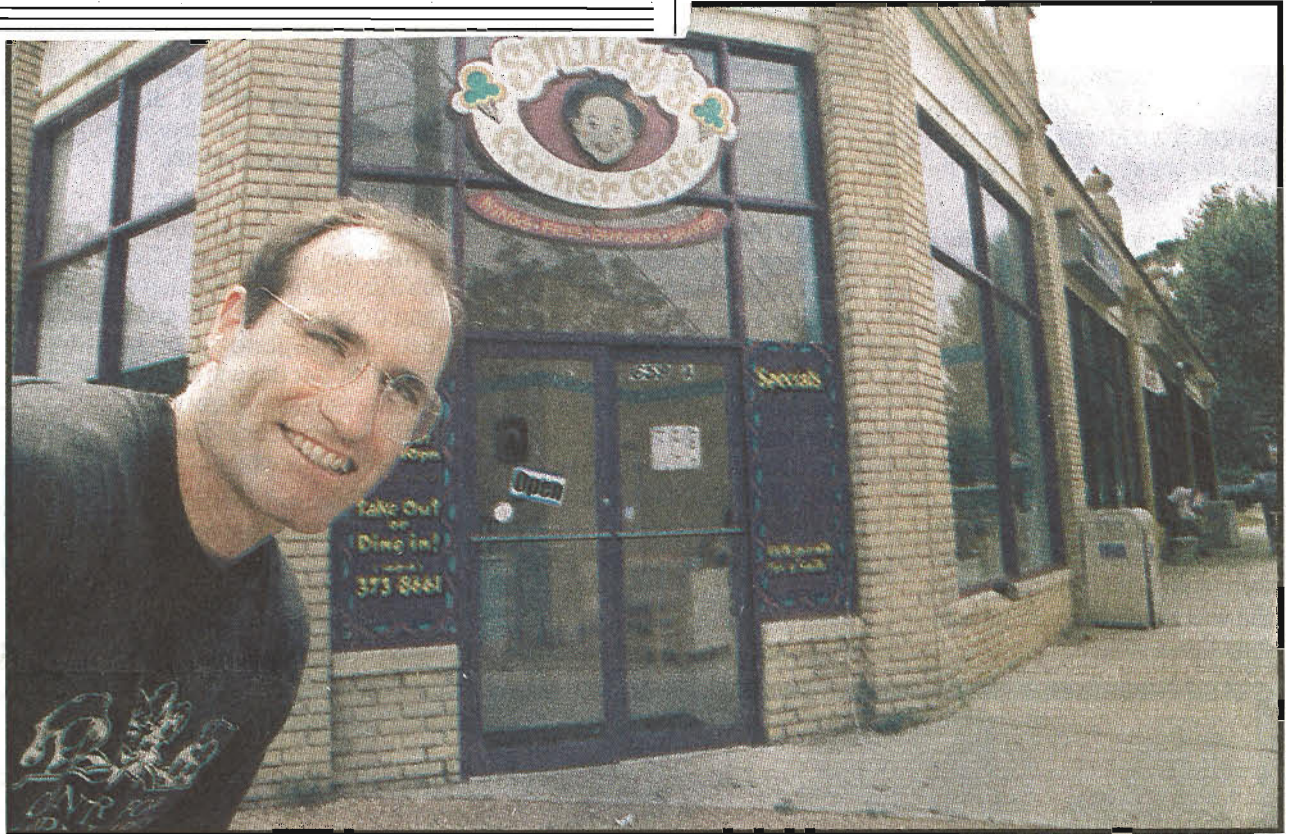
Then, about 10 years ago, a few civic-minded individuals, area churches and some local groups began rebuilding that lost sense of community. They promoted the community's diversity and tolerance in the areas of race, sexual orientation and economic status.

They replaced garbage-strewn public spaces with gardens. They organized arts fairs and block parties. And they created what has come to symbolize the new-found civic pride, a mural called "Decatur: My Neighborhood," painted on the wall of the former Redding Pharmacy. It features residents' favorite things about Decatur, including an official flower and a MARTA bus.

As civic pride grew, so did the urban pioneers' victories. The neighborhood now boasts of its success at reclaiming the streets from drug dealers.

With the infrastructure now present, Oakhurst's leaders are optimistic about the revival of the commercial district. These early risk-takers include Pete Whitlock and Jim Westman, co-owners of Candler Park Investors Inc., which bought and renovated two of the buildings about four years ago.

"I saw Little Five Points, Candler Park," Whitlock said, explaining why he invested in the community. "I knew this area could support the same type of businesses."



Photos by RENÉE HANNANS / Staff



**Confident:** Pete Whitlock (above), co-owner of Candler Park Investments, owns the building housing Smiley's Corner Cafe and believes the area is ripe for revitalization. Chris Cooper (left), 14, walks down Oakview Road near an auto repair business and a convenience store.

The pioneer business-owner was Sanders, who opened the video store Movies We Like. Since then, Smiley's Cafe, a coin laundry and a tattoo studio have joined him. Community agencies occupy several other store fronts.

"I think the tattoo shop is a nice addition," Whitlock said. "It adds to the diversity of the community."

The SDCDC is in the process of renovating another abandoned building. By fall, the boarded-up and peel-

ing exterior will have a new facade and the first occupant will be the office of the SDCDC. Other marketing plans include distributing a survey to residents within the next few weeks to identify their needs and wants, sending coupon books to residents to promote the existing businesses and visiting area restaurants to encourage them to come to Oakhurst.

The task force targeting the Scottish Rite site is equally aggressive with its mission. It will soon be submitting a plan outlining acceptable uses of the site to the city, which will then put out the request to developers for bid.

The task force envisions development accenting the site's existing neighborhood-oriented agencies, such as the community center and the Oakhurst Community Health Center, said task force Chair Robert Soens. Possibilities include an arts center, low- or mixed-income housing, a restaurant or bakery and a home for the elderly.

## Maintain diversity

While the community likes the idea of a thriving commercial center, it is also worried that rising property values may hurt low-income residents like the elderly and young adults who grew up in the community and now want to move into their own home. As people buy five-figure homes and renovate them into six-figure investments, low-income people will be unable to afford the higher rents, says Caroline Leach, associate pastor at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church.

"We don't mind property values going up, but we also want to make sure we have affordable housing," added Pat Doster, an eight-year resident of Oakhurst and a member of the Scottish Rite task force and SDCDC. "We like the economic diversity. We don't want these people to be displaced."



**Leading the charge:** Pete Whitlock (left) and Pat Doster of the South Decatur Community Development Corp., with Robert Soens of the Property Development Team — a city-appointed task force — share a vision of a lively commercial district in Oakhurst. All three live in the community as well.