



BUSINESS

In this part of the Charlotte region residents are fighting development – and winning

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Davidson residents pushed the town to abandon plans to sell publicly owned land for townhouses, shops, a hotel and a park. Mooresville commissioners voted down a plan to build hundreds of houses, shops and offices, and Huntersville residents are fighting to stop new subdivisions.

Fights over development are common, as are concerns about traffic, congestion and changing neighborhoods. But north of Charlotte, an unusually fierce wave of opposition has grown over the past year, and residents there are winning some big fights against developers.

The key to their success has been a mixture of social media, irritation over growing road congestion and resentment over the years-long Interstate 77 toll lanes controversy. Save Davidson, formed to oppose the town's plans to sell 19 acres of wooded land to a developer, has about 2,000 Facebook group members, and they've used public records, investigations of decades-old town documents and rallies to drive their points home – and now they're opposing other developments and planning to recommend candidates in the upcoming town election.

But beyond specific grievances about roads or the lack of progress on projects such as the stalled Red Line commuter train, however, residents in the towns say they're motivated by a sense that local leaders reflexively side with developers – and that residents don't have a say in the changes.

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“It seems to me that our town officials err more on the side of developers and less on the side of town residents as a whole,” Kim Aichele told the Huntersville Town Board at a September meeting. A half-dozen residents from a new group called Save Huntersville vented their concerns to the board about new development proposals.

A real estate source who’s been involved with developments in Davidson warned that the towns around Charlotte risk getting a reputation for being inhospitable to development – potentially driving them to other locations that might be even farther away, sending traffic to Charlotte through them anyway.

One reason for the angst: The towns north of Charlotte have seen breakneck growth in the past decade. From 2005 to 2015, Davidson’s population grew 22 percent, to 11,765, according to Census data.. Huntersville also grew 22 percent, reaching 50,433 residents. Since 2000, the population of Mooresville has almost doubled, to more than 36,500.

“People are fed up with all the development and sitting in traffic,” said Donna Pollack, one of the leaders of Save Davidson. “It’s too much.”

Social media megaphone

Aside from the sheer scale of growth, there’s another factor in the recent movements against development. Social media, particularly Facebook, has allowed groups to band together quickly and easily.

“That social media venue allowed the people in town to connect,” said Pollack. “People were fighting their own little battles around town and looking at it in isolation.”

That’s also led some to charge that groups on Facebook have developed a mob mentality, with scads of nasty comments shouting down people who disagree.

“Quite frankly, I have been alarmed by the lack of civil discourse and behavior that clearly deviates from Davidson custom,” said Mayor John Woods, who’s been in local government for two decades. “We have never encountered the divisive and damaging behavior by some individuals that we see today.”

The fights have been intense at times. In Davidson, opponents of a planned hotel said it would endanger students at an adjacent school because of possible sex trafficking, an assertion the town's police chief denied in a recent meeting.

In Mooresville, a town commissioner texted the mayor that opponents to a large development on N.C. 115 were "Loud mouths that don't even live in Mooresville pitching a fit." At one point, the mayor responded with an emoji of a crying cat to another text about a homeowner who promised legal action. Neighbors obtained those texts through a public records request.

The exchange was projected like a slideshow on a wall during a public town commission meeting – further deepening mistrust among the development's opponents. The board ultimately voted down that plan, which would have allowed 600 condos and apartments, 115 single-family homes and 120 townhouses, along with shops, restaurants and offices.



Longtime Davidson resident Ed Harris said that while he agrees with some of Save Davidson's complaints, especially about lack of public involvement in the town's development plans, he has been disheartened by the tone of the debate.

“The town commissioners and the staff have become a punching bag for these folks, and they’ve been pummeling them relentlessly,” he said, especially on Facebook. “You can’t go on there and say anything...and not get creamed...It’s not a polite conversation.”

Denise Beall, one of Save Davidson’s leaders, said she believes 95 percent of the posts have been civil. She acknowledged some people can get emotional, and said the group has added moderators to contact people who post inflammatory statements and ask them to tone it down.

“We don’t want name-calling,” she said. “We want to make sure our message is getting through, vs. our tone, and tone it down.”

‘Stupid growth’

When the state of North Carolina decided to contract I-77 widening to a Spanish company that would then collect tolls from residents, it set off an explosion of opposition from the northern towns. The project, under construction now, would add express toll lanes from uptown to Exit 36 in Iredell County.

Construction for the toll lanes is already worsening backups on I-77, where grinding slowdowns in the middle of the day, at night and on weekends have become common. A recent report from a consultant found opposition to the toll lane project is so intense that it would be a “potential justification” for canceling the project. Some political observers linked anger over the tolls to former Gov. Pat McCrory’s defeat last fall.

The Red Line commuter rail from uptown to Mooresville is another sore point. It’s been planned for decades, but Norfolk Southern remains opposed to passenger trains on its rails, the total cost and funding source are unclear, and there’s no timeline for when it might get built.

Residents in many of the northern towns are fed up with waiting for infrastructure improvements. If developers and town leaders want to build more, give us some relief, they say.

“People here are not against smart growth,” said Arielle Emmett, who helped lead opposition to the Mooresville plan. “They just don’t want stupid growth.”

She lives just south of the proposed development, off N.C. 115, a country road that’s become increasingly congested. A recent trip to Charlotte Douglas International Airport in the morning took her more than an hour and a half, she said. She fears it will only get worse.

“You have attempts to do this rapid-fire development without the money for attempts to expand the roadway or the railroads,” said Emmett.

Davidson Mayor John Woods

Observer archives

Beall said Save Davidson plans to keep pushing for changes in the town's government, and to inform citizens about what's planned. They want to be involved before developments get started.

“Our mission is clear, for transparency and open conversation with government,” she said. “We are not anti-development. We are for open conversation...We don't want to be asked afterward, to check a box.”

Woods, the Davidson mayor, predicted Davidson will continue to have strong opinions on development.

“The Davidson community has long been known for strong opinions backed by a willingness to courteously discuss issues and support neighborly behavior,” said Woods. “Our consistent goal is to find consensus.”

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