

Historic Toano might get a facelift. Here's how

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Jack Wray, a Toano-raised developer in Charlottesville, hopes to revitalize the heart of Toano through a series of reconstruction and preservation projects on Richmond Road. (WYDaily/Alexa Doiron)

When Jack Wray runs his palm over his great-grandfather's century-old bar top and thinks of Toano, he thinks of home.

"Toano is a place with history and character, and that's something special," he said. "I'm just so proud to be from Toano."

Today, when drivers pass through the sleepy village on the outskirts of Williamsburg, they see scattered, mismatching buildings with businesses that come in and out. But Toano wasn't always like this. It was once a flourishing area with its own high school, theater, and newspaper.

In the 1950's-1960's, Wray was a young boy that witnessed the destruction of a community he knew and loved as the stretch of Richmond Road that ran through Toano was made into two lanes and resulted in the demolition of a number of businesses and homes.

"When I was 15, we watched our little town be demolished," he said. "A real gloom fell over this town and Toano hasn't recovered since."

Toano was an area of character and pride, and that's what Wray, co-owner of Wray Brothers, a contracting firm in Charlottesville, hopes to bring back to the area by restoring some of the historic homes. This means potentially rezoning the area for mixed-use properties and creating a historic commercial district — a decision that was discussed at a public forum Friday night in what's historically known as the W.C. Martin store building.

Keeping it in the family



The W.C. Martin Store, owned by Wray's grandfather for 50 years, sits next to a historic bank building and a Masonic Lodge built in 1903. (WYDaily/Alexa Doiron)

In the Martin Store building, owned for 50 years by Wray's grandfather and formerly the store "Everything Vintage," photos and decorations of Toano's history are placed along the century-old brick that extends part of the room.

From the outside, the small building shows signs of age that come from years of use, but the inside boasts a character and history that Wray is more than happy to share with the community.

The same goes for the other eight buildings he has accumulated. Wray has taken nearly 15 years to collect and preserve the history for these buildings. He started buying historic properties in Toano in 2003 as part of his plan to restore and revitalize the area.

This includes finding his own family connections, such as photos of his mother as a little girl outside his family's home across the street from the Martin Store building.



The Toano Historical Society, lead by Jack Wray, hopes to restore Toano's historic homes like the Carlton-Mitchell house, to their prior glory, Wray said. (WYDaily/Alexa Doiron)

In 2005, James City County formed a task force to complete a community character corridor study and potentially preserve the area's aesthetic and atmosphere, Wray said.

Following the study, in 2006 the Board of Supervisors adopted a master plan that merged retail, office and residential occupancy in a way that emulates the history of Toano. But to complete this plan, there needs to be approval to change the zoning from business use to mixed-use.

Wray is at the center of this project, attempting to get approval for the area as the first historic commercial district in James City County.

"We're in an embryonic stage of it," he said. "We can bring a lot of honor and prestige to this little village by making it a recognized historic area."

At the Friday night meeting, Toano residents gathered to hear about the plans and discuss the proposition of the potential historic commercial district.

Maureen Anderson, owner of Tasha's Own, recently moved into one of the area's oldest homes, the Stevenson house built in 1900, and expects the district to bring the community together.

"I've been a city person and I've been a farm person, but I always wanted somewhere that really felt like home," she said. "That's what we have here, there's a community, but we need a place to gather. Somewhere where I can see my friends at the store or on the street."

The commercial historic district proposal will be presented to the state review board on Dec. 13 at 10 a.m. at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture in Richmond. If approved, the recommendation will move on to the National Parks Service and official work can begin in approximately a year, said Mark Wagner, architectural historian for the Capital Region Preservation Office.

"Every building is a diary of how people have lived here," Wagner said. "We have a chance to save the good stuff that's left."

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