



Selden Market Seeks Vibrant Spaces

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(A rendering of what the new Selden Market might look like)

By Jeff Maisey

When the Downtown Norfolk Council (DNC) initiated its Vibrant Spaces program in 2015, a need emerged that could not immediately be addressed – vibrant small spaces.

“Of the 86 applications we received for the six spaces we were working to try to lease, the majority of the applicants we’re looking for the smallest of those spaces, which was around 700-square-feet,” said Mary B. Miller, president and CEO of Downtown Norfolk Council. “So we knew there was a demand for smaller spaces.”

Vibrant Spaces provides a grant which allows an upstart business to operate at a very reduced rent and includes funds for build-out. The incubator program is designed to “activate” long vacant retail space on the pedestrian-friendly sidewalk blocks of downtown Norfolk and Ghent.

The original beneficiaries: Prince Ink at 433 Granby, Lamia’s Crepes at 401

Granby Street and Muddy Paws Downtown at 400 Granby Street. Eight additional grants were awarded to existing businesses including Brick Anchor Brew-House, Work I Release, Leone's and Hurrah Players. Additional vacancies have been filled through connections with Vibrant Spaces including Pinot's Palette (Ghent); Town Center Cold Pressed (Ghent); Jollity & Co. (Ghent; Pacers (35th Street); Bearded Bird Brewing (NEON); Corks & Caps (Downtown); Bonchon (Downtown) and The Rustic Tart (Downtown).

After Selden Arcade, which was home to nearly 100 local visual artists under the d'Art Center moniker, was rocked by a gas-line explosion during the early construction phase of the neighboring Main hotel and conference center, the Arcade was closed to the public. The d'Art artists were replanted in the NEON district near the Chrysler Museum of Art.

As then city manager Marcus Jones wrestled with what the best use should be for the historic city-owned property (Selden), the Downtown Norfolk Council's retail incubator program appeared to be a positive short-term solution.

"We started out thinking of locations and how many spaces we could accommodate in some of the locations we were considering, and then at the end of last summer the former city manager approached us about the idea of doing our incubator in the Selden Arcade as a temporary use until the city decides what its long-term use will be," Miller said.

In that time, Norfolk elected a new mayor in Kenny Alexander and Jones departed for a city manager position in Charlotte. Mayor Alexander has a long-term vision for Selden Arcade that calls for making it an international market and include kiosks showcasing the 29 nations comprising NATO as the city's emerging plan to brand itself as an international city and the only home to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization outside of Belgium.

In the meantime, Downtown Norfolk Council will host an Open House on Saturday, June 17 at Selden Arcade to show the available space in prospective entrepreneurs with a vision, hope and dream.

"We're looking for independent businesses," Miller said. "People can apply to be a mentor business, an incubator business, or to lease one of the kiosk that will be in the center of the Arcade. We're not using the whole Arcade. We're using just under 9,000 square feet of the building. We want there to be a mix of business types and something that will be attractive to both the people who live and work downtown but also of interest to our visitors to Norfolk as well."

According to Miller, the DNC will also provide help to applicants in developing a business plan.

The Selden Market is scheduled to open this fall. Once open, the DNC will produce events in the walk-through, common space area to draw more people to the up-and-coming, vibrant spaces.

The hope is that businesses from the Selden Market will be able to expand after three years to available retail space within the city.