

Innovative Land Swap Proves Economic Catalyst for Uptown Charlotte

By Lelia King

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innovative land swap

PROVES ECONOMIC CATALYST FOR UPTOWN CHARLOTTE

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Panorama of 3rd Ward with 2 cranes in the air, projects under construction and completed projects surrounding Romare Bearden Park and BB&T Ballpark. From October 2014.

In 2005, Charlotte Center City Partners began preliminary work with public and private sector partners to facilitate a strategic land swap to redevelop two of Charlotte's downtown neighborhoods, Second Ward and Third Ward. The agency, which manages four of Charlotte's business improvement districts, facilitated the process and creation of the Land Swap plan as part of implementing several key recommendations of the city's downtown master plan, the Center City 2010 Vision Plan, adopted in 2000. Charlotte Center City Partners (CCCP) orchestrated the Land Swap under the leadership of President & CEO Michael Smith.

The concept of a land swap involves convincing owners of parcels of land to actually swap parcels

(and, for some, cash) in order for the parcels to be developed in a strategic way that fits within a larger vision for a certain area. For Uptown Charlotte, a vision for a ballpark neighborhood and adjoining park would not have come to fruition were it not for the vision and willingness of parcel owners.

The project included private and public sector involvement in an effort to transform large tracts

Lelia King is director of communications for Charlotte Center City Partners. (lking@charlottecenter-city.org)

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of underutilized and underperforming land into new tax-generating development with well-designed, appropriately located new public parks and facilities. The project resulted in the construction of both Romare Bearden Park and the BB&T AAA Ballpark, and catalyzed redevelopment in the surrounding areas.

“The Land Swap has helped to write a new chapter for our city with a focus on creating affordable housing, inexpensive family-friendly entertainment, economic development, generating infill development on under-utilized blocks and creating first class urban green spaces,” Smith said. “We are grateful to the IEDC for recognizing that this type of strategic thinking and execution is happening in Charlotte. The results are incredible.”

Charlotte Center City Partners is the downtown development organization focused on facilitating and promoting the economic and cultural development of the urban core. The organization is a 501(c)4, operating under the leadership of a Board of Directors, with a unique vision of Charlotte’s Center City as a viable, livable, memorable, and sustainable Center City with modern infrastructure, a tapestry of great urban neighborhoods, and a diversity of thriving businesses. CCCP’s focus areas include Planning & Development, Business Recruitment and Retention, Marketing & Communications, Programming & Events, Research, Transportation, Sustainability, and Neighborhood Support & Development.

The Uptown Charlotte Land Swap has proven an overwhelming success. The Third Ward neighborhood, once a desert of unused industrial buildings and crumbling parking lots, is now bus-

ling with activity – The Charlotte Knights just completed their first season in the neighborhood’s new BB&T Ballpark, having played more than 70 home games. The new ballpark propelled the Knights from last in attendance for the 14-team International League to the top box-office draw this season among all minor-league clubs. Charlotte finished with 687,715 fans attending home games at the 10,000-capacity ballpark. The team ended the season with a celebration complete with local craft beers and a concert by Blues Traveler. Next door, Romare Bearden Park has become a magnet for residents and visitors alike with its gardens, interactive musical playground, and colorful waterfall against the shining Charlotte skyline.

When the ballpark opened in April 2014, more than 1,000 units of residential and commercial space were either planned or under construction in the area around the stadium and park. Restaurants, bars, and retail stores are following closely behind. Though the extent of the vision for the Land Swap has not been fully met yet, early results point to a long-term success for the Queen City.



BB&T Ballpark

BB&T BALLPARK

BB&T Ballpark, home of the Charlotte Knights, brought baseball back to Uptown Charlotte in 2014. More than 25 years ago, AAA minor league franchise Charlotte Knights moved to a regional facility in Fort Mill, SC. After years of planning, the decision to design and build a new stadium in Uptown Charlotte garnered support from Charlotte Center City Partners, the city of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, and many other private and public partners.

The site is an 8.5-acre parcel in the Third Ward neighborhood of Uptown Charlotte, adjacent to Romare Bearden Park. In fact, the main entrance plaza is located directly across

from the park, creating synergy between the two parks and enhancing the urban connection to the facility.

The stadium has a capacity for 10,000 and includes concession areas, full team and media facilities, a team store, a natural-grass field, and 22 private, luxury suites. The interior stadium areas total 101,414 heated square feet, and the exterior, unheated areas encompass 136,730 square feet.

The stadium seating bowl is intentionally depressed below the surrounding street level to eliminate views of back-stadium structures and to open the stadium to inviting views from the street and sidewalk. BB&T

Ballpark was oriented to provide a stunning view of the Charlotte skyline from nearly every vantage point, particularly home plate. The view has become a favorite for taking photos at games. BB&T Ballpark also features the widest HD videoboard in any Minor League stadium, at 30 x 80 feet.

