

## 'Close-Knit' and 'Well-Planned' Become Suburban Mantra

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ANDY MEEK | The Daily News

A good title for a book about real estate development in Shelby County might be "The Rise and Sprawl of the American Dream."

One chapter could touch on how well-manicured suburbs like Germantown and Collierville have become magnets for growth. Another could show how those growth patterns have carried a few unwanted side effects, such as cookie-cutter subdivisions and retail strip centers.

Newly settled homeowners need schools nearby, which only adds to the chaos. Then there's traffic, which is a nightmare along major thoroughfares like Germantown Parkway.

There, developers are in a feeding frenzy over available ground, especially near Wolfchase Galleria mall. But there's another result of all the growth and development that's barreling through Shelby County.

### 'Town and gown'

A new chapter in that local real estate book could be written about a resurgence of creativity among a few ambitious developers. They share a handful of planning ideas, popularly described as New Urbanism.

And in the coming months, their individual visions will be translated into bricks and mortar, popping up in almost every corner of the region.

For some of those planners, like urban designer Steve Auterman, it's about getting back to basics - things like walkability, mixed uses and upscale, heavily landscaped designs. It's also about creating a sense of place to combat the spread of sprawl.

"In so many master plans and in many communities here, people are returning to some of these basic, fundamental characteristics of good development," said Auterman, who works for Looney Ricks Kiss Architects.

The firm is working on a master plan for the Highland Strip, where many storefronts were neglected for decades until people recently started buying vacant properties and transforming others.

The 1.8-acre Highland Street Church of Christ property at 443 Highland is under a "purchase-



**THE ANTISPRAWL:** Brown Gill and his father, Ray, president of Gill Properties Inc., pause in the middle of their 25,000-square-foot retail center, Cordova Station. More properties like it are attempting to temper sprawl and cookie-cutter development. -- Photograph By Andy Meek

and-sell" agreement with the Memphis-based real estate development firm Poag & McEwen. The company reportedly has plans to turn the property into an upscale retail and residential center.

With all of that in mind, University Neighborhoods Development Corp. approached LRK to put together a master plan for the area to guide its future growth.

Auterman said that stretch of Highland, which includes a few small businesses and college hangouts, has a unique "town-and-gown flavor."

"That's a planner's term, and it's used to describe those university neighborhoods that are often very vibrant," Auterman said. "I grew up in Ann Arbor, Mich., which is a college town, as well. And the funk and flavor of those kinds of places just make them very desirable (places) in which to live."

All those projects and more haven't come by happenstance. Juan Self, co-owner of Self Tucker Architects Inc., said they're the result of more people wanting to live in a close-knit, well-planned community.

LRK planners hope to tout some of that "funk and flavor" over the coming weeks. After a few more public meetings, Auterman said a final report on LRK's plan could be ready in a couple of months.

### **Bring on da funk**

To the east, Germantown officials are angling for a similar design in the 538-acre heart of the town. They're calling the idea - which will establish a master plan for Germantown's bustling core - the, well, Heart of Germantown.

The name refers to both a plan and a place. The place currently has a mix of land uses and is bounded by Brierbrook Road in the east, Miller Farms in the west, Neshoba Road in the north and Poplar Pike in the south.

To promote a sense of community, the plan might include a marketing strategy, mixing land uses even more and linking places with walkways. Andy Pouncey, the town's assistant city administrator, said officials hope by May to have chosen a planning and design firm that has a good proposal for the area.

"This is about taking a step beyond and evaluating how we can maintain a competitive edge for the future," he said.

### **To the Gills**

Developers elsewhere are beating back against the tide of sprawl.

In Cordova, Ray Gill of Gill Properties Inc. is preparing to break new ground around Cordova Station, his 25,000-square-foot retail center development.

Just off Germantown Parkway, it includes stone fountains, ornately designed, paved walkways and quaint storefronts. On a recent afternoon, Ray and his son, Brown Gill, strolled among the

fountains, enjoying the sunshine and stopping to adjust anything out of place.

"You know, I've worked on this for about three years now," Ray Gill said. "We were really going for a nice, Italian plaza feel."

He's preparing to start on a similar development next to Cordova Station, and a few medical office buildings are also in the works surrounding it.

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And that's just what his company plans to deliver once construction is finished on the \$8 million Towne Center at Soulsville Self Tucker is designing near the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. The project will include a mix of single-family houses and townhouses, as well as retail space.

"The entire idea, really, is to rebuild neighborhoods, make them strong, and give people a sense of place," Self explained. "This involves making neighborhoods vital, as opposed to the suburbs where you're literally gone all day and have the long drive home."