

WILLIAMS CORNER

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wrestling , indicates that the guiding principle will in fact not be whether Chatham grows, but rather, how it grows.

This is an important concept since a number of plans were approved during the years from 2002 to 2006 when Bunkey Morgan was the County Chairman and many of these plans became vested and still exist on paper and in the Chatham County GIS waiting to be developed.

One such plan is Williams Corners, located on the Northeast corner of US 15-501 and Lystra Road which is approximately 118 acres and is mostly zoned conditional use business (CU B-1).

The *Chatham County Line* recently chatted with local businessman, Chris Ehrenfeld, who is a driving force behind updating the legacy plan that was approved nearly 15 years ago during the tenure of former Commissioner Bunkey Morgan.

Ehrenfeld grew up in Pittsburgh, PA and to no one's surprise is a Steelers fan. He attended school at UNC-Chapel Hill and upon graduating over 20 years ago decided that Chatham County was going to be his home. Then started a building company.

His first home was built in Chatham County. Shortly thereafter, his mother Jill Ehrenfeld retired from a career in the financial services industry and opened a real estate agency with Chris in Chatham. (The company is now Bold Real Estate) Their lives have revolved around Chatham County ever since.

Chris has served as the chair of Central Carolina Community College Foundation, chair of Chatham County Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC), and chair of Chatham Education Foundation.

Ehrenfeld owns Bold Construction, Bold Development Group, Bold Commercial Real Estate, Bold Real Estate (formerly Domicile Realty), and Governors Club Realty, as well as the *Chatham News + Record*.

He is married and lives in Chatham County with his wife and two sons, who attend North Chatham Elementary.



CCL: How did you become a board member and chair of the Chatham County Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC)?

EHRENFELD: I was working to bring Strata Solar, with its 200+ employees, to the Bold Building in Governors Village. Chapel Hill was offering them incentives to attract them to Chapel Hill, but I knew they belonged in Chatham. So I called around to see if there was anybody that could help me. I was put in touch with Dianne Reid, then President of the EDC. Dianne brought in the elected officials and other people to let Strata know that they would be welcomed in Chatham. And although we didn't have incentives, we were still able to land them as a tenant.

A few months later, Dianne informed me that I had been nominated to be on their board.

What was your proudest accomplishment as the leader of the CCEDC?

I was the Chair of the Economic Development Corporation for nearly five years. My principal goal was to improve economic development so our county would have more funds to improve the quality of life in Chatham County (more money for schools, parks, improve water quality, etc). We were able to advance quite a few building sites and attract major employers during my tenure.

My proudest accomplishment in Chatham County was through a connection I made while at the EDC. I was recruited to join the Chatham County Community College (CCCC) Foundation Board. While serving, I was able to help fundraise to get Central Carolina Works (CC Works) started. CC Works put counselors into the local high schools to inform students about opportunities at the community college.

I was then able to lead the effort to make K-14 (Chatham Promise) a reality.

The Chatham Promise gives Chatham students the opportunity to attend their first two years of college at CCCC tuition-free. This was a goal we had discussed for many years. Chatham Promise is providing students with the opportunity to continue their educational journey tuition-free, helping to create our leaders of tomorrow. *[The Chatham Promise was a key plank of Commissioner Jim Crawford's platform during his re-election of 2018 and was funded by the Chatham County Commissioners as an investment in the future of Chatham County.]*

How did you get involved with Williams Corner?

ZR Chatham LLC has owned Williams Corner since 2005. A recession and a major shift from big box retail stalled the initial proposed plans. The investment group contacted me about updating Williams Corner to create a development to be more in line with current consumer demands and better serve our County.

Why do you think your new proposal is better than the existing entitled plan?

To highlight the benefits of the new proposal: More walk-friendly amenities and green space, less traffic, more county tax revenue, and the cultivation of a mixed-use community that meets Chatham's growing population.

Williams Corner was approved in 2006 as a 360,000 s.f. medical/retail/office complex with forty (40) townhomes.

The recession hit before the project got going in earnest. In the intervening years, there have been many positive changes both from the commercial marketplace standpoint and within the Chatham County land planning regulatory and environmental framework. So although Williams Corner has a flexible existing entitlement, our preference is to update the project to create a present and forward thinking mixed-use community that incorporates these many positive changes.

We are seeking to reduce the retail/office components to 230,000 square feet while adding pads for two storage buildings and two apartment complexes with 250-275 units in each.