The project achieved LEED certification, incorporating locally sourced materials, low-e and SHGC glazing, energy-efficient building envelope and HVAC systems which resulted in a 32 percent energy cost savings. More than 95 percent of construction waste was diverted from landfills.

THE PROCESS

Because a majority of the land in question was publicly-owned, the process involved proving to the County Commission and City Council that an intricate land swap strategy was a viable and optimal way to benefit the community and achieve the 2010 Plan recommendations. Achieving this trust was not easy – it involved individual conversations, small and large meetings, presentations, and phone calls. Private land owners also needed to be convinced to put key parcels in play to achieve the community's goals above their company's interests. Developing individual relationships with each land owner proved key to the success of the Land Swap plan.



Element under construction, recently completed, overlooks Romare Bearden Park and BB&T Ballpark.

The concept for redevelopment of the two neighborhoods would be instigated and catalyzed by three key projects: a new 11-acre mixed-use development in Second Ward; and, a new 5.4-acre park as well as a 10,000-seat baseball stadium in Third Ward.

The Land Swap had been preceded by extensive, quality planning and visioning that determined our goals and objectives:

- 1) Bring baseball back to downtown & provide affordable family fun – Baseball had been the fabric of Charlotte life from 1901- 1988 until the team was purchased and moved to Fort Mill, SC.
- 2) Create a new downtown park – the 2010 Center City plan called for the creation of a major urban downtown park, which has finally been realized.

- 3) Build new affordable and market rate downtown housing – make the neighborhood accessible for people from all walks of life to benefit from and enjoy the amenities of urban living.
- 4) Expand the municipal tax base and create jobs – redevelop strategically located, publicly-owned land into privately owned revenue-generating assets; create new jobs.

These objectives were outlined in the Center City 2010 Vision Plan, which was created as a collaborative effort between Charlotte Center City Partners, the city of Charlotte, and Mecklenburg County. The plan was adopted by City Council and the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners in 2000. Charlotte has created downtown master plans each decade since the 1960s as a collective effort of Charlotte residents, government staff, developers, landowners, public officials, and national planning experts. The goal of the plans is to guide Center City's future on several levels – on a global scale, as an economic center, and as a series of neighborhoods for people to live, work, learn, and visit.

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THE PARTNERSHIPS

CCCP's role in facilitating and fostering partnerships was key to the success of the Land Swap. Major partners in the project in addition to CCCP included:

City of Charlotte – public land owner provided funding for infrastructure improvements

Mecklenburg County – public land owner leased land to Knights for \$1/year to make ballpark development feasible; funded construction of infrastructure for ballpark and park

Charlotte Knights AAA Baseball Club – privately developed the BB&T Ballpark

Mass Mutual, Wells Fargo, Spectrum Properties – private land owners and prospective developers of Second Ward Brooklyn Village

Third Ward Neighborhood Association – created the Third Ward neighborhood plan that proposed development of an uptown park and ballpark neighborhood

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Department – created the plan that proposed a new urban neighborhood called Brooklyn Village in 2nd Ward

Mecklenburg County Parks & Recreation Department – developed Romare Bearden Park

LandDesign & Neighboring Concepts – designed Romare Bearden Park

Odell & Associates – designed BB&T Ballpark

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools – owned parcel of land

Facilitating the Land Swap was tedious and sensitive. CCCP's major task was to bring each party to the table to discuss and work toward common goals. By establishing strong connections and partnerships, CCCP was able to carefully facilitate these complicated relationships and legal transactions so that all parties involved, and ultimately the city as a whole, benefitted.

In order to share the vision and begin initial conversation around the Uptown Charlotte Land Swap, CCCP President & CEO Michael Smith contacted each entity that had been identified as a major partner. Each partner, listed above, had to get behind the idea in order for it to work. Smith and the CCCP team started with one-on-one meetings with individual partners. Once each partner signed on to the idea, they kept the ball moving with weekly meetings with all key partners – private and public.

Though it was uncertain how long it would take to see the idea come to fruition, the team continued to meet on a weekly basis to ensure continuity despite obstacles and setbacks. Those setbacks included an economic recession and multiple legal battles. One private developer sought to put a stop to the realization of the community's vision in an effort to push his own idea of bringing major league baseball to Charlotte in lieu of minor league.



The Catalyst apartments with ground floor retail, as built adjacent to Romare Bearden Park.



Romare Bearden Park as built in 2013.

ROMARE BEARDEN PARK

When Romare Bearden Park opened in Uptown in 2013, it became an instant icon for Charlotte. The 5.4-acre park has been an integral chapter in an unprecedented story about the transformation of Uptown's Third Ward into a ballpark neighborhood; and about how Charlotte's citizens and leaders accomplish great things...together.

