35TH STREET BETTER BLOCK

NOVEMBER 8-9, 2013

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City of Norfolk
WWW.NORFOLK.GOV

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WWW.PARKPLACEBUSINESS.ORG

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WWW.TEAMBETTERBLOCK.COM

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WWW.REALTOR.ORG

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THE VENUE ON 35TH
GLOWYN WHITE ROUGHTON

INTRODUCTION

The Better Block project is a bottom-up, community led planning tool that helps bring rapid revitalization to areas suffering from disinvestment, blight, or a low perception of safety. The effort started in April of 2010 in a neighborhood of Dallas, Texas called Oak Cliff, where a group of community stakeholders, civic activists, and artists rapidly transformed the buildings, roadways, and sidewalks of a vacant block into an inviting, neighborhood destination. Old buildings were filled with pop-up book stores, coffee shops, art galleries, streets were changed to include bike lanes, al fresco seating, and sidewalks became stages for fruit stands, musicians, and artists. The effort rapidly led to zoning changes, infrastructure improvements, and new businesses in the area, and within two years became an international movement occurring as far away as Tehran, Iran, and Sydney, Australia.

Team Better Block, LLC was founded in 2010 to provide communities with best practices on how to conduct their own Better Block successfully. Its principals, Andrew Howard, AICP, and Jason Roberts, have over 20 years experience in Urban Planning and Community Organizing. In April 2013, the City of Norfolk contracted with Team Better Block to organize a Better Block on Granby Street in the city's proposed downtown Arts District, the first of three planned projects in the city. The efforts use temporary collaborative placemaking to coalesce the community and change citizens' and City officials' sense of "what's possible." During the weekend-long event, residents created temporary spaces, piloted small businesses, and forged important connections. The weekend also led to the City's adoption of permanent zoning changes.

The 35th Street Better Block project was led by Park Place Business Association with financial support from the Hampton Roads Realtors Association and the City of Norfolk. Team Better Block provided consulting assistance on logistics of the project, identifying zoning and public space hurdles and creating documentation and recommendations for the area to rapidly revitalize. The following report outlines the planning and execution of the project.

"The Better Block approach is gaining traction as a best practice for increasing community consensus on zoning changes, economic incentives, and infrastructure projects"

Placemaking for REALTOR® Associations

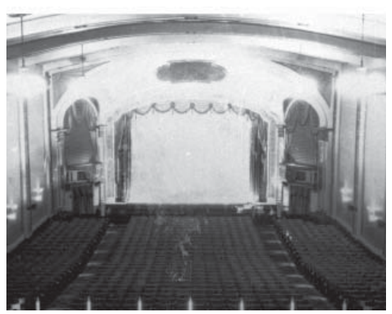
BETWEEN 1900-1930'S, several neighborhoods (Park Place, Virginia Place, Colonial Place, Kensington, etc.), were established as Norfolk expanded north. The 500-600 blocks of 35th Street were the center of it all. The area had great local shopping with small merchandise shops, entertainment from two large theatres (500+ seating), and several small restaurants.

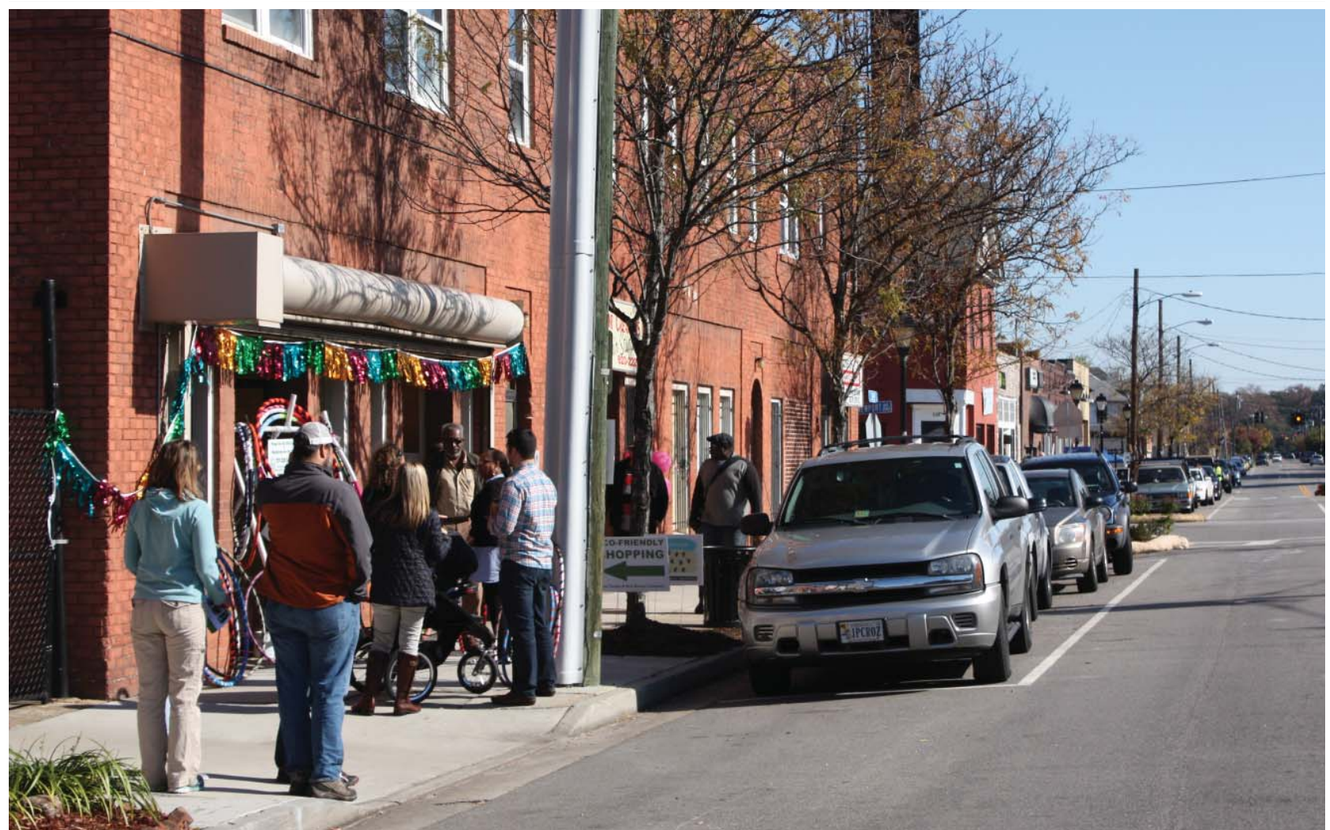
At the intersection of 35th and Granby Streets was a Trolley Stop for visitors to Lafayette Park and residents coming from the city center (Downtown Norfolk).

