



BB&T TOWERS RAZED TO MAKE WAY FOR NEARLY \$100 MILLION PROJECT

IN DECEMBER, buildings that had defined Historic Downtown Wilson's skyline for decades fell in seconds. That set the stage for a project that will redefine the area for years to come.

The BB&T towers were familiar sights in Wilson as symbols of BB&T's continuing commitment to Wilson, the financial institution's birthplace. But the towers had become inefficient over the years and were vacated after BB&T (now Truist after a merger with SunTrust) opened a new Wilson headquarters on Pine Street and relocated more than 500 employees in summer 2020.

Truist planned with D.H. Griffin Wrecking Co., Inc., for more than a year to deconstruct the towers and then implode the remaining structures, which happened Saturday, Dec. 19. The contractors evacuated a 1,000-foot radius of the buildings, but still hundreds of people watched as a series of explosions brought the buildings down.

The property will be redeveloped as the new Pine-Nash Street District, a project estimated as more than a \$100 million investment. This will include a new Wilson

Family YMCA with an aquatic center; this building will also house the Healthcare Foundation of Wilson's planned afterschool network for middle school youth. NSV Development is planning a large-scale residential/retail mixed-use development fronting Pine and Nash streets. This is expected to include retail on the ground floor with 200-250 apartments above. And the city is planning to build a parking garage on the land behind the YMCA, providing valuable infrastructure for future development of the district. Wilson City Manager Grant Goings said, "We believe the impact of this block will be tremendous, a community-changing development of a scale unseen by cities of Wilson's size."

Cleanup of the demolition will continue into early 2021, with construction expected to begin immediately after. Construction in the district will continue for several years.

COVID-19 forced the city to conduct business through drive-through lanes and a mix of virtual and socially distanced meetings.



COVID-19 RESPONSE

COVID-19 SLIPPED QUIETLY into Wilson County in March 2020. Authorities knew of only one local infection when the state, county and city all declared states of emergency mid-month.

But once here, COVID spread quickly. The county topped 100 cases by mid-April, 500 cases by June, 1,000 by July and neared 6,000 total cases by year's end. Most recovered, but 108 Wilson County residents died during 2020 and others remained hospitalized or with lingering effects.

A health crisis this large forced the city to take unusual steps to provide vital services while protecting our employees and the public.

In March, the city closed its offices and recreation centers to the public. Firefighters and police officers began using protocols to protect first responders as well as citizens.

All customer service operations were moved to the drive-through lanes, and a second, temporary location opened on U.S. 301. The City Council voted in April to suspend utility disconnections, ahead of a statewide order to do so by Gov. Roy Cooper.

Meanwhile, the planning department reopened the old drive-through lane at City Hall 15 years after it closed. This allowed the department to do plan reviews and still have face-to-face interaction with customers. The inspections department began offering remote inspections.

Parks and Wedgewood Golf Course never shut down, but playgrounds and restrooms were closed for months by a governor's order. The recreation department brought back exercise classes and sports leagues in the fall, but held outdoors, using COVID-19 protocols and social distancing.

As schools shut down and went to remote learning, Greenlight responded by creating more than 30 new public WiFi hotspots in neighborhoods, community centers and city parks. The city-run utility also created a \$10-per-month basic Internet package.

"During these uncertain times, we want to do what we can to make daily living easier for everybody, especially for our children," said Wilson Mayor Carlton Stevens. "The expanded coverage makes it easier for students to continue learning from their home or very close to home."

All city meetings went virtual in April, and City Council meetings were streamed live on the Internet and then archived there for the first time. Mayor Stevens began doing regular updates on Wilson's Channel 8 and social media channels.

Several city events went virtual in 2020, including National Day of Prayer, Memorial Day, the N.C. Whirligig Festival, Veterans Day and Light Up Wilson, the annual treelighting ceremony.



PARK IMPROVEMENTS CONTINUED IN 2020

THE CITY UPGRADED TWO PARKS in 2020 while making plans for a major addition to a third.

Lake Wilson, 4621 Lake Wilson Road, had seen a surge in popularity with the 2018 completion of a pedestrian bridge across the lake. Residents were excited to be able to walk the 2-mile-plus loop, but the popularity made parking a premium.