The park, which stretches between Church Street, Third Street, Mint Street, and MLK Jr. Boulevard, is a long-awaited tribute to artist Romare Bearden, who was born in 1911 in his great-grandparents' house at the corner of Second (now MLK Jr. Boulevard) and Graham Street in Uptown. Bearden included memories of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in his later work.

Romare Bearden Park, produced by LandDesign and artist Norie Sato, is based on Bearden's collages and paintings and features beautiful, intentionally-planned plants and flowers, a creative music "playground," and a colorful waterfall that has become a popular photo backdrop for Uptown Charlotte. The open space has become a place for yoga classes, impromptu concerts, workday lunch breaks, romantic strolls, snowball fights, and inspiration.

Hundreds of individuals with dozens of organizations played a role in ensuring Romare Bearden Park was a success and a source of pride for our community. Mecklenburg County, Mecklenburg County Park & Recreation, the city of Charlotte, Wells Fargo, Spectrum Properties, Mass Mutual, the Arts and Science Council, and Charlotte Center City Partners represent some of those key players who had the vision to bring the park to life.

The partners pulled together and weathered a seven-year storm of seven law suits by this individual in order to execute the goals that the community's collective planning process had clearly defined. Despite these challenges, the partners clung to their vision. The recession meant that a few pieces of the puzzle would have to change (primarily with financing – the deal ended up needing some support from the city) but the overall vision and plan remained intact.

In the end, the vision for the Land Swap prevailed as a collaborative community effort, in part because of the strong relationships and partnerships that had been formed.

As the vision for Third Ward begins to take shape, the next phase of the development plans made possible by the Land Swap will take place in Second Ward with the creation of a new Brooklyn Village, neighborhood park and school.



Rendering of The Mint apartments with retail, currently under construction adjacent to BB&T Ballpark.

THE IMPACT

CCCCP's key role in the Land Swap was to facilitate a process that transformed large tracts of publicly-owned land, which were not generating tax revenue, into new tax-generating developments with well-designed, appropriately located new public parks and facilities for affordable family fun.

Prior to the land swap, annual property tax paid to the county on the future sites of the park and ballpark equaled \$152,000. Now, having been completed, the ballpark should generate \$500,000 to \$830,000 in new tax revenue and 490 jobs.

After the swap, private developments that were catalyzed by the park and ballpark will produce an estimated tax of \$2.8 MM to the county and an estimated construction value of \$250 MM in residential product and \$65 MM in office. Including the ballpark, an estimated total of more than \$350 MM in construction has been generated adjacent to the park and ballpark. Speculative projects in planning stages could generate another estimated \$1.5 MM in taxes within the next three years.

With a new park and ballpark in the heart of Uptown Charlotte, the city has enjoyed several festivals and events in these public spaces. On a daily basis, patrons can be seen in the park enjoying lunch from a local food truck, doing yoga or simply stopping to watch other people. Romare Bearden Park does what great public spaces should - create opportunities for casual interactions, for community to happen. The park's location adjacent to the ballpark only further energizes the blocks. With new multi-family, LEED buildings and mixed-use projects coming out of the ground, residents and workers are increasing in number, which complements the daily population of visitors in Uptown. The area around these two great projects, instigated by the Land Swap, is truly becoming a well-rounded, sustainable urban neighborhood.

WHAT'S NEXT

As the vision for Third Ward begins to take shape, the next phase of the development plans made possible by the Land Swap will take place in Second Ward with the creation of a new Brooklyn Village, neighborhood park and school. Prior to the recession, Spectrum Properties had master planned a new 11-acre neighborhood village called Brooklyn Village. The goal of the community is to create a true live/work/play resilient urban neighborhood that is accessible to a wide demographic. An RFQ for master developer is currently being generated.



The Ally Building LEED office with ground floor retail was catalyzed by the approval of Romare Bearden Park plans.

Leveraging publicly-owned land, the Land Swap has created unique opportunities to build a more sustainable Charlotte of tomorrow by executing the goals of a community vision. Already, the project has helped to write a new chapter for the city with a focus on creating affordable housing, inexpensive family-friendly entertainment, economic development, generating infill development on under-utilized blocks and creating first class urban green spaces.

INNOVATION & REPLICATION

The process and strategy that was used for this project is scalable, replicable, and transferable for other cities and projects. The concept behind the Land Swap was to respond to the planning and visioning work that had been done and to execute the vision by unlocking re-development opportunities through facilitating partnerships. Like what was accomplished in Charlotte's Land Swap, other communities could use their local knowledge, vision plans, and partnership-building to achieve results with similar impact and magnitude, yet builds on their relationships and reflects the indigenous character and goals.

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