

Better Block spurs change on Norfolk's Granby St.

NORFOLK

The crowds of people who showed up on Granby Street for April's Better Block event are gone, but lasting change could be coming as the city notches a few successes.

In the four months since the two-day block party, aimed at spurring development on north Granby, at least three groups have announced plans for the area and officials have begun work on a series of changes that could keep the momentum going.

The Hurrah Players, a theater company, signed a \$1.1 million contract on the Texaco building shortly after the event. Alchemy NFK, a community-based arts center, signed a lease in June, and The Beauty Parlor by Q + Company is planning to open a cafe, called The Parlor, next door.

The city's plan is to combine the Better Block concept of rapid revitalization with long-term planning, infrastructure improvements, economic development incentives and, when needed, new zoning regulations.

There have been subtle improvements, such as new or repaired street lighting, and zoning has been tweaked to clear the way for businesses like antique stores and art studios. The city is working on a proposal to create new business incentives, such as reduced fees, that are allowed under state legislation that passed a few years ago.

More noticeable changes will occur in the arts district, some in the coming months. Public art pieces, including one skateboarders can use, are being created. The old Zedd's building on Granby Street will be demolished, said Patrick Gill, real estate agent for the Texaco building and other nearby properties. Bike racks and planters will start appearing.

"Better Block was a great start, but we still have a lot of work to do," Gill said.

The city agreed to pay the Texas-based Better Block firm up to \$43,000 to plan and help lead the April event, and to also help plan similar projects for 35th Street and Five Points. An October Better Block event is being planned for the 35th Street Business District.

The actual Better Block events rely heavily on volunteers, and those volunteers never stopped showing at Alchemy NFK, said company president Careyann Weinberg. People with varying backgrounds and interests still come to clean bathrooms and paint walls. On the back of the building, an evolving mural that includes the work of multiple artists started about two weeks and can be seen from St. Paul's Boulevard.

Weinberg said the company was shaping up before Better Block, but the event put their plans on a faster track.

That doesn't mean the last few months have been easy. Alchemy learned just days before a promoted event that its capacity could not exceed 50 people, Weinberg said. A line formed outside, with some people

waiting an hour to get in.

The center is in the process of making modifications to increase its capacity so it can satisfy code requirements and have larger events. The business also is seeking approval to serve alcoholic beverages and host live performances.

Quincy Brown, who owns The Beauty Parlor, also has filed paperwork to expand into the adjacent building, which was used as a pop-up shop during Better Block. The excitement of April's event gave him confidence.

The cafe, which would serve food as well as coffee and alcoholic beverages, could be open in the front of the building as soon as October, Brown said. He also is planning to use the rest of the space for special events, such as fashion shows and vintage clothing sales, and expand his salon. Brown also is in the process of starting a nonprofit that creates wigs for cancer patients who have lost their hair.

Like Weinberg, Brown aspires to create something unique for Norfolk. Neither of them plans extensive build-outs.

"I really want to make this something different from what anybody has seen," Brown said. "It's not going to be your typical cafe, that's for sure."

Meanwhile, the Hurrah Players expects to close on the Texaco building this October. The theatre troupe is trying to raise \$1 million for renovations. The group plans to use the bottom floor for set design and the remaining two floors for educational programming, such as a film studio and classes in sound recording, said Katie Stone, the general manager.

There also will be rehearsal space for cabarets and small performances, Stone said. The Hurrah Players will keep its headquarters on St. Paul's Boulevard.

"We would love to be an anchor for this arts district," Stone said. "That Better Block really gave us a better idea of the creative things we could do there."

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