In March 2019 the Wilson City Council approved major improvements to the park, including a bathroom facility, improved boat ramp and new boat docks, sidewalks near parking areas, paved parking, and landscaping enhancements.

That work began in October 2019 and was completed in spring 2020. State rules related to the pandemic prevented the bathrooms from opening until the summer, but otherwise, the improvements were immediately embraced by a community eager to get outside for a beautiful walk.

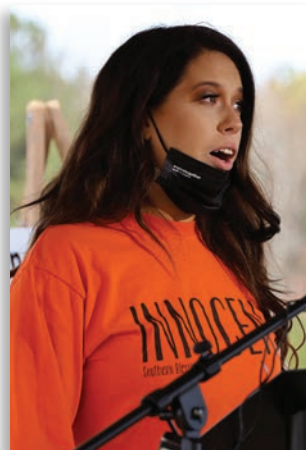
Lane Park (formerly Lane Street Park), 1802 Bishop LN Forbes St. SE, also received an overhaul in 2020. The work included a new concrete basketball court, shaded playground equipment and a fantastic picnic shelter. The parking lot was paved, new lighting was installed and the 1/3-mile walking trail was improved for accessibility issues. Also, the project is intended to fix a drainage issue.

Also announced during 2020 were plans for a major improvement to the J. Burt Gillette Athletic Complex, 3238 Corbett Ave. A gift from the family of Cannon

Hinnant will revamp the BB&T Noah's Arc All Children Playground with shade structures, new flooring and additional swings for handicapped children.

The gift will also launch a fund-raising campaign for the Miracle Field, a specially-designed baseball field that will allow play by children with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. The field will be located next to the playground and connected by a plaza that will include engraved pavers, concession stands and an announcer booth.

"To bring a Miracle Field for disabled children, it gives every child an opportunity to do something, not only the kids who can run on their feet, but the kids in wheelchairs," said Cannon's mother, Bonny Parker. "Cannon didn't see color. He didn't see disability. He loved every child just like they were."



Cannon, 5, died in August as the result of a gunshot while he was riding his bike in his yard. Wilson police have charged a 25-year-old neighbor with first-degree murder. A schedule for the work at Gillette has not yet been announced.

Bonny Parker at the Miracle Field announcement in November. Plans for the Miracle Field can be seen at wilsonnc.org.

HIGH ACCOLADES FOR WILSON ENERGY

WILSON ENERGY'S electric and natural gas division continue to be highly regarded by their peers across the state and even nationwide. In April, Wilson Energy received the Reliable Public Power (RP3) designation from the American Public Power Association at the Diamond Level, the highest level of recognition. In May, Natural Gas was awarded the prestigious APGA System Operational Achievement Recognition (SOAR) for excellence in operating its natural gas utility.



DESPITE COVID, EMPLOYEES MADE HOLIDAYS BRIGHT

COVID-19 MAY HAVE PLAYED a Grinch-like role in 2020, but our employees continued their traditional community outreach projects for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Christmas in the South is the Wilson Police Athletic/Activities League's annual effort to bring the Season of Light and Love to all of our children. For more than 20 years, police officers had hosted a morning every year to allow kids to come and pick toys.

For months, Christmas in the South 2020 was in danger of cancellation. Police Chief Thomas Hopkins had to get permission from city administration to proceed and then it had to be done totally differently to be safe. Police officers assembled a list of families to receive toys and food.

City employees organized a special toy drive across all departments that in two weeks collected hundreds of toys and even a few bicycles, hard to come by. Police officers held toy drives at large stores and raised money from supporters.

Then over two days right before Christmas, police officers delivered special packages of toys, foods and even clothing specifically chosen for each family. These

Santa's helpers made around 150 stops in Wilson and even in the county.

Another long-standing project is a partnership between Wilson Energy and Longleaf Neuro-Medical Treatment Center with our employees providing gifts to patients who might be a long way from their families during the holidays.

This year Longleaf requested up to three gifts per patient: typically two items of clothing and then gifts like playing cards, hair brushes or books. A small number of Wilson Energy employees made those Christmas wishes come true.

