

# Durham man to breathe new life into forgotten city corridor

By Katherine Reeder

James Rogers remembers when 406 S. Driver St. housed a secondhand shoe store. It's where he got his shoes when he was a student at North Carolina Central University.

Rogers, a self-described country boy, said Durham was a big city to him.

"The neighborhood was, you know, a little rugged, and so I'm over in the rugged neighborhood, shopping, buying shoes, so there was a twinge of excitement to that," he said. "And I got shoes that I could afford."

Now, the front corner spot sits empty at the intersection of Driver Street and Angier Avenue with chipped paint and boarded windows.

James Chavis, a resident of Northeast Central Durham, said the building has been vacant for more than 10 years. He too remembers when it was a shoe store. It's where he got his shoes as a boy.

"It's a disaster to look at compared to what it used to be," he said.

Rogers plans to change this, however. He is the chief executive officer of A&J Capital, the company that recently acquired the property. He said it is good timing to invest in the building, as the city has already invested in the Angier-Driver corridor to pave the streets and install new lights.

"That intersection is a focal point of Northeast Central Durham," he said. "And when it comes to life, the rest of Northeast Central Durham is going to come to life. It's already started, and I just want to be a part of that."

Rogers calls the project "Ashley's Corner." He said his first item of business is replacing the roof, and he also wants to replace the downstairs windows with storefront glass and put in new flooring.

The lower level has room for four commercial spaces, three of which are already occupied by a convenience store, a used furniture shop and a barbershop. He said he is considering moving his own law office into the vacant front corner space.

The upper level, however, will require major renovations because it



**Above: James Rogers hopes his project, Ashley's Corner, will be a catalyst for growth in Northeast Central Durham. (Image provided by James Rogers)**

**Below: The Angier-Driver corridor as it is now. (Photo by Katherine Reeder)**

suffered fire damage about eight years ago, Rogers said. He wants to convert the space into two loft apartments.

Joe Bushfan, owner of Joe's Diner across the street, said the community needs these renovations. He said the vacant space has been a blight on the community, and the renovations will provide housing and greater business variety.

"It's going to make (the community) more attractive, helping to remove that blight," Bushfan said.

Chavis said he looks forward to these changes. He said the vacant space has lowered the economic value of the entire area.

"It helps bring down the neighborhood," he said. "And when it comes down, guess who comes in — outside crime."

Chavis said people broke into the building and stole copper from it in the past. There was also an unauthorized flea market there for a time, he said.

Although he said he saw no disadvantages to the changes, Chavis emphasized the challenge of making sure the building does not become too expensive for the area.

"It's a good, and it's a bad," he said.

The good of the building is that it will bring business, which will bring jobs so that people can eventually afford the



building's higher rent, he explained.

Chavis said the new building will attract people from outside the community, something that can be beneficial as long as community members do not get pushed aside. To be successful, the community needs to grow with these new people, he said.

"It could be worth it in the long run if the people in both sectors would look at it as bringing the community together," he said.

Rogers is eager to get started on the project, as he believes it will be beneficial to the entire community. The city recently gave him a grant of up to \$170,000 contingent upon his finishing the project. However, he said the entire project is expected to cost a little more than \$400,000.

Rogers said construction should start in the next month, and he expects the project to take eight months to one year to finish.