



## **Hampton Roads (VA) REALTORS® Co-Host “Better Block” Effort With Smart Growth Grant – January 2014**

How do you channel 1,500 local visitors through a downtrodden urban neighborhood to experience its potential vitality? On one such block in Norfolk, VA recently, through a weekend of pop-up shops, entertainment, and a half-dozen residential open houses, that is just what happened. The support and involvement of the Hampton Roads REALTORS® Association [HRRA] helped to create the exciting vision; over time, with continued effort, that vision will become a reality.

Andrew Sinclair, Government Affairs Director of the 3,000-member association, explains that Team Better Block, LLC, an innovative Dallas-based planning firm, was already targeting a block of the 35th Street corridor in the distressed Park Place neighborhood for a temporary revitalization to show the area's promise, and to use its findings in making zoning ordinance recommendations to the city's Planning Commission. Earlier in the year, it had created a great deal of excitement by showing how another Norfolk city block could become a vibrant arts district. The 35th Street project was to be the second in a three-block contract that Team Better Block has with the city.

Sinclair was aware of the transformative block projects, but it wasn't until the Smart Growth staff at the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® helped him realize that HRRA could play a meaningful role in the process that he decided to apply for funding.

Indeed, HRRA applied for and received a grant of \$15,000 from NAR to help fund the 35th Street Better Block effort over the weekend of Nov. 8-9, 2013. A portion of the funds went to the Park Place Business Association, toward event expenses; the rest was spent on consulting, both for the expertise required to make the weekend transformation happen, and, afterwards, measuring its success and converting the experience in to an actual planning tool.

The block of 35th Street to be transformed was a commercial corridor embedded in a residential neighborhood, and HRRA arranged for six vacant houses within a five-block radius to have open houses over the course of the Better Block weekend. It created a pop-up REALTOR® office in an empty storefront on 35th Street, staffed by a rotation of 18 members who promoted the open houses with walking maps and listing information. "It's a neighborhood in transition," notes Sinclair, "and there are some really great houses available, in a broad price range. It was an ideal time for people to see them, because the Better Block event showed -- dramatically -- how the area could be completely revived, and a very desirable place to live."

The temporary vision was called "The Soul of Norfolk." Local bands and entertainers performed, and a festive marquis sign that had been dark for 37 years was re-lit, thanks to 400 new light bulbs and a borrowed crane. Temporary street-scaping and traffic-calming measures enhanced the pedestrian experience. Just for the weekend, there were pop-up bike and hula hoop shops, coffee shops, bistros, and bakeries, a terrarium garden enterprise, craft and jewelry and international food stalls, and tables of chess sets ready for play on the 35th Street corridor, delighting residents and welcoming



visitors. Retail sales for the weekend totaled over \$13,000. Certain city zoning restrictions had to be eased, for example, to accommodate the popular *kombucha* shop selling fermented tea: technically, the production of this beverage would be classified as 'cidery' in Norfolk, which current zoning prohibits on this commercial block. According to Sinclair, the hope is that by having relaxed the zoning code temporarily, the Better Block event will have demonstrated the value of reconsidering some of the unnecessarily restrictive ordinances -- such as the one governing 'cidery.'

The Park Place Business Association and the Civic League took the lead providing input to Team Better Block when the project was in the planning stages, as well as manning the street teams that effected the actual transformation. "It was key that ownership of the event remain within the community," says Sinclair, adding that they still have lots of work to do in order to achieve and secure the vision that was created.

The Business Association built on the event's momentum with a pop-up holiday shopping fair, and is actively seeking independent businesses to fill the block; it is also maintaining the re-lit marquis sign, which sends the signal that the neighborhood is 'open for business.' The final report developed by Team Better Block will be submitted to the city, to inform the Planning Commission's review of existing ordinances, and the creation of new ones. Sinclair presented the preliminary report to NAR at its December meetings in Williamsburg, showing how HRRRA's Smart Growth Action Grant is working hard for the improvement of Norfolk's Park Place neighborhood.

*To learn more about how the REALTORS® of Hampton Roads, Virginia, are helping to revive neighborhoods in their region, contact Government Affairs Director Andrew Sinclair at [asinclair@hrra.com](mailto:asinclair@hrra.com) or 757-473-9700.*



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Local bands and entertainers performed at the weekend event that was nick-named "The Soul of Norfolk."

