

# Meet the new head of the Downtown Norfolk Council Mary Miller | Inside Business

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Mary Miller joined the Downtown Norfolk Council in August 2004. After a year as the deputy director and director of operations, she became vice president and director of marketing. Now, she is the president and CEO of the council, upon the retirement of her predecessor, Cathy Coleman, after 30 years with the council.



What are some of the most important lessons you have learned in your positions on the council?

You must be flexible. Relationship-building is key, and you must learn to build consensus.

How great of an impact do you think Urban Outfitters will have on downtown?

It is a catalyst for change, drawing a new customer base to Granby Street. We need to seize on the opportunity of their draw in working to attract complementary uses.

What is the council's stance on the proposal to allow food trucks downtown? What would the council say to convince the city council to allow them?

The Downtown Norfolk Council Board of Directors took action at its December meeting to support mobile vendors on both publicly owned and privately owned property and with no trial period and no early time limit. This position was presented to the Planning Commission at its public hearing in December.

We have an emerging creative class in downtown, which we want to continue to attract and retain, and food trucks are a use they find appealing. They also are economic development as a startup for future restaurants.

What are your thoughts on the Waterside proposal? Do you think it will help or hurt merchants along Granby Street?

It will benefit downtown and the city to have an active use on the waterfront that can be enjoyed by residents throughout the region and visitors. The project will help downtown if it is successful in drawing new customers and we all work to draw that customer base into the core of downtown.

What is the vacancy rate downtown? How much space is now available, and what are your thoughts on these numbers?

The Hampton Roads Real Estate Market Review had the overall vacancy rate for downtown office space at 20 percent, as of the end of 2011. I have not seen the numbers for 2012 as of yet. The

Downtown Norfolk Council, along with the city of Norfolk, must work to support our downtown property owners and commercial office brokers with research and marketing to both retain and attract businesses. Activity and interest in downtown has picked up and I hope to see continued forward momentum as we move through 2013.

Your predecessor retired after 30 years. What are some of the most important things you learned from her about downtown and about leading the council?

Cathy is well respected in the downtown management profession and was a phenomenal mentor to work under as I learned the profession. She taught me that as an organization we must be willing to constantly change and adapt while still focusing on the vision and mission of the organization.

What are the most important things that the council and/or the city can do to bring more businesses downtown?

Follow cutting-edge trends and be open to new ideas so that we stay competitive. Ensure we have the resources and tools in place to make it easy to set up and do business downtown. nib

Interview by Bill Cresenzo

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