

## Norfolk block will become a two-day hot spot

*Note: This story has been changed to clarify that the city's contract with Better Block includes planning work for Five Points and 35th Street.*

### NORFOLK

San Antonio planners for more than two decades tried to turn the area around the historic Alamo into more than just a tourist destination.

But little progress was made because of the strong opinions over what should be done to the area surrounding the fiercely loved American landmark.

After years spent in a near-stalemate, a Dallas-based firm came to town in 2012 with a different approach: Do something. Do it cheaply. Do it quickly.

On Tuesday, that firm, Team Better Block, is coming to Norfolk, where it will attempt to show residents what a little hard work and ingenuity can do to a long-ignored stretch of Granby Street.

Norfolk is paying the urban-planning company up to \$43,000 to temporarily transform Granby, from Olney Road to Addison Street, and to help plan projects for Five Points and 35th Street later. More than 150 volunteers will help transform that stretch of road into a destination spot for two days. Think "Extreme Makeover," but for a city block.

The project will culminate Friday and Saturday with activities for the public, including displays from about 15 artists.

This area of Granby Street was once a thriving "auto row," but it became disconnected from the rest of downtown by a six-lane highway. By the 1960s, it had slipped into a deep decline.

There are already several businesses there, such as Exotic Home Interiors and Daevid's, a designer florist. But there are also multiple vacancies, including a derelict building that takes up an entire block.

The goal next week is to show officials, residents and business owners the area's potential without getting bogged down in bureaucracy and intensive long-term planning.

Better Block's first project was three years ago, close to the company's home, in the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas.

Since then, the company has traveled internationally, bringing with it a "lighter, quicker, cheaper" strategy for rapid revitalization. It recently returned from Australia, where projects are planned for Sydney and Melbourne.

Last August, on Davy Crockett's 226th birthday, Better Block closed the street in front of the Alamo - a previously controversial concept in the community - and set up an outdoor market and a QR-code walking trail for those with smartphones. Historical re-enactors re-created the famous battle. Hundreds of people, including locals, attended.

The project was so successful that once-staunch opponents warmed to the possibility of closing the street once a week, said Colleen Swain, the city's redevelopment officer.

"They were able to test something that we would have never tried on a permanent basis, but it was OK on a temporary basis," Swain said. "It allowed us to gather feedback."

San Antonio has done three Better Blocks in different areas of the city.

Other cities, such as Mount Rainier, Md., heard about Better Block and decided to do a similar project on their own.

The Mount Rainier community, which will do its third version of the project later this month, raised its own money and then used the project as a way to bring attention to existing businesses in the city's proposed arts and design district.

Closer to home, Norfolk leaders see the project as a way to drum up enthusiasm for the arts district and showcase empty storefronts.

Pop-up shops, or temporary businesses, have become a trademark of the Better Block way. Norfolk will have a smorgasbord of pop-up shops on Granby next week, including a cafe, a store for handmade jewelry and terrariums, and space for a comedy sketch troupe.

Sometimes the pop-up shops vanish after the weekend is over. Sometimes they stick.

A pop-up studio at the original Better Block in Oak Cliff turned into an art shop and studio named "Oil and Cotton," which will celebrate its third anniversary later this year.

Oil and Cotton co-owner Shannon Driscoll was working as an art conservator when she met her business partner at a Better Block planning meeting. They both wanted to open a neighborhood arts studio, so they volunteered to run the temporary studio.

"We couldn't get people to leave," Driscoll said. "It was really magical."

Stories such as this make Norfolk resident John Wharton giddy. A marketing director of American Classic Self Storage by day, Wharton sometimes works late into the night assembling terrariums, air plants and succulents as a side gig, Glass Gardens and Jewelry.

One day, Wharton hopes to partner with other artists and open a studio in Norfolk's arts district.

"I don't even really have an agenda," said Wharton, whose business is one of the pop-up shops. "I'm just excited to be a part of the Better Block. I hope that energy stays and there will be revitalization."

Residents may love it. They may hate it. Either way, it's temporary.

"You go to a gallery and you might not like some of the art," said Andrew Howard, one of the Better Block founders. "This is a testing period. You can try anything. That's part of the scientific method. You get out there and try things. It's low risk because you're not spending a lot of money on it."

But after Saturday, then what? The ephemeral nature of the project means what is seen and experienced this week will quickly pass. Howard said the goal is to stimulate lasting change by revealing an area's potential and motivating people to act. Right now, the focus is on the "social infrastructure," he said.

"Build the love for the place back," he said. "Then put the big money into it after you've gotten people to celebrate."

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