

# LOCAL

## Bill would help get COVID aid funds to housing projects

BY LAUREN LINDSTROM  
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Developers building low-income housing may have easier access to federal funding if a new bill, introduced by two North Carolina members of Congress, becomes law. The LIFELINE Act would change federal rules that hinder the use

of pandemic relief funding toward building or preserving affordable housing projects that use low-income housing tax credits. It is sponsored by U.S. Rep. Alma Adams, a Mecklenburg Democrat. "Unfortunately, just like other cities across the country, our community is facing an affordable housing crisis," Adams said in a video announcing the

legislation. The bill, she said, "solves another piece of the puzzle and brings us closer to a future where every American family can afford a decent, affordable place to live." It is co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. David Rouzer, a Republican representing southeastern North Carolina. North Carolina is one of some 20 states that have

declared intent to use those federal recovery funds for affordable housing, according to the National Council of State Housing Agencies.

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS

Financing and building affordable housing only got harder after COVID-19 arrived, developers have previously told



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The Tapestry University City apartments development rises in front of the homes in Rocky River Village in the University City area of Charlotte, on July 8, 2021.

the Observer. It's in large part because of the rising cost for land, construction and labor, which were already on the upswing in

a booming Charlotte market. Julie Porter, president of

SEE BILL, 24A

## Landmark vote could preserve key site in local Black history

BY GORDON RAGO  
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Standing in a parking lot at the corner of Beatties Ford Road and LaSalle Street in West Charlotte, 82-year-old Ellore Erwin paints a picture of the thriving neighborhood over the decades.

There were the lifelong friends she met on frequent walks from the Double Oaks neighborhood to Johnson C. Smith University in the late 1950s and early '60s. In



Christopher Dennis

built exclusively for the Black community.

Along the way, she met folks across the neighborhood, from business owners to truck delivery workers. People, she said, were proud to say they lived on that side of town.

between classes, Erwin picked up shifts at the box office of the Ritz Theater on Beatties Ford Road,



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Christopher Dennis, left and Ellore Erwin, right, embrace outside the Chase bank branch at 2023 Beatties Ford Road.

"This was the life of the Black community," Erwin said.

And sitting in one of the more prominent corners of the neighborhood was

McDonald's Cafeteria. Not to be confused with the fast food restaurant,

the cafeteria was a staple in the community for decades.

Christopher Dennis, a local developer, purchased the 1970s-era building at 2023 Beatties Ford Road a couple years ago with an eye towards redevelopment.

Dennis was initially considering tearing the building down due to its age and other factors. Dennis' company, E-Fix Development Corp., bought it for \$1.25 million in early 2020, according to county property records.

But during one planning meeting shortly after he purchased the building, Dennis was on his phone when he came across an old Charlotte Observer story referencing the building. He learned how John McDonald, a Black entrepreneur born in Charlotte, started his

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**BILL**

nonprofit affordable housing developer DreamKey Partners, told the Observer earlier this year that increased costs mean they need to look for more funding sources to close

the gap, including from local government, land donations or other philanthropy. DreamKey is one of dozens of affordable housing and community devel-

opment organizations to support the bill, according to a release from Adams' office. Low-income tax credits, administered locally by the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency, are a key way affordable housing developers help pay for projects. The bill would open up options to

use State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, awarded as part of the 2021 American Rescue Plan, to further support those projects. Mecklenburg County was awarded more than \$215 million in state and local recovery funds, according to a county recovery plan. That money can be used for in a varie-

ty of areas, including public health, services to disproportionately impacted communities, premium pay for essential workers and infrastructure. In the first of two allocations, the county has dedicated funds to mental and behavioral health, homelessness and workforce development, among

other priorities, the Observer previously reported. The county has about \$150 million still to be allocated over several years. *Lauren Lindstrom: 704-358-5346, @lelindstrom*

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**MCDONALD'S**

well-known cafeteria in 1970 at that same site. Dennis knew he couldn't tear it down.

through Beatties Ford Road and not only live the future but understand the history," Dennis said.

**UNDERSTANDING CHARLOTTE'S HISTORY**

So instead of knocking it down, Dennis moved forward with welcoming a JP Morgan Chase branch that opened last September.

The interior is mostly unfamiliar to the cafeteria's heyday as a meeting place for the Black community. But the exterior of the building still shares many of the same qualities.

That's why Erwin was eager to meet Dennis on a recent sunny March day. She had heard of his work along Beatties Ford Road and was hopeful the landmark designation would get approved.

"I'm glad people like you are doing things to revitalize, bring it back to the original standards and the goals that we all wanted for our neighborhood," Erwin told Dennis, cars whizzing by them at the busy intersection.

