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Green plan looks ahead, not behind

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Sometimes it takes audacious dreamers to see the possibilities of the future. When some people drive down Railroad Street, they probably remember the hustle and bustle of a previous time when workers churned out furniture. Others take that route and see large abandoned buildings and wonder whether the property will ever see new use. But others envision a completely radical reinvention, in which a technology associated with the future takes root.

The idea of the former Lexington Home Brands Plant No. 1 becoming the Lexington Green: Solar Technology and Weatherization Institute remains a long way off. The possibility is intriguing, and grant options look promising. But until money is awarded and construction begins, Lexington residents should take a realistic, if optimistic, view of the plan. After all, many other grand plans have been discussed for redevelopment of old buildings, but many have failed to reach fruition.

Still, some momentum does appear to be building for the green technology idea. Rep. Mel Watt, D-12th, first broached the topic publicly when he visited the site earlier this month, accompanied by Paul Kron, regional planning director for the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments. Kron returned Monday night to update the Lexington City Council on the project. PTCOG's involvement and expertise could help Lexington in its attempt to land grants for the project. The numbers being tossed around are significant - $500,000 through one federal program, $5 million through another, $250,000 from a state foundation.

That type of investment could truly help invigorate a site that many skeptics believe may never see a productive use. And green technology looks to the future, rather than to a manufacturing past. Say what you will about global warming, but green technology serves as a growth industry. More and more businesses and governments are looking to green technology to help the environment and reduce their expenses. The initial outlay can be expensive, but savings come over the long term. Those initial costs will decrease, too, as the technology becomes more mainstream and efficient.

The institute could make a big impact on the county's high unemployment rate - 13.3 percent in June - by training those who are out of work a new trade. The research that goes on could attract further investment and make the institute a mover and shaker in green technology. The buildings that now sit empty could find use again or be demolished for new structures, changing the landscape of downtown.

Other projects have shown that redevelopment can occur. Look north to Winston-Salem for the Piedmont Triad Research Park or south to Kannapolis for the North Carolina Research Campus, which both focus on the sciences. Some answers for Lexington will begin to emerge in the next few months as city leaders learn whether the grants have been awarded. Until then, residents can imagine the potential for the property off Railroad Street to once again focus on building, just with a different end product.

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