

Mapping Greenville neighborhood's wants and needs

They didn't want all that much, really. They wanted light on the streets that were dark. They wanted to feel safe. They wanted gas connections to *all* the houses, so nobody had to use smelly kerosene heaters any more to keep warm.

And the vacant lots. Thanks to unknown persons, vacant lots were trash dumps. Broken bottles and plastic bags lying in weeds. The neighborhood sure wanted to see something done about vacant lots.

And maybe most of all, cut-through cars. Cars that fly down Green Avenue like the people who live there



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don't even exist. Teenage drivers with heavy feet, careening between Mills Avenue and Greenville High. Downtown workers running late.

The neighborhood worried for their children and for their elderly, who could sometimes be slow to cross

a street. How big was their worry? "Lord have mercy," someone said, and a researcher dutifully wrote that down.

These were things the city of Greenville heard about when it asked. When Rodney S. Tucker spread big maps of the Green Avenue neighborhood on a table and handed out colored pencils. Write on the maps, he told the ones who came to the meeting. Draw circles. Blue pencils for what's good about your neighborhood. Red for what you don't like.

So on those maps, they wrote their lives. They wrote their fears and troubles. They wrote what

made them proud. And, when Tucker asked, they wrote their dreams. They dreamed of a day-care center, a basketball court, fixed-up houses, slower streets, a restaurant, a Dollar General store.

In a way, they dreamed what used to be. Green Avenue, once known as Washington Heights, is one of Greenville's vintage neighborhoods. More than half the houses were built before 1940. Another quarter were built in the '40s and '50s. In the early days, white families lived on certain streets and black families on others, and everyone understood where the line

was.

M.F. Davis, who owned and managed Greenville's first black theater, the Liberty Theater, lived in the Green Avenue area, Tucker found. State Sen. Ralph Anderson grew up on Calvary Street. The Working Benevolent Society Hospital, closed in 1948, was on the corner of Green Avenue and Jenkins Street. It was run by a black fraternity and treated African-American patients.

"If you were black and lived in Washington Heights, you were somebody," one of those who wrote on the maps recalled.

The decline of the neighborhood began in the late '50s. By 1974, Green Avenue had bottomed out long enough and hard enough for the city to officially mark it a candidate for revitalization. There were some efforts in that vein and some successes, but no cures. Drugs and loiterers and other urban ills hung on.

So now this. The city went to Green Avenue and asked the people: *What will it take to fix this neighborhood?*

Tucker, community planner for the city, walked every street and handed out fliers. Invitations to the meeting about maps. The

Green Avenue Civic Association handed out fliers, too. People showed up.

Now, Green Avenue will get 140 houses; some renovated, some new. Bungalows with porches, the new ones. Some to buy, some to rent. The neighborhood will get street repairs, sidewalks, trees, streetlights, slowed-down cars. Not everything they wanted, but a whole lot.

With their blue pencils and red pencils, the people of Green Avenue drew a future.

■ Jeanne Brooks' column appears on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. She can be reached at (864) 298-4261.