Dennis wants that, too. His company is redeveloping a commercial site across the street from the former cafeteria. He's seeking the historic designation to help educate the wider community about the people who helped pave the way.

**WHO WAS JOHN MCDONALD?**

McDonald's Cafeteria is not to be confused with the fast-food restaurant.

John McDonald's small business was "one of the most important spaces for the African American community in Charlotte," the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

wrote in a designation report completed last August. At its March 14 meeting, the commission held a public hearing, the first step in an approval process that eventually will head to the City Council.

When he was in his early 20s, McDonald moved his family to Brooklyn, New York, where he worked as a cook in a hotel, seafood house and steak restaurant, according to the commission's report. In 1949, he opened his own restaurant called McDonald's Dining Room.

McDonald later felt called by God to return to Charlotte. Once home, he noticed the popularity of

buffet-style cafeterias. By 1970, he had purchased the building at Beatties Ford Road and LaSalle Street. He also opened a "mini center," with a seafood store, beauty and barber shop, an insurance and real estate office, and a small grocery store, the report notes.

McDonald leased the spaces to young managers for a relatively low rate and employed local college students. The cafeteria grew in popularity, known for both a family atmosphere and a place where politicians and other city officials gathered. McDonald served breakfast, lunch and dinner with dishes including short ribs, fried fish, mac and cheese, and sweet potato pie.

At the time, few businesses in the area were Black-owned. This was despite the fact that the neighborhoods surrounding Beatties Ford Road were predominantly African American. McDonald worked to change that by using his own capital to provide commercial space at reasonable rates to Black managers, the report states.

**MCDONALD'S MOVES UP THE STREET**

In 1982, McDonald moved the cafeteria to a bigger space on Beatties Ford Road. The new location was closer to Interstate 85, at 2812 Beatties Ford Road.

The new spot could seat

around 250 people. Churches held meetings there. So did civic organizations.

"That cafeteria was the heart of our community," Erwin recalled. "Everybody met there."

That included Erwin's sister, Sarah Stevenson.

Stevenson started the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum, which met to discuss issues important to the Black community. The group gathered around hot coffee at McDonald's. The forum is still around today.

Whenever the Rev. Jesse Jackson came to town, people would meet him at the cafeteria, Erwin recalled.

The Black political caucus would also meet at the cafeteria. Together, members pushed for better representation in government as well as equal access to things like bank funding. "Everything that we are still pushing for now," Erwin said.

Stevenson's forum would grow from its roots at the cafeteria to a prominent group that would eventually help people like Dennis, the developer.

"If you were looking to do something or be something in Charlotte," Dennis said, "and you didn't go to that forum it might not have gotten done."

At the new location further up Beatties Ford Road, McDonald expanded to include other business ventures. He opened a hotel and amusement park known as Fun City in 1992.

Along the way, his cafeteria became a "must see and visit" place in Charlotte, widely regarded as the most popular, non-chain restaurant in the city, the commission's report states.

**A LOSS FOR REGULARS** By June 2003, McDonald's Cafeteria closed. By then, it was owned by a firm whose investors included former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt. Both Gantt, and Rep. Mel Watt, a former congressman, cited a tough business climate.

The eatery, hotel and amusement park ran into hard times after McDonald died in 1995 and the restaurant faced foreclosure, according to Observer files. Stevenson was saddened by the loss to the community. In a transplant-heavy boomtown, the cafeteria was a place for regulars to see each other, Stevenson told an Observer reporter at the time.

**KEEPING MCDONALD'S 'VISION' ALIVE** The Landmarks Commission makes recommendations to the City Council on designating historic landmarks. A public hearing is scheduled for McDonald's Cafeteria at the City Council meeting on March 28. Council members are also expected to vote on the designation then, according to a city spokesman.

If approved, the building would join 358 other

landmark buildings across the county. Other nearby designations include the Excelsior Club at 921 Beatties Ford Road. The Grand Theater, 333 Beatties Ford Road, is also a landmark, along with buildings on JCSU's campus.

The designation of the McDonald's building would give design review authority over the property to the landmarks commission. Any material alterations made to the property must first get approved by the commission.

It does not, however, prevent demolition. A property owner can decide to tear the building down and, by law, the commission can't deny that application. But it has the power to delay the decision for up to a year to find an alternative.

For Erwin, the building still carries important memories. She can remember McDonald as a father figure.

Dennis, she said, is among a group of people working to keep that legacy alive.

"(McDonald) was a man that I feel had an open heart to do something in his community that his people could come to and have a nice place to sit down and eat," Erwin said. "He had a vision for this area."

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