

---

#### **4/11/04 EDITORIAL: Trouble Rising — Prosperity Means Little if History Repeats**

Six weeks ago, a last-minute, out-of-order change to Greenville's comprehensive plan set the stage for land at the intersection of U.S. 264 and Greenville Boulevard to be rezoned.

The City Council sealed that deal last week by approving a request to build 500 apartments on property covered for days by several feet of floodwater during Hurricane Floyd. The decision is the first practical impact of a policy change allowing dwellings in the floodplain of the Tar River. The rezoning came as no surprise. Yet that makes it no easier to accept. A conscientious, sure-footed City Council has ignored history, embracing public policy that places people in harm's way. And in doing so, set a troubling precedent for growth carrying more weight than public safety. Greenville needs no lessons in what happens when you build in flood-prone areas.

In 1999, flooding from Hurricane Floyd covered 58 percent of the land in Pitt County. Six people lost their lives. Hundreds lost their homes. Hundreds more who were stranded by deadly brown water had to be evacuated at great risk to human life.

That disaster laid bare the facts.

In Greenville, hundreds of apartments for students at East Carolina University had been built in the path of floodwaters. So had a public housing project, a large retirement community and trailer parks. An expensive buyout program relocated many of those people. And in 2000, the City Council agreed that no more residential development should take place in the newly drawn floodplain, a deep and sensible bow to nature's humbling lesson.

Now that course has been reversed. Landowners and developers who pushed the change argued that prohibiting dwellings in the floodplain put too much land north of the Tar River, an area that has not shared proportionately in Greenville's prosperity, out of consideration for development.

Yet prosperity will matter little if history repeats itself. Even if dwellings are built above the high-water mark — as the new ordinance requires them to be — floodwater will surround and strand residents in apartment complexes in the same way it did four years ago. The cost of such policy is obvious, both in public dollars and human lives. On both counts, it is the citizens who will pay.

Soon, the foundations of nice, new apartments will appear at the intersection of U.S. 264 and Greenville Boulevard. As they rise, literally, above the lowland, they should serve as a warning of what can happen when public safety takes a back seat and the desire for growth takes the wheel.