

Excelsior Club plans falter yet again. Historic Charlotte site likely to get new owner

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In the latest in a series of setbacks for a once-prominent site for the city's Black community, redevelopment plans for the Excelsior Club have fallen through again and property could have another owner by next year.

Redevelopment of the Beatties Ford property had been in the works since 2020. But on Thursday, city Councilman Malcolm Graham told The Charlotte Observer, those plans had fizzled.

"The ownership of the property may change hands in the next three to four months," he said.

The Excelsior was Charlotte's first private club for Black residents when



The Excelsior Club at 921 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte is likely to have a new owner by next year, city councilman Malcolm Graham said.

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Jimmy McKee opened it in 1944 during segregation.

The west Charlotte club

was a political and social hub of the community, with legendary musicians

performing there like Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole. But in 2016 as

business was declining, Excelsior closed for re-pairs and never reopened.

The club has had several owners through the years.

In December 2019, California-based company Kenwood Investments purchased the club for \$1.35 million, including \$250,000 in public and private funds with the city of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County commission,

Knight Foundation and Foundation for the Carolinas. Graham said those commitments are still there.

Kenwood's plans called for a 1950s-designed boutique hotel with about 60 rooms, full-service restaurant, small museum and interior courtyard for live music.

Standing independently would be an Excelsior building that respects the architecture of the original 1940s building.

But in May 2023 during a community meeting at a local library, Kenwood CEO Darius Anderson said the project was short

15 to 20 parking spaces and he was working with the city on the issue. But nothing has changed

since. Graham said he has not talked to the owners since that community meeting but city staff has.

"A lot of time has gone by since that meeting," Graham said. "I think he has made a business decision to move on from the project."

Kenwood Investments officials did not respond to requests for comment Thursday.

Graham said he hopes that any new plans for the Beatties Ford Road property will anchor the redevelopment happening in the Beatties Ford Road corridor off Brookshire Freeway.

"I would like to see someone who wants to invest in the corridor and bring back music or food or entertainment that would demonstrate a wink and nod toward the legacy, history and tradition of what the facility once was," Graham said. "I don't think it's a redevelopment of the four walls but of the site."

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Disabled adults face challenges in getting, keeping jobs

BY ALISON CROSS
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October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and in Connecticut, Gov. Ned Lamont's Administration marked the occasion with a proclamation and press release celebrating individuals with disabilities and urging them to apply to thousands of open jobs in the state.

Disability rights advocates and allies welcomed the governor's recognition but stressed that even in the current labor market, finding and maintaining employment remains a challenge.

Approximately 705,000 adults in Connecticut - more than a quarter of the state's adult population - have a disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, just 22.5% of people with a disability were employed in 2023, data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found.

That same year, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities more than doubled the rate for the non-disabled population. Among individuals with employment, the bureau reported that workers with a disability

were nearly twice as likely to work part-time" and "more likely to be self-employed than those with no disability."

Another study by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy found that "earnings are consistently lower for disabled workers" and "poverty rates are consistently much higher for people with disabilities."

In a proclamation declaring October 2024 Disability Employment Awareness Month in Connecticut, Lamont urged "businesses to recognize the value and talent people with disabilities add to our workplaces and communities and affirm Connecticut's commitment to an inclusive community that increases access and opportunities to all."

The language in the proclamation largely borrowed from a sample provided by the U.S.

Department of labor, but left out recommended resolutions, including a call to employers "to ensure that disabled workers have access to good jobs every month of every year" and a state "pledge to continue to take steps throughout the year to recruit, hire, retain, and advance individuals with disabilities

and work to pursue the goals of opportunity, full participation, economic self-sufficiency, and independent living for people with disabilities."

Lamont's press release included a list of resources available to job seekers with disabilities through the Connecticut Department of Disability Services, the Connecticut Department of Aging and Disability Services, the Connecticut Department of Labor's American Job Centers, CTHires and local job fairs.

"Given the number of open jobs in our state, we know many industries and businesses are looking for employees," Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz said in the release.

Connecticut Department of Labor Commissioner Danté Bartolomeo said,

"Now is a great time to get into the job market."

"Employers throughout Connecticut, across industries, and at every career level have more than 80,000 jobs available,"

Bartolomeo said in the release. "No matter your skillset, the Connecticut Department of Labor and the American Job Centers in our state can help you

to take steps throughout the year to recruit, hire, retain, and advance individuals with disabilities

their job, it's what makes our economy strong and competitive."

Melissa Taylor, a member of the Citizens Coalition for Equal Access, said leaders of the disability advocacy group saw Lamont's proclamation as "wonderful," but Taylor said state officials must do more in order for people with disabilities to "know that we're being heard."

"It's rosy," Taylor said, describing the announcement. "And I want to believe in rosiness, but I've also had a lot of pain and I'm tired of pretending that I didn't."

Taylor was born with cerebral palsy. She has experienced "varying degrees of disability" throughout her life and currently uses a rollator with a seat to walk.

Taylor served six years as the vice president of the Connecticut State Independent Living Council. She has a bachelor's of arts in social work and a master's in elementary education, but after earning her degrees

Taylor said she worked for years as a customer service associate at Stop & Shop until she said her body "just couldn't handle it anymore."

Taylor said that every time she tried to branch out professionally, she hit roadblocks.

