

He strikes a balance

Advocate of open space also leads development team

By Mark Horvit, Staff Writer, May, 17,1999

Rock Hill – At first glance, Duane Christopher's career seems to be something of a contradiction.

As chairman of York County Forever, he's taken a lead role in the country's battle to preserve itself in the face of voracious growth.

At the same time, he's poised to become the master planner for Rock Hill Renaissance, a proposed 65-acre "urban village" that would be the latest addition to the booming intersection of Dave Lyle Boulevard and I-77.

But far from finding any conflict in those roles, Christopher has found a way to balance his priorities. He can help ensure that open space is protected while creating what he believes is a blueprint for responsible development.

Ken Driggers, an environmental consultant with the Palmetto Conservation Foundation who works with York county Forever, said Christopher is a perfect choice to lead York County Forever. The group is charged with protecting 10,000 acres of land from development over the next 12 years.

"You need to understand the development process, the buying and selling of land," Driggers said.

Christopher, a landscape architect and 20-year resident of Rock Hill, understands both the goals of developers and "the impact they can make on the environment and on the place that we live."

Christopher enjoys landscape architecture because it incorporates environmental and aesthetic concerns as well as traditional design. As part of his business, Christopher is sometimes hired to mark off wetlands on pieces of property being eyed for development.

"It's a nice, scientific side of the job," Christopher said, "because it allows me to go out and enjoy nature for awhile, walk around in the woods and the swamp."

Christopher grew up near Ithaca, N.Y., and is a Cornell University graduate. He and his wife, Karen, were married in 1985 in Asheville; their reception took place on the grounds of the Biltmore House. Their 7-year-old daughter, Michelle, is a student at Westminster Catawba Christian School. Among the local projects he's helped design and the Westgate subdivision at Heckle Boulevard and Herlong Avenue, the Hunter's Chase development off Celenese and the landscaping for Piedmont Medical Center.

His most ambitious project is his latest. Rock Hill Renaissance, which he is planning along with an N.C. Developer, is part of a nationwide trend toward developments that mix homes and businesses with public buildings and healthy swaths of green space. The development will have everything from a chapel to a hotel. Christopher hopes it will act as a model for other local developers.

"If I can show how development can be done in a positive fashion that will benefit the community and the people, their quality of life, that's what my goal would be" he said.



Duane Christopher plans to build his biggest project to date -- Rock Hill Renaissance, a 65-acre "urban village" -- near a stretch of land on Old Springdale Road. DALE SPENCER/STAFF

The project, which could get under way next year if city officials sign off, is part of a nationwide rebirth in the concept of mixed-use developments.

For many years, homes and businesses co-existed in cities, he said, nothing that his parents once lived in an apartment above the gift shop they ran.

Communities imposed zoning as a defense against strip malls and endless parking lots, Christopher said. But as land becomes more scarce and the realization sets in that sprawling development is more expensive than dense growth, the pendulum is swinging back toward compact self-sufficient neighborhoods.

For Rock Hill Renaissance, Christopher is drawing on some of his earliest influences.

When he was a boy, his parents took him on a long vacation to Europe. What he saw during those five months – pastoral English countrysides, massive stone castles rising above the Rhine – planted the seeds for his career. In Bath, England, Christopher saw a stately row of townhouses built in a perfect half-circle and opening onto a lush garden. Even as an 11-year-old, he was taken by the simple elegance of the design, and the image stayed with him.

Now, some 32 years later, he's designed a similar crescent-shaped collection of townhouses as part of Rock Hill Renaissance.

In many such ways, the project gives Christopher a way to put his design concepts and land-use beliefs into practice. Similarly, the career he's carved out, with its blend of landscape design and stewardship of the land, is everything he hoped it could be.

"I'm sort of living my dream here," he said.

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