

Signs of these times

A drive through no-growth North Chatham

By Bill Sommers

I live in Fearrington Village and frequently drive north on 15-501. This small corridor up to the dusty skeleton of County Line Plaza shows the high and lows of Chatham's recent wave of frenzied development. Let's take a trip up 15-501 to see what's happening – and what's not.

Coming out on Village Way we see a large sign, directly across, noting that the 40-acre **FEARRINGTON PLACE** is offering "outparcels" for its small-scale shopping center. Sewerage is offered, surprisingly, in an area where no sewer lines exist.

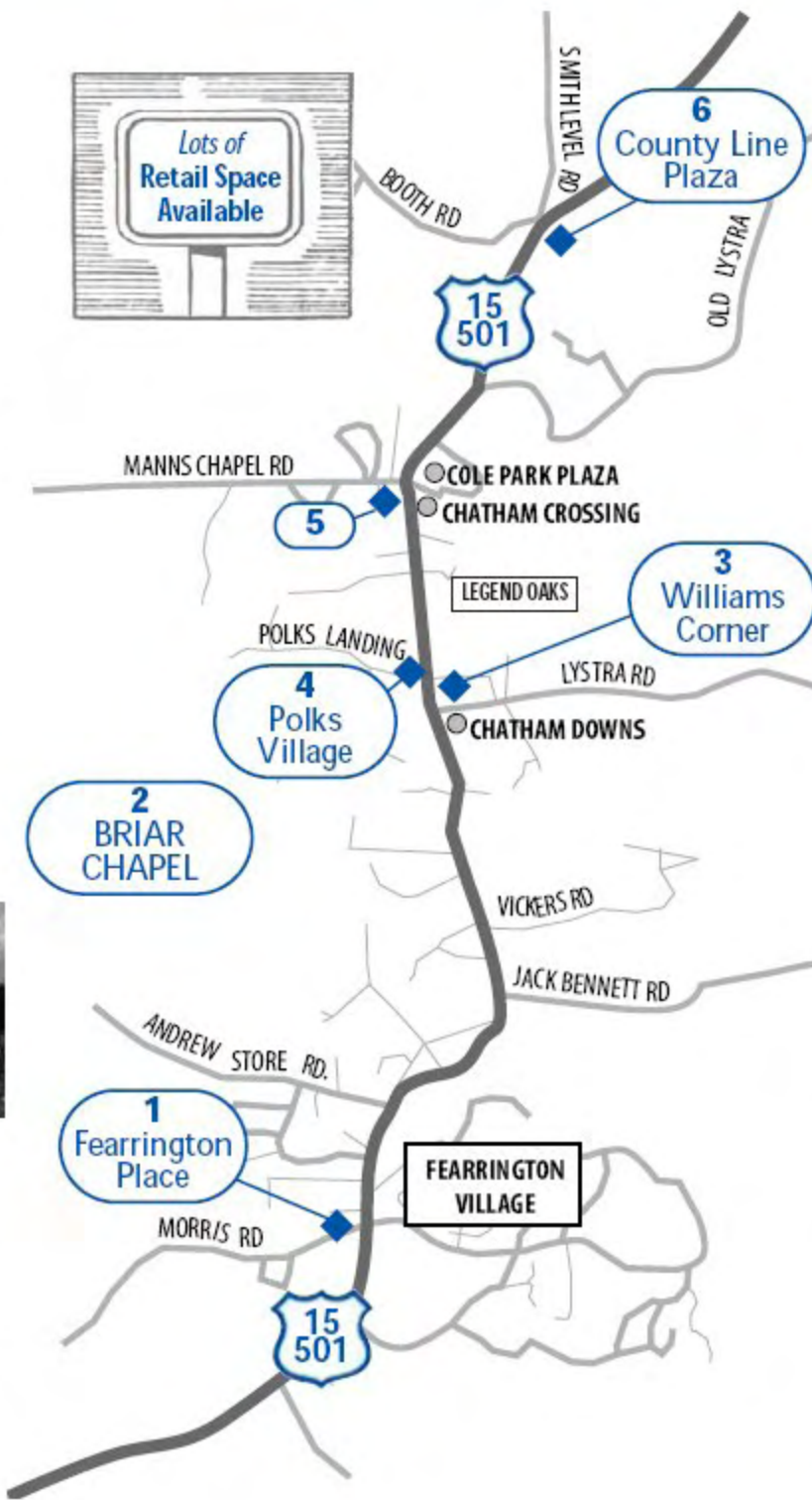


1 The Board of Commissioners approved **FEARRINGTON PLACE** on July 17, 2006 over objections of its planning staff. The OK may have been prompted by an Economic Impact Study, promising a 81,000-square-foot grocery store to anchor a bank, a drug store, a high-end restaurant, fast-food convenience store: a \$24.2 million estimated investment!

Yet no signs of any constructive construction to date. What we see is a tree shorn-leveled land with a couple of dirt piles, which look like they might contain T-Rex bones.



2 Approaching the Andrews Store Road area: the country façade for **BRIAR CHAPEL DEVELOPMENT**, fronting a substantial space on both sides of the highway. Here are three large signs advertising the sale of commercial land and, after passing the sale



signs at **FEARRINGTON PLACE**, we begin to wonder.

Briar Chapel has over 60 acres of commercially zoned land on both sides of 15-501. Briar Chapel had planned three separate commercial and office units of vast possibilities. Now these potential commercial centers are overgrown in weeds, trees and wild grass and are beginning to cover the signs.

On the north corner of the Lystra Road intersection, we can see, if a bit askew, the placard announcement of **WILLIAMS CORNER**: Opening 2009, an un-built planned unit development by North Chatham Investments, approved by the County Commissioners on January 17, 2006.

