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## BUSINESSES

make a successful place out of," said Mark Wilson. He owns and runs the bar, which opened in 2008, with his brother Brian Wilson. "We don't feel like going anywhere, I guess."

The Thirsty Beaver has always been a bit quirky - the red-eyed beaver painted on the side of the bright orange building should be a tip-off - but now it has become a symbol of neighborhood quirkiness that's staying put in the face of new development.

That wave of new development is transforming Central Avenue, Plaza Midwood and the surrounding neighborhoods, bringing 820 new apartments to a quarter-mile stretch of road in front of the Thirsty Beaver and hundreds more to other sites nearby.

That's sparked concerns about homogenization of Charlotte, with locally owned businesses bearing the brunt of new development. The Wilsons credit their landlord, George Salem, with deciding to keep the land that's been in his family for about 70 years rather than sell.

"We told him if he held onto it, we'd be there with him," said Wilson. The brothers also own and operate the Topsy Burro restaurant on Monroe Road, which opened last year.

Inside the Thirsty Beaver on Wednesday, with "Hee Haw" playing silently on a television overhead, a small crowd of regulars cracked affectionate jokes about the bar: Order whatever you want, you'll get a Jack and Coke. The bar has a great wine list - red and white. And like the bar in "The Blues Brothers," the place has an extra-wide music selection: Country and Western.

"It has always been one of those places where you come in and leave your pretensions at the door," said Bob Campbell, who lives nearby and has been dropping in since shortly after the bar opened. "There's not too many places like that in town now."

Like the other customers, he worries about what's happening to the neighborhood - new developments, new people and lots of changes. Although Campbell said he's happy to see Charlotte grow, he wishes more of the new apartment buildings had ground-floor retail spaces to ensure the neighborhood businesses have somewhere to go.

All things considered, the new apartment building hasn't been that bad a disruption, Wilson said. Motorcycles can still park out front, the neighborhood regulars can walk like they usually do, and other people have figured out how to Uber or park in one of the nearby public lots.

And the apartments aren't the first business disruption the Thirsty Beaver has endured. In 2013, the previous owner of the then-vacant land around the bar unexpectedly put up chain-link fences around the building, hemming it in about as tightly as the apartments do now. Thirsty Beaver regulars responded by attaching signs ("Thank you for your support!" read one) and bras to the fence, and the bar stayed open.

"You're not going to push us around or force us out," Mark Wilson said.

There have been other holdouts who declined to sell in the face of Charlotte development, including the owner of a half-acre parcel in front of Bank of America Stadium. The owner refused to sell for more than a decade, surrounded by hedges, until 2013, when the city

of Charlotte paid \$550,000 for the sliver of land.

But many other local businesses have closed recently in the face of new developments, especially when their landlords decide to sell. Tommy's Pub, a former dive bar on Central Avenue, the Chop Shop in NoDa, Phat Burrito in South End, Tremont Music Hall - all shuttered. Jackalope Jack's in Elizabeth, American Beauty Garden Center and Fern just up the street from the Thirsty Beaver in Plaza Midwood, the Common Market in South End - all have moved to new homes as new development moved in.

CW Development paid \$8.5 million for the land around the Thirsty Beaver in 2015. The company is planning to open its new apartment building in the fourth quarter this year, said David Helfrich, the

company's CEO.

"We've made several attempts through the entire development process to acquire that property," said Helfrich, adding, "very unsuccessfully."

The property's owner, Salem, didn't return messages from the Observer seeking more information about his ultimate plans.

In 2013, Salem told the Observer he had no plans to sell: "It's part of our family. We've had it all those years. I'd like to keep it."

"It's more of a legacy for him to hold on to that," said Helfrich. He said the company could seek to acquire the property in the future, and it could be used as "green space" for a miniature park if they ever do.

For now, though, as long as the Thirsty Beaver is there, Helfrich is philosophical. The bar might help attract tenants, he said: "You could call it an amenity."

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Mark Wilson, co-owner of The Thirsty Beaver: "We don't feel like going anywhere."

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