The Finance Department did a food drive in November to support area food banks ahead of Thanksgiving. The drive collected several boxes of nonperishable or canned food as well as clothing for Wesley Shelter.

Public works began a new project of cutting firewood from trees that were downed during the year in weather events or for city projects. At year's end, the Wilson Evening Lions Club was working on a plan to distribute the wood to families in need of wood for heating.



Wilson police officers prepare to make Christmas in the South deliveries of toys, food and even bikes in December 2020.

ABOVE: BB&T (now Truist's) new building.
BELOW: The Gig East Exchange.



WILSON HAS MOST DOWNTOWN INVESTMENT AMONG MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES IN NC

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN WILSON had more than \$40 million in public and private investment in a 12-month period, making it tops among Main Street Communities in North Carolina.

The list includes projects between July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020 and includes a diverse blend of new construction and renovations, large employers, small business, and entrepreneurs:

- **New BB&T/Truist building housing more than 500 employees, which opened in spring 2020.**
- **The Gig East Exchange (125-127 Goldsboro).**
- **220 Barnes building including Ruckus & Redemption and Phil's Record Shop.**
- **The Edge (127 Barnes St.)**
- **Samora Naturals (108 Tarboro St.)**

As a Main Street America™ Accredited program, Wilson Downtown Development Corporation (WDDC) is a recognized leading program among the national network of more than 1,200 neighborhoods and communities who share both a commitment to creating high-quality places and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development.



All Main Street America™ Accredited programs meet a set of National Accreditation Standards of Performance as outlined by the National Main Street Center.

“Being a part of the national and state-level Main Street Program has provided a comprehensive framework for our downtown’s successful growth and development,” said Kimberly Van Dyk, director of planning and community revitalization for the City of Wilson. “This past year’s \$40+ million dollars of investment in Historic Downtown Wilson’s revitalization is the result of strong community leadership, dynamic public-private partnerships, vibrant special events and public art, the cornerstone of which is the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park.”

The Main Street program incorporates transformative economic development strategies that implement a Four-Point Approach to Downtown Revitalization: Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization. More information about the Wilson Downtown Development Corporation and each of their committees is at historicdowntownwilson.com.

STORMWATER PROJECT RECEIVES NATIONAL RECOGNITION

THE CITY OF WILSON'S underground storage project was designed to capture hundreds of thousands of gallons of stormwater, but it has also been gathering regional and even national attention.

The North Carolina chapter of the American Public Works Association named the project the 2020 Stormwater Infrastructure Project of the Year, and then Stormwater Solutions magazine chose it for the 2020 National Top Project Award.

That's high praise for what's essentially a hole in the ground, albeit a well-designed and cleverly built one. The stormwater system covers nearly 16,000 square feet under the city's Centre Brick Parking Lot, between Goldsboro and Tarboro streets, next to Whirligig Station.

In a heavy rain event, the facility would take water from nine acres in Historic Downtown Wilson, most of it paved or impervious surface, and store up to 850,000 gallons of rainwater, about 30% more than an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

The facility then slowly releases the water into Hominy Creek. In a heavy rain, the flow would be reduced by as much as 80 percent. The facility also captures trash and pollutants in a sand filtration system so the water is cleaner leaving the storage facility than when it entered.

Wilson had earlier seen success with an underground storage facility. In 2015 the city partnered with Wal-Mart to build a storage system under the parking lot of its neighborhood market store at the corner of Nash Street and Ward Boulevard. That system is capable of handling around 26,000 cubic feet of stormwater, or about 200,000 gallons. It has greatly reduced flash flooding in that area, especially for homes backing up to that Wal-Mart.

Both projects are part of the city's strategies to improve the health of Hominy Creek, as detailed in the city's Hominy Swamp Restoration Plan for Category 4b. The city is working to improve water quality in the creek, as well as build a greenway that would follow the creek from Williams Day Camp to east of U.S. 301.



GIG EAST EXCHANGE OPENS; INAUGURAL WILSON RAP COHORT GRADUATES

AT THE BEGINNING OF 2020, the Gig East Exchange renovation was underway and set to open its doors to the first cohort of the Wilson RIoT Accelerator Program (RAP) by spring. Like most things in 2020, this vision had to change and adapt due to COVID-19.