"The things that I'm really good at, they don't really have jobs where you're not (having) to do a

bunch of other stuff with kids and chasing them around," Taylor said. "I'm better at small group instruction, because teaching a full classroom, my energy level isn't the same ... it takes me two to three times more energy to move around."

Taylor said that many jobseekers with disabilities encounter the same frustrating experiences that fuel self-doubt.

"It's hard for me. It's hard for other people and they tell me ... 'People don't think I can do anything.' So when you have to break down that barrier every time you meet someone ... you wonder, 'Well, is it just me?'" Taylor said.

One of the main challenges was transportation - Taylor does not drive. She eventually found a remote internship, but Taylor said "it wasn't very rigorous." During the "specialist" year of the program, Taylor said she fell behind. Due to the lack of viable internship opportunities and financial challenges, Taylor said she had to put her studies on pause.

At times, Taylor said, "it's hard to have the courage to apply" to jobs.

"It's hard to build up your self-confidence and then you go out into the world and they don't see it," Taylor said.

"I have all this great stuff inside and I have all this life experience, but I feel like I don't have a correct avenue to share it because it's like my experience is always filtered through a nondisabled lens," Taylor explained. "As much as I've learned in my life and as much as I try and do, it's

hard for other people to see my strength. They more often will see what I can't do first and I know that and there's nothing I can do about it."

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In 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that more than 43% of individuals with disabilities who did not have a job reported at least one barrier to employment. Reported barriers included the disability itself, lack of education, training or transportation, the need for accommodations or modifications at work, attitudes held by employers and coworkers and the loss of government benefits.

For individuals who were employed, the bureau said "more than half ... reported that their disability caused some difficulty in completing their current work duties."

Stephen Morris, the executive director of Favarh, The Arc of the Farmington Valley, said transportation is one of the top barriers for workers with disabilities in Connecticut.

'Helping the helpers': How Charlotte laundry service aids Duke Energy crews after Helene

BY CHASE JORDAN
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In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, workers from Collins Cleaners are driving a lot of miles around Charlotte picking up dirty laundry from Duke Energy crews who are working to restore power in Western North Carolina.

For owner Patrick Collins, it's not enough to just clean the clothes for the stressed-out workers. Employees are sending the laundry bags back with snacks, water, notes of encouragement and waterproof bags.

"You don't know if they're sleeping in tents for a couple of days, or whether they're going to be in a hotel or sleeping in the back of their trucks," Collins said. "This is just a nice way to tell them how much we appreciate them for what they do."

Close to 14 drivers are picking up laundry early in the morning at hotels across Charlotte for Duke Energy workers.

The laundry is returned

later in the evening after it's cleaned through multiple wash and rinse cycles. Duke Energy workers are also dropping off clothes with trailers full of clothes to Collins Cleaners locations across Charlotte.

It's an honor , said driver Drew Nathan.

"I'm honestly feeling the urge to go up there and help and do something," Nathan said. "I know that it's probably a nuisance for me to be in the way for people actually like bringing stuff in, people that are supposed to be there."

But like many other people miles away from the devastation, Nathan is glad to be doing his part.

"I'm from North Carolina and it's a weird sense of 'helping the helpers,'" he said. "And I think that's what I felt from it."

Collins Cleaners operates from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. with two shifts of workers.

As of Tuesday, they have cleaned 13,807 pieces of clothing since the storm for 466 people from Duke Energy and other organizations.

"We've tried to put that

word out because the name of the game really is to get them their clothes as best and as fast as we can," Collins said.

Drivers are also planning trips farther west to cities like Hickory, which is closer to the devastation. Collins expects the work to continue through October based on information he received about hotel bookings.

"A lot of those guys are, you know, they're traveling, and they just kind of get beat up while they're on the road," Collins said.

"It can be really disheartening."

ABOUT COLLINS CLEANERS

Collins started the business in 1992 with his wife Shelby, who serves as vice president. The valet cleaning services provides pick up and delivery services for customers, including law enforcement agencies and other organizations.

Collins Cleaners connection with Charlotte-based Duke Energy began in December 1998 after an ice storm froze much of the

city Charlotte. The relationship started through the Sports Page restaurant, which shared an attached building with the cleaning business at the time. Sports Page provided catering for Duke workers during disaster events, according to Collins.

And it's also important for Duke crews to leave with good thoughts about Charlotte, Collins added.

"For us, it's really more about just trying to give back to these guys," he said. "And also, my wife and I are from here, so we kind of consider Charlotte our town. We want people to leave here with the best impression of Charlotte they could possibly get."

Since Helene first struck Duke Energy's service territory in North Carolina, the company has continued to work with local, state and federal agencies, and numerous private businesses, to support team members in some of the hardest-hit areas of the state, according to Duke Energy spokesman Jeff Brooks.

"We greatly appreciate

the support of and collaboration with these organizations and businesses as our team continue to work to rebuild the grid and restore power," Brooks said.

The faith-based business also has a relationship with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for services. Collins has presented the idea of having mobile laundry facilities for workers in disaster

areas.

But reaching people may become a challenge if destroyed roads are closed.

"There are still some things to work out," he said. "But I think that's just a little bit of the vision into the future of where things like this are going."

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Collins Cleaners picks up laundry for Duke Energy workers after Hurricane Helene.