

ARTS ZONE Norfolk arts district plan aims to link downtown to Ghent area

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City staff and area stakeholders are working to bridge the gap between downtown Norfolk and Ghent by creating an arts and design district in the area surrounding Granby Street north of Brambleton Avenue.



AltDaily editor Jesse Scaccia and publisher Hannah Serrano were behind the initial idea and were first to draft a plan for the area in July 2012. They called it the NEAD Project, which stood for Norfolk Emerging Arts District, and in the proposal suggested naming the district GUNROW or Granby Under the Rope Walk.

Their vision included food trucks, street performers, sculpture gardens, crosswalks painted like piano keys, fire escapes transformed into vertical gardens and streets filled with people "holding fresh prints, frames and flowers; tossing money into the busker's open guitar cases; trying on brand new jewelry and scarves crafted by locals; and jamming with the street musicians on newly-bought banjos and bongos that were made by hand," the proposal read.

"We did that to get the ball rolling," Serrano said, of the initial proposal.

Norfolk, however, does not currently allow food trucks downtown, and in the proposed art district, which city officials have named the Downtown Arts and Design District, current zoning allows art galleries, but not art studios. Mixed-use buildings with retail space on the ground floor and living space above are also prohibited.

Besides being an underdeveloped area of Norfolk, the area north of Brambleton Avenue was chosen because of the artistic venues already there and nearby - the Chrysler Museum and Glass Studio, Harrison Opera House, Scope Plaza and Chrysler Hall.

Certain businesses like Fuzion Ink Tattoo Studio, Exotic Home Interiors, an interior design and furniture store, the offices of Inside Business and The Virginian-Pilot also seemed to fit the district mold.

The area is zoned D4, a downtown cultural and convention center district. Planning Director Frank Duke said a task force, made up of members of the community, city staff, representatives from Old Dominion University, the Public Art Commission and the director of the Chrysler Museum, want to amend the zoning ordinance to allow for office, retail and residential development.

The changes would allow antique stores, breweries, consignment shops, flea markets, educational facilities, art studios, dance studios, used book stores, and automobile and truck repair.

"That one took me by surprise," Duke said, in his presentation to the Planning Commission on March 13.

Firestone Complete Auto Care has been a successful business on Granby Street and Duke said task force members wanted it to be able to stay.

The following businesses in the proposed area will also remain - Bob's Gun Shop, Bress Pawn Shop and The Garage, a gay bar. After-hours membership clubs and commercial drive-throughs, however, would not be allowed.

Duke hopes to finalize a list of permitted uses next month.

But while the task force debated drive-throughs and tattoo parlors, city officials worked on ways to improve part of the area.

Norfolk has hired Team Better Block, a Texas-based firm, to revitalize a two-block section of Granby Street from Olney Road to Addison Street within the boundaries of the proposed Arts and Design District. According to its website, Team Better Block works with cities, developers and stakeholders to create quick, inexpensive, high-impact changes that improve and revitalize under-used properties and highlight the potential to create "complete streets."

The city contract includes improvements to Five Points and 35th Street next.

The arts district concept is relatively new for Virginians. In 2009, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation permitting localities to create "arts and cultural districts" and use incentives or provide regulatory flexibility.

Williamsburg formed a district in February of 2011 including seven blocks between Richmond Road and Lafayette Boulevard, about a mile from Merchants Square.

Any business that qualifies as a creative economy business is allowed, and Williamsburg Economic Development Director Michele DeWitt said the city is broad in its definition of a creative economy business.

The eligibility list includes filmmakers, fashion designers, restaurants, bakeries, performing and visual artists, musicians, architecture and advertising firms.

"If you're not on the list, we leave it open and you can try to convince us that you are," DeWitt said.

Offered tax incentives include sale tax rebates, Business Professional and Occupational License Tax rebates, and free zoning and building permits for a period of five years. Since the district was created, DeWitt said eight new businesses have opened.

Richmond formed its Arts and Cultural District in May 2011.

Like Williamsburg, district businesses receive rebates on building permit fees and business permit taxes. Those with five or fewer employees whose owners makes less than \$70,000 a year also qualify for city micro-loans.

Nick Feucht, assistant to the director of economic development and planning, said incentives are limited to 10 years by law.

With Norfolk looking to enact similar tax breaks, the time constraint is disconcerting for some city officials.

Norfolk Planning Commission Vice Chair Martin Thomas asked at the March 13 meeting whether the arts district could be created in phases, so businesses could best utilize the incentives.

Deputy City Attorney Adam Melita said he would look into it.

The commission could vote on the proposed zoning changes at its next monthly meeting.

Meanwhile, Assistant City Manager Anne Odell said the planning department is working to revise the city parking code and find a way to safely connect the district and downtown Norfolk.

"One of the things that needs to be worked out is how to get people safely across Brambleton," she said. "The district is very close to the light rail, but how do we also make it pedestrian-friendly and bike-friendly?"nib

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