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Research hub focused on equity development proposed for Durham's Hayti neighborhood

Matthew Burns : 3-4 minutes : 10/6/2021

— Once a renowned Black middle-class neighborhood, the struggling Hayti area near downtown Durham could become home to a pioneering effort to build an equity education research hub.

A group of local academics, executives, entrepreneurs and community organizers is targeting a 2,000-acre site near the Fayetteville Street interchange with the Durham Freeway for the [Durham Global Equity Project](#).

The backers have submitted a proposal to the Durham Housing Authority, which owns part of the site, for the first phase of a \$1 billion-plus mixed-use project, which would include a blend of affordable and market-rate housing, offices, a grocery store and other retail shops and an "Innovation Academy," designed to help minority youth become entrepreneurs.

"[We want] to create a catalyst for the community," said Henry McKoy, DGEP director and a business professor at North Carolina Central University. "Durham is growing, and this community should grow as well. It should benefit from the growth in Durham. It shouldn't be something where the community is sitting on the sidelines watching other people as they grow."

A century ago, the Hayti neighborhood was considered the heart of a "Black Wall Street," with some 200 Black-owned businesses, McKoy said. But the Durham Freeway was built through the middle of the community in the 1960s, razing dozens of homes and businesses, and the area is now among the poorest ZIP codes in Durham, he said.

"This particular plot of land is where homes and businesses were located until the Durham Freeway came through and destroyed them. It has an enormous significance to the community," he said.

Future phases of the proposal would include a Hayti History Museum, a Community Center, an event center, research labs, a farmers market and more retail and housing.

Much like North Carolina's "First in Flight" history, McKoy said the state, and particularly Durham, can become "first in equity." DGEP will become home to firms focused on racial equity research and development and investing, with a goal of ending systemic racism in health care, education, environmental issues and economic development.

The project also aims to support an investment fund that will focus on building infrastructure in Black communities, strengthening the pipeline of Black entrepreneurial firms and seeding other Black-led or Black-focused investment funds.

Financial backers for the project haven't been disclosed, but Big Path Capital, a firm that focuses on impact and sustainable investing, is listed as a partner of the DGEP website.