

Norfolk incentives aim to attract shops for downtown

By Sarah Kleiner Varble
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NORFOLK

By the end of the year, parts of downtown Norfolk may look like they were pulled straight from the pages of Pinterest.

A group of downtown business and property owners is expected to launch an incentive program this morning called **Vibrant Spaces** (<http://vibrantspaces.com/>), which aims to bring unique and stylish street-level shops to Granby Street and Monticello Avenue.

If all goes to plan, six stores will open in downtown and the arts district before the holiday shopping season, and several existing businesses will have cash to make upgrades that add to the area's character, said Drew Ungvasky, owner of Grow, a digital advertising and development agency.

Ungvasky is one of the leaders of a group of business and property owners who volunteered their time and money to help build the momentum that's already rolling. He has worked with the Downtown Norfolk Council and serves on its board.

"It is a vision and a catalyst program for accelerating neighborhood-defining businesses - those street-level businesses that uniquely contribute to a city's sense of place and its vibrancy and its life," Ungvasky said. "We've sort of been saying it's the places that you can't wait to tell your friends about."

Each new business selected for the program will receive a \$20,000 grant, plus half-off rental payments for the first two years, Ungvasky said. Half of the grant will be paid when the business opens and the rest after one year of operation.

The money for that part of the program has been donated by people with connections to downtown, said Mary Miller, president and CEO of the Downtown Norfolk Council. She and Ungvasky declined to identify them.

An additional \$60,000 has been set aside for existing businesses to spruce up their storefronts, perhaps with new signs, doors and windows, sidewalk and rooftop dining, book carts or flower stands, Ungvasky said.

Each business that applies is eligible for a matching grant up to \$10,000.

That money has been set aside by the Downtown Norfolk Council, which is funded by member dues and a tax that downtown businesses pay, Miller said.

The changes brought about by the program will happen quickly. Applications open today; open houses at the six properties will be June 13; applications are due July 8; businesses will be notified Aug. 7.

If selected, business owners have three weeks to sign a lease with the property owners in the program.

Buddy Gadams, who owns 401 Granby St., said he joined Vibrant Places early in the process because downtown development boosts the rest of his businesses.

"High tide lifts all boats," Gadams said. "It may seem like I'm accepting less rent, but truthfully, if it makes Granby Street and downtown a more vibrant place, then we all benefit."

A program like Vibrant Spaces has never been tried in Norfolk, and its organizers couldn't find examples like it anywhere else.

"Through our conversations with different people in the world we work in, we're not familiar with anybody who has done it like this," Miller said. "Nobody has really put together a package that has gotten the landlord to agree to concessions along with the downtown organization through donations and its own funding."

In recent years, downtown and the arts district have been awash in new restaurants and stores, including Field Guide, Gershwin's, The Grilled Cheese Bistro, The Barrel Room, Sweet Teas, the Groove, Saint Germain, The Parlor on Granby, and Zeke's Beans and Bowls.

The six new stores must have a unique concept, Ungvarsky said. Ideas floated in the committee and community meetings included grocery store, bakery, brewery, bike shop, boutique, pet supplies and ice cream shop.

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