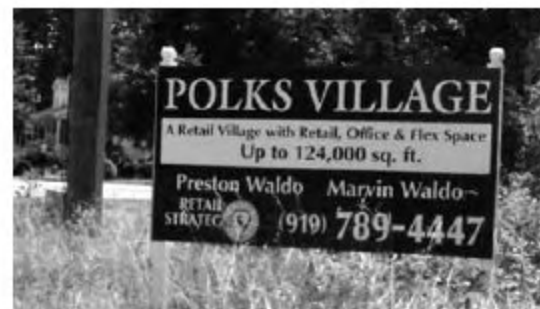
3 Using the joint driveway to **LEGEND OAKS**, the **WILLIAMS CORNER** project area is surrounded by a locked, gated fence, which, between the slots, gives no evidence of any significant building. A construction

permit was issued for a waste water treatment plant but no action yet. Right now **THE CORNER** consists of the fence, the signs, a building permit receptacle box on and a rather murky "Lake Williams" with a subsidiary swamp wrapped by a rough bituminous road.



The residential community of Legend Oaks next door is an established development with a very hilly and winding terrain, approved for some 58 lots. Another 56 on 100 acres is now under consideration by the Planning Board and the Board of Commissioners. Chatham Water Department records show that of the 58 lots already approved for construction, only 17 are registered as water users.

4 Continuing north, a look across the highway reveals another languid development effort, **POLKS VILLAGE** at the intersection of 15-501 South and Polks Landing Road.



This proposed 40-acre development includes retail, offices, restaurants, furniture, pet shop, art house theatre, gallery and a Fifth Avenue bevy of other commercial features. Wow! The Board of

Commissioners agreed to a modified proposal on October 16, 2006, 10 months after the **WILLIAMS CORNER** approval of a very similar development — right across the highway.

Continuing, we cross Vickers Road where on the left we get a good view of Briar Chapel and its well-mannered entry into Chatham's biggest residential development. Approved by the Board of Commissioners in 2005 with a long series of public hearings during 2006 before both the State Division of Environmental Protection and the US Army Engineering Corp, **BRIAR CHAPEL** is now in operation. It has an inviting entry, a tangle of good roads spotted with a boulder and tree filled landscape. The developers have made good on a variety of local obligations. Slated for the construction of over 2,000 houses, its current effort has yielded about 85 water users according to the Chatham Water Department. It's a slow start but something seems to be working.



5 Our next visit comes abreast of 15-501 and its intersection with Mann's Chapel Road. On the left hand side just before the traffic-lighted intersection we note another signboard — *ground lease available* — or — *build to suit*.

This exciting sign advertises Baycorp's effort to develop 4.6 acres of nearly invisible land: a testament to developmental perseverance. The first proposal was dated October 4, 2005, alluding to a possible

Bank location. Approvals and re-approvals have been given over four year with no action except the current signage framed against a background of green trees which may be the best — perhaps the only — developmental choice available.

Taking the green light, we note **COLE PARK SHOPPING CENTER** on the right, hard hit by the loss of the school, two restaurants and a long-time dental office, and a host of *for lease* signs. Thank the shopping center Gods for Pope's Hardware, the Thrift Shop, the Light Store and the last existing full scale mexically dinning place in the area!

Passing the UNC parking lot on the right, constructed during a late summer rush in 2005, there's a large mound of construction dirt, covered with weeds, wild flowers and a plethora of stunted ever-greens. In 2005 it was expected that the County Line shopping center proposal would include a couple of big-box stores, needing more parking area, including said mound. But in development, as in life, the well-laid plans of mice and men often miss the mark altogether.

6 Which brings us to our last stop at the Chatham County border — **COUNTY LINE PLAZA**.

The County Line Plaza began in 2006 when Lee Moore Capital Company aka Lee-Moore Oil Company, filed for a zoning permit covering a 60-acre plus shopping center. Included in its application was a vibrant economic impact analysis showing a large home improvement center with seven other commercial units, filling over 200,000 square feet, valued at nearly \$42 million and payrolls topping \$8 million annually. The Planning Department reviewed the application and, with a number of caveats, recommended



approval to a glad-eyed Board of Commissioners who gave their imprimatur on November 20, 2006.

However, the project fell into a large legal tangle and as it dragged on, the owners applied for and received a Land Disturbing permit in 2007 to prepare the land for development.

In December 2008, Lee Moore Capital Company, swallowing the effusion of their 2006 proposal, asked for preliminary approval of a much smaller plan, reducing their commercial enterprise to three lots which would support a drug store, a bank and an undisclosed retail store. The "big three" will cover about 7 acres, leaving the bulk of the property — nearly 60 acres — without designation, being zoned part B-1 and R-4, reserved perhaps for further expansion. The Board of Commissioners approved the preliminary plan on March 16, 2009.

Who knows what will happen next? For starters, we know that our NC solons just passed a bill, signed by the Governor, to extend all local and state real estate development permits to January 1, 2011, instructing everyone that "this act shall be liberally construed." Thus the road side signs and lumps of dirt — herein examined — will no doubt remain in status quo for a long time. Would that our noble legislators had accorded this same kind of extension to citizens suffering home foreclosures!

We turn left into the gas station, fill the tank and head south on 15-501. Yet I keep hearing that wonderful Scottish brogue of Robert Burns, repeating over and over:

**O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us
It wad frae mony a blunder free us
An foolish notion**

Don't you hear it too?

Bill Sommers maintains an interest in Chatham County local government, and in its development, with particular focus on the Chatham Water Division. He was the Commissioner of Inspections for the City of Boston and the Public Works Commissioner for Cambridge, Massachusetts.