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TURNAROUND UNDER WAY

Development blooms along Wilkinson

Once-blighted area west of uptown welcomes additions like Starbucks

BY STEVEN BROWN
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Not that long ago, most people who wanted to get out of the house on a Saturday afternoon would have put Wilkinson Boulevard at the bottom of their list of destinations.

But here were Tracy Pomeroy and Terry Price, sipping raspberry mocha frappuccinos at Starbucks. At an outdoor table. Shaded by an umbrella. With yellow day lilies blooming next to them.

Just beyond the patch of greenery: Wilkinson.

"We just thought we'd just go and talk about nothing," Pomeroy said.

The rest of us can talk about this: Pomeroy, a nurse, and Price, a pharmacist, made an excursion from Belmont on Saturday just for this.

Wilkinson is turning from decay to destination.

Starbucks, which commemorated its first anniversary here Saturday, shares a shopping center with Radio Shack, Payless Shoes, ABC Liquors and other retailers. There's a steady flow of customers coming and going.

Behind them sits the mega-retailer that located here first.

"Wal-Mart focused everybody's attention on this part of town," said Brian Fincher, presi-

dent of the Camp Greene Neighborhood Association.

Longtime residents lament the decline that the region around Wilkinson, West Morehead Street and Freedom Drive suffered in recent decades. But now they're convinced that a turnaround has begun.

Home values in the neighborhoods outside uptown are rising, Fincher said. The crime-infested Toll House Motel on West Morehead is slated for demolition and redevelopment. Blighted apartments are being bulldozed and replaced with nicer homes.

Another shopping center is under construction on Wilkinson next to Starbucks. The Charlotte School of Law plans to move next year into a commercial development to be built near where Wilkinson meets Interstate 277.

On Freedom Drive, Mecklenburg County is converting the once crime-ridden Freedom Mall into a home for county departments. Employees and the people who do business with them will re-energize the area, said Richard Eppley of the Freedom West Community Action Association.

"That's really going to change the complexion out here," Eppley said.

When Radio Shack was in Freedom Mall, crime gradually drove its customers away, store manager James Cannon said. Last November, the store moved into the center with Starbucks. Its business is coming back.

"More customers. Higher traffic. More business," Cannon said. "We love it."