

Business offers hope to community

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When Dorothy Soraparu was a little girl, if she was good, she got to go window-shopping on Dryades Street.

"We lived on Magnolia Street, and I had a cousin who was 10 years older than I was," Soraparu, 83, said. "We just thought it was a treat if she said we could come shopping with her. That was only if we had been good.

"Dryades Street was really something. It was very popular," said Soraparu who at the time was a 10-year-old student at Thomy Lafon School.

Addressing neglect

Much has changed since then.

The scene of some of the most important civil rights battles in the 1960s, the street has been renamed for the late Oretha Castle Haley, a leader of those struggles.

But even more visible than the change of name has been the reversal of the street's fortunes.

Many of the buildings on the street have been abandoned and have become blighted in the years since desegregation. As black shoppers gained access to stores in other parts of the city, Dryades lost much of its allure as a retail mecca.

In recent years, art galleries, a restaurant, newly renovated apartments and other development have helped return the street to a modicum of its former glory.

But among the renovated buildings that house these businesses, there are still many blighted edifices and abandoned lots.

Monday it was announced that the old Handelman's department store, one of the largest and most blighted buildings on the street, will be turned into apartments, offices and stores.

Today, the Hope Community Credit Union will celebrate its grand opening at the corner of Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard and Felicity Street. The credit union is sponsored by the not-for-profit Enterprise Corporation of the Delta and will offer a range of services including home mortgages, consumer loans, financial counseling, savings and checking accounts.

Additionally, Holiday on the Boulevard, an annual event designed to bring shoppers back to the street, will kick off at the Ashe Cultural Arts Center.

New help for residents

The aptly named Hope Community Credit Union may well be the institution to spur the redevelopment of the Central City community.

While real estate speculators from all over town have come to appreciate the architectural treasures on and around the boulevard, longtime residents often lack the financing and sophistication to invest in their own communities.

A community bank that aggressively markets to its surrounding community could be just what is needed to bring about the long-hoped-for renaissance on that storied street.