

Key to downtown: Get out of the way

Norfolk's downtown hosts restaurants, bars, night clubs, a mall and other retail shops, campuses and a light rail system that carries folks from one spot to another.

Soon, hundreds more people could call it home in one of a number of new apartment buildings under construction or renovation.

That collision of people and amenities helps create the elusive element of an active downtown, an appealing urban vibe that says "this is a cool place."

Downtown residents and workers would welcome a few additional pieces of flair to catalyze the coolness.

Proposals floated to the City Council by city administrators include pop-up shops in shipping containers, miniature green spaces called "parklets," some as small as a parking space, and lighting over Granby Street to create ambiance and visual interest.

Other cities - New York, San Francisco, Austin - have deployed these ideas to boost their downtowns. More accurately, those cities have allowed these ideas to flourish.

In discussing the future, Assistant City Manager Ron Williams noted that shipping container shops would be a natural fit for a port city like ours. Norfolk already hosts a temporary park partially constructed from shipping containers. It is scheduled to move to the growing Arts District north of Brambleton as construction begins on a new downtown hotel and conference center at the parklet's current location at Granby and Main streets.

Something as simple as a few strands of light bulbs strung across Granby Street could, quickly and cheaply, evoke a more chic, dare we say even romantic, atmosphere.

Stealing a few ideas from other cities merely sets the stage. Norfolk's creative class rustles about in many parts of the city; attracting inquisitive minds closer to downtown with a shipping container coffee house could spur additional innovations with an injection of caffeine.

As cities from Portland, Ore., to Portland, Maine, have discovered in recent decades, tuning down municipal control is a necessary ingredient of a vibrant downtown.

Relinquishing control is simultaneously the easiest thing for a city to do and one that runs completely counter to the instincts of City Hall. But as city after city has shown, it also works.

Good ideas come from everywhere, from entrepreneurs and artists already here and from the ones attracted by the kind of city that expressly gets out of the way so their ideas and hopes can become real.

City Hall has only to help set up mechanisms that would allow such buzz to grow and then get out of the way to watch the flair flourish.