Wilson RAP launched in February with seven startups. The group was able to meet in person for several weeks before transiting to virtual sessions in March. The Wilson RAP cohort prevailed and all seven companies graduated from the program in early summer with a virtual pitch contest. The Gig East Exchange renovations finished up by year end and the Exchange opened its door to its first tenant, Larema Coffee.

To date, the Exchange houses two startups in private office suites, Shyft Auto and North State Consulting.

Under the Exchange's COVID-19 safety procedures, only private suites are being leased for now. All coworking space is on hold until we emerge from the pandemic. The Exchange team is anxiously awaiting a time when the space can fulfill its vision as the epicenter for entrepreneurship in Wilson.

Throughout 2020, Gig East continued to bring people and ideas together in Eastern North Carolina through several virtual Meet Ups and the 2020 Gig East Summit, keynoteed by the Center on Rural Innovation's Matt Dunne, with speakers from the region's leading entrepreneurial organizations. All sessions are available at www.gigeast.com.



A NEW CHRISTMAS EVENT at Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park was an immediate success, drawing both raves and soldout shows. Electric Light Fantasy (ELF) was a 30-minute-long show mixing laser lights with holiday stories and music. It was originally scheduled four shows per six nights, but additional shows were added to accommodate the demand and it is likely to return in 2021. Proceeds benefited whirligig maintenance.



AN ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES CREW came to the assistance in November of a senior citizen who had fallen in her yard. Kelvin Horne, Davonte Arnold and Christopher Baines were working in the Knollwood area, off Forest Hills Road, when they heard cries for help. They quickly located a disabled woman who had fallen down the steps at her back door. As their crew leader Ernest Davis said, "In my opinion they quite possibly saved a life today."

THE WILSON CITY COUNCIL decided in 2020 to rename Lane Street as Bishop L.N. Forbes Street in recognition of the influential religious leader in the Wilson community. The street is home to the bishop's namesake church, which hosted the renaming ceremony for his friends and family members in October.



RIDE FINDS SUCCESS, NEW USERS IN FIRST MONTHS

RIDE REPLACED THE CITY'S BUS SYSTEM

in September and immediately won rave reviews for being a faster, more efficient and more dependable way to get around town.

RIDE is a partnership between Via, a global transportation company, and the City of Wilson, and allows residents to request a ride from a smart phone app or by phone, walk to a nearby "virtual bus stop", and be driven to their destination in a standard vehicle, rather than a city bus.

"The City Council has consistently demonstrated a willingness to try new approaches to better serve our community," said Wilson City Manager Grant Goings. "Our existing bus system was outdated and inconvenient for most citizens. We believe RIDE provides a better service for transit riders and creates a new, convenient and modern transportation option anyone can access. We may be the first community of our size to attempt this conversion, but Wilson is not afraid to lead."

RIDE hours are 5:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Each ride has a \$1.50 flat fare with discounts for multi-ride bundles and multiple riders on the same trip. The service includes wheelchair-accessible

vehicles, with curb-to-curb rides for those with limited mobility.

Numbers show a large gain in ridership. The buses were serving around 250 people per weekday, pre-pandemic. The buses served around 125 people on Saturdays.

At year's end, RIDE was averaging well over 300 people per weekday and over 250 on Saturdays.

The RIDE vans were also getting people to their destinations faster. The buses often required people to wait for long times at bus stops and then transfer at the transit center. In contrast, RIDE provided more than 24,000 trips from September-December with an average wait time of less than 14 minutes. And because the app updates riders on their drivers' locations, riders do not have to be outside until their ride is arriving.

And the RIDE vehicles cover a much larger territory than the bus routes.

The partnership has been so promising that the city received a \$250,000 FTA innovation grant that will be used to expand service hours through the end of 2021 at least.

Wilson RIDE vehicles are becoming a familiar sight around town.



STAY UP TO DATE WITH CITY NEWS

Follow the City of Wilson on our website, WilsonNC.org; our Channel 8 on Greenlight and other local cable television systems; and on such online channels as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vimeo and Youtube.