

Hundreds attend 'Better Block' arts district in Norfolk

Note: See photos and more from Saturday (and Friday). [1]

More than a hundred volunteers spent weeks making plans. For four days, they worked into the night sweeping and painting long-vacant store fronts. They carted in trees, flowers, furniture, art and lights.

On Friday afternoon, with alternating rain and sunshine, the effort seemed to have paid off: Hundreds of visitors from young to old turned out to take in Norfolk's first "better block" – a dilapidated stretch of Granby Street just north of Brambleton Avenue that's been dramatically transformed.

"It's pretty incredible," said Ghent resident Julie Swift, who was waiting in line at a food truck that drove in for the occasion. "It feels really different – just so unique and welcoming."

Learn all about the Better Block project. [2]

The transformation was organized by a Dallas-based urban planning firm called Better Block, hired by the city to quickly, cheaply and briefly revive a once-vibrant corridor of auto dealerships that slipped years ago into disrepair. While the improvements and the party are planned to last just two days – the better block will be dismantled this afternoon – city officials hope it will inspire lasting change. They've targeted the area along Granby, from Olney Road to Addison Street, for an arts district.

The better block is open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. today, with live performances, food, shopping and art activities for kids.

"What we're really building is social capital – social infrastructure, and that's what stays around," said Andrew Howard, a Better Block founder who spent the week in Norfolk. "We're showing the community what's possible."

Better Block has remade streets in cities around the world, always with the help of volunteers. Howard said that while he believes every community has the creativity it takes to achieve such transformations, he's "seen it in droves in Norfolk."

"All we did was activate it," he said.

Although the volunteers, the city and Better Block had been preparing for weeks, it wasn't until Friday that they began setting up all they'd built in advance.

They carted in hanging gardens and colorfully painted street furniture constructed from old wooden pallets. They covered a vacant corner parking lot with faux grass, then erected a towering canopy made of bamboo limbs. They painted bike lanes and cross walks and added roadside plants to slow traffic and change what

Better Block calls the “psychology” of a street.

Inside the block’s old Texaco building, they moved in tables and chairs and set up a beer garden, where bands and the sketch comedy group The Pushers performed. Murals and colored lights covered the walls.

In a vacant store front next door, a recent culinary school graduate opened a temporary bakery and coffee shop. Other “pop up” businesses – a craft supply store, a plant shop, art galleries, a vintage clothier – set up in other empty buildings.

“It’s been hectic, but today has been a really magical day,” said Hannah Serrano, the editor of alternative news website AltDaily, who is leading the push for a permanent arts district.

Among other things, she helped book performers for the better block.

“On Monday, I had zero bands,” she said while taping O’Connor Brewing Co. signs to a makeshift bar in the beer garden. “And then I just put the word out and I got five bands who wanted to play.”

For existing businesses on the block, the event brought a welcome influx of foot traffic. Furniture store Exotic Home opened its warehouse doors. Acclaimed Events, which does catering and entertainment for parties, donated tables and chairs.

Mike Barnett, a 27-year-old student and DJ who lives in Chesapeake, said he would love to see Friday’s atmosphere revived.

“It’s got its mind in the right place,” he said. “It could lead to something.”

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[2] <http://hamptonroads.com/norfolkbetterblock>