

The Virginian-Pilot

PilotOnline.com

Editorial: Development breathes new life into Norfolk

The Virginian-Pilot Editorial Board

Mar 31, 2017

IT'S EASY to forget, given the state of the place today, that the fortunes of Norfolk's Granby Street — indeed, all of downtown — have waxed and waned repeatedly over its history.

For decades surrounding the arrival of the 20th century, Granby was the center of retail and commercial life, both for the city and for this region.

As urban economic vigor faded after the '50s — precipitated by families fleeing in the decades following Massive Resistance and by the rise of the air-conditioned suburban shopping mall — Norfolk's downtown suffered a steep and accelerating decline.

The city's fathers tried, repeatedly, to arrest that fall. That was behind the opening of the Scope arena in 1971 and Chrysler Hall a year later.

Such motives led to the first iteration of Waterside, which opened in 1983. And its second iteration. And its third, due to open next month.

Urban revival was responsible for giving birth to Harbor Park in 1993 and Nauticus in 1994. And the next door Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in 2007.

Perhaps most significantly, such efforts gave impetus to the eradication of some blighted residential properties and the rise of the MacArthur Center shopping mall in 1999, just a few years after Tidewater Community College consolidated its operations in a campus on both sides of Granby, and the year before a renovated Norva reopened.

Beginning in 2011, there was The Tide light rail line running through all of it, including past the glittering Slover Library, which opened in 2015.

When the 21st century arrived, it still wasn't easy to find a meal downtown on nights or weekends. Almost nobody lived between St. Paul's Avenue and Boush Street.

Now look at it.

Granby Street is the well-lighted spine to a reborn downtown Norfolk: Destination

restaurants down the block from the hottest nightclubs. More buildings renovated than not. Countless millions of private investment to go with countless millions in city investment.

ADP will bring nearly 2,000 new jobs to the eastern edge of downtown. Apartments are being built at a breakneck speed. Young people are everywhere.

Agree or disagree with the size of the city's investment in a new conference center at The Main, and this page has been volubly skeptical, there's little question that it'll help bring new vitality to the foot of Granby Street when it formally opens this weekend. Waterside will enliven the street that bears the same name.

Whether all that additional life will be worth the cost to taxpayers will only come clear over time. The history of projects built by both Bruce Thompson and the Cordish Companies provide real reason for optimism.

So does what's already happened.

Norfolk's downtown hasn't seen this kind of energy in 50 years. Indeed, so much life has returned to a city core once given up for dead that it has spread beyond downtown's loose confines.

Granby Street north of Brambleton Avenue, a sleepy neighborhood once notable for a bus station, is well on its way to becoming the eastern edge of a vibrant arts district that includes the newly renovated Chrysler Museum and its glass studio, which have literally transformed the fine arts in Hampton Roads, as well as the Harrison Opera House and a relocated D'Art Center.

To the west, construction along the waterfront will eventually connect downtown and the Chelsea neighborhood. To the east, one day, St. Paul's Quadrant presents the greatest redevelopment opportunity in any major American city.

Much has already been accomplished in downtown, thanks to a cast of forward-thinking leaders stretching back decades. It hasn't been easy; it hasn't been straightforward; and it hasn't been without significant costs to the taxpayer and to the patience of residents.

But it has also worked. Norfolk's downtown is better. It's alive.

The opening of The Main represents another opportunity to celebrate the renaissance of one of America's great downtowns, to remember what made it happen, and for Norfolk to cast its gaze toward the horizon for what comes next.