Large, mostly-single family homes and a few apartment buildings were in the 100-400 block of 35th Street. By the 1960's, the racial makeup of most of the neighborhoods changed. 35th Street remained a center of small businesses and a few single family homes, but most of the residencies became apartments.

Today, a number of small businesses and a few new ones continue to serve the immediate neighborhoods. Some new homes have been built, and many of the older dwellings are being restored and/or renovated.

One of the original theaters remains unused and in need of renovations, while the other theater was torn down.





HISTORY

Prior to this effort, pedestrian focused infrastructure development had occurred within the area, and stakeholders organized a new Business Association to begin attracting neighborhood and regional focused business to the historic buildings that had multiple vacancies. Tensions existed due to a contrasting vision from a former Merchant's Association who felt strongly that the area should import a national chain (Cheesecake Factory) to anchor the block in order to help create a needed regional draw. This model of development is referred to as "Economic Harvesting", and while it would have resulted in more jobs, greater street activity, and enhanced economics, the potential to damage the identity of the area and transfer ownership from its current unique, locally focused model to a national, duplicated business model would have unstitched the strong, cohesive neighborhood fiber that gives the area its strong foundation.

The newly formed Park Place Business Association began organizing multiple merchants on the block and spearheaded a progressive vision for revitalization on the block. This group laid the groundwork for the Better Block project and ultimately is responsible for the effort's success.

The demonstrations put forth by Team Better Block and the Park Place Business Association focused on an "Economic Gardening" model, where regional residents and entrepreneurs use the affordable, historic building stock to incubate new, locally focused businesses. In parallel to business development, Team Better Block worked with the City of Norfolk to introduce roadway improvements to slow traffic, and create a more desirable bicycle and pedestrian landscape to encourage street life and improve area perception of safety.

Economic gardening takes an entrepreneurial approach to regional prosperity. Often referred to as a "grow from within" strategy, it helps existing companies within a community grow larger.

THE PROJECT

In the fall of 2013, Team Better Block partnered with the City of Norfolk, the Park Place Business Association, the Hampton Roads Realtors Association, and a multitude of volunteers, local businesses, and organizations to create the 35th Street Better Block project. The project was developed to encourage local entrepreneurs to set up businesses within long vacant historic buildings on the block, improve the streetscape to create a vibrant streetlife, and to promote the history and culture of the area. Ultimately, the Better Block project offers a rapid incremental development method which utilizes the strengths of the people living in and around the area, while creating a stronger sense of place which leads to heightened safety, improved health, increased economics, sociability, and a raised sense of pride. Collectively, these tenants are the foundation of a healthy, sustainable neighborhood block where young people, old people, and families can live, work, play, and grow comfortably together.

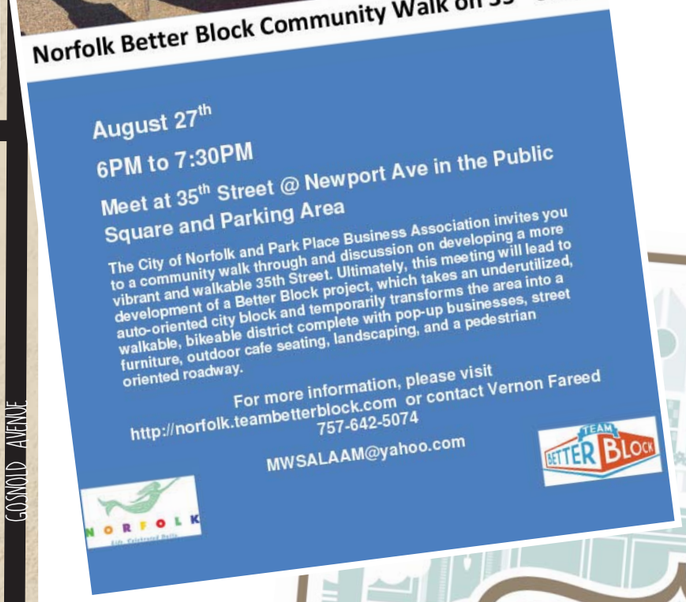
Better Block planning took place in late August with a large group of civic activists ready to begin work to change their block. Imam Vernon Fareed, who chaired the Park Place Business Association, led the community outreach and engagement portion of the project, assigning team leaders to organize street

KICKOFF MEETING
August 27, 2013

CONCEPTUAL PLANNING
September - October 2013

COMMUNITY BUILD-OUT
November 6-7, 2013

BETTER BLOCK EVENT
November 8-9, 2013



MAP CREATED FOR THE BETTER BLOCK EVENT

installations, sidewalk improvements, pop-up business development, and activity programming.

Project development took place over three