



## **South Bend (IN) REALTORS® Lead Way Bringing New Life to Local Hispanic Neighborhood—*May 2015***

What began as an effort to breathe new life into an underappreciated commercial corridor of Western Avenue in South Bend, Indiana, has jumpstarted the community outreach activity of the Greater South Bend-Mishawaka Association of REALTORS® (SBMAOR) in ways it hadn't anticipated. Up until last year, when SBMAOR took the lead on bringing a Better Block event to the largely Hispanic Western Avenue neighborhood, it didn't even have a Community Outreach Committee, reports Myron Larimer, Chief Executive Officer of the 495-member association. Now, it's a respected player in the municipality's planning efforts, with community outreach high on its agenda.

It actually began back in 2013, at the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® conference in San Francisco, when Larimer and his association president, Laurie LaDow, attended a presentation on the Better Block program. The concept of engaging a neighborhood in envisioning ideal improvements concerning traffic, commercial enterprise, leisure, and well-being, and then temporarily implementing those ideals over the course of a weekend, was inspiring. They knew there were blocks in South Bend in need of just such a boost. When they learned that the city was already looking to address traffic and commercial development along a few specific corridors, SBMAOR reached out in partnership, identifying a few tired blocks of Western Avenue for a Better Block project, and committing its leadership and resources to sponsor the effort.

First, it secured a \$15,000 Smart Growth Action Grant from NAR, to which it added funds of its own for promotions and publicity; along the way, a number of community organizations contributed funds and assistance, and local businesses helped with in-kind services. The city provided \$5,000, and its Park Service lent ample departmental resources ranging from dumpsters to hand tools.

In July 2014, months before any hand tools were needed, Andrew Howard of Dallas-based Team Better Block visited South Bend to explain the concept at a community meeting that drew about 150 community stakeholders. The next day, he met with project leaders to work out specific strategies. Hours of planning, brainstorming, and recruiting followed. One month out, volunteer crews devoted weekends to clearing lots and painting; just prior to the event, the city set up barrels changing traffic configurations, and volunteers did some commando-landscaping.

The October event weekend brought visitors to Western Avenue from throughout the city, though the weather was wet and cool. The whole streetscape had been transformed with bike lanes, crosswalks, wider sidewalks, landscaping and lighting. There were pop-up beer tents and food vendors, with an emphasis on the two local restaurants that took their service outside by special permit. There were new parkettes created, a vacant lot became a dog park, and a vacant building became a temporary art gallery. A local church timed its rummage sale to coincide with the Better Block event, and local musicians enlivened the festive, family-friendly, date-friendly atmosphere. SBMAOR worked with a number of local media outlets, which provided significant



coverage throughout the process. The local farmers market reported a great boom in business.

And then there were the kinds of benefits that just can't be planned. "We made a positive impact by bringing the neighborhood together in ways it never had been before," says Larimer. Nearby businesses began talking about staging another, broader event in the coming year. Property owners discovered that by working together, they had strength in unity. "We knew the project was a success even before the event, when business owners in the surrounding area, a couple streets away, started cleaning up and painting their properties. The effort was contagious!" he notes.

Through its contact with two partners in particular, the Latin American Chamber of Commerce and La Casa de Amistad, SBMAOR gained a higher awareness of real estate issues affecting the predominantly Hispanic community of the Western Avenue corridor. "With property values so low there, it had been difficult to get banks interested in financing transactions," says Larimer. "Language and cultural barriers had been making it difficult for the community to access the lending industry, but we're finding ways to bridge that gap. We're beginning to open a dialogue with the local Mortgage Brokers Association, to address the problem," he says. "Thanks to the relationships we've built in the neighborhood, we're looking forward to bringing new opportunities for property ownership and economic development, and also for careers in real estate within the Hispanic community."

The whole process has gone a long way toward elevating SBMAOR's status with local officials and the city government, too – relationships, Larimer says, they've been working hard to forge. "Our good will, energy, and resources have earned us a voice. We're finally being recognized, and actually sought out for our input and support. Our goal had been to give greater, positive exposure to the neighborhood, and local businesses in particular, but the real success was much further-reaching than that."

*To learn more about how the REALTORS® of South Bend-Mishawaka are building better blocks in their communities, strengthening ties with local minority populations, and achieving a stronger say at City Hall, contact SBMAOR Chief Executive Officer Myron Larimer at [mlarimer@sbmaor.com](mailto:mlarimer@sbmaor.com) or 574-289-6378.*



## South Bend Better Block Event Highlights Greater South Bend-Mishawka Association of REALTORS®