We have improved the neighborhood friendly services with a walkable, mixed use community by creating an extensive on-site trail network, two bus transit stops and multiple electric vehicle charging

stations. For more harmony with nature, we will be doubling the width of the stream buffers, and about 75% will remain undeveloped (approximately 89 acres of the 118 acre Williams Corner tract).

Our re-envisioned plan will be what consumers and businesses are seeking today, a walkable mixed-use community. The retailers will be more service oriented, as the medium box retailers have scaled back growth plans. These smaller and more specialized businesses thrive on having a built-in audience of people living on site. The retail shops and the apartments will support each other which allows them both to be successful and benefits the entire county. In addition, we believe Williams Corner is the exact type of development our Board of Commissioners, through the adopted Comprehensive Land Use Plan, has said is appropriate and needed in this precise location.

What will the benefits be to the community if your plan is approved and developed?

In addition to creating a beautiful neighborhood with apartments, parks, walking trails, shops and gathering spaces, one of the best benefits of Williams Corner will be additional funds to improve the schools.

Despite generating a relatively small number of students, Williams Corner will have a significant beneficial impact on our education budget.

Our schools need more funding. The Commissioners are in a tough spot as they have a limited budget to work with. So they can either offset these budget shortfalls with dramatic tax increases or they can approve commercial developments within limited and sensible geographical nodes that provide significantly more tax revenue than is required to deliver the services needed for those developments.

Upon full build out, Williams Corner is anticipated to generate nearly \$1.8 million a year of tax revenue for our County. This would represent approximately 2% of our County's budget.

In addition, Williams Corner will make impact fee contributions of approximately \$500,000 to be used exclusively for school improvements.

What is a fair critique of the proposed project?

Some neighbors of the property are concerned about the size of the project. It is 118 acres. More specifically the biggest complaints are about the number of apartments proposed. Chatham County has a massive undersupply of apartments in Chatham County.

So we are proposing putting two apartment complexes on two different nodes within Williams Corner that will be built over approximately the next seven years.

And our proposal is seeking a revision to an already approved entitlement.

The currently approved entitlement had a larger traffic impact because it was going to be a huge retail/office/medical development.

What is an unfair critique?

Some residents are concerned because the modification intends for Williams Corner sewage to be sent to a processing facility within the Briar Chapel development. That facility's sewer provider, Old North State, has approval to serve more capacity than it currently serves.

In fairness, we understand that there are legitimate concerns as Old North

State has had operational issues recently. We support the Briar Chapel Community in holding the utility accountable and we fully expect this regulated utility to improve moving forward.

We are glad to see that the NC Utilities Commission is monitoring and addressing the concerns.

We are confident that these operational issues will be fully resolved long before Williams Corner breaks ground.

How many jobs and/or FTE jobs will be created? What will be the new tax base of the parcel?

Upon completion, Williams Corner will create 870 permanent new jobs in Chatham County. Williams Corner will generate \$1.77 million per year in Chatham County revenues.

Will the project be served by Chatham Transit?

Yes, Williams Corner will be served by Chatham Transit.

We have two transit stops, one by each apartment complex. And we have been in communication with Chatham Transit. They are excited that they will finally have a dense development along a major corridor that will allow for people to walk to transit. They already have strong ridership to UNC.

What modifications have you made that will potentially reduce traffic impacts?

The NCDOT is requiring us to pay for major improvements to 15-501 and Lystra Road.

Those improvements should help make those intersections less dangerous. And from a traffic count perspective, although we are adding apartments, we are removing a tremendous amount of potentially high traffic by removing some of the approved retail/medical.

The net result is that our project now will generate 5,000 less daily trips than the currently approved plan.

Why do you believe that apartments are integral to the site?

Providing workforce housing, accommodating downsizing seniors and attracting young professional housing are all driving the need for apartment growth. Chatham County has a severe lack of apartments. Density is critical to limit sprawl.

Williams Corner is a great mixed use development that accomplishes this goal while providing local residents walkable amenities, trails and open green space.

A bit of local data: currently 80% of all Sheriff's Deputies live outside of Chatham. The percentages are similar for teachers and firefighters. They cannot afford to purchase real estate in Chatham and need an alternative.

The average home sales price in Chatham last year was over \$430,000 according to MLS data. Apartments are much more affordable.

Editor's Note: The Chatham County Board of Commissioners voted on April 20th to delay the public hearing for Williams Corner.

In in September of 2009, *Chatham County Line* published an article by former contributor Bill Somers focusing on development along the HWY 15-501 corridor from Pittsboro to Orange County. Rad the archived file at our website: <https://chathamcountyline.org/pdfs/CCL.sept09.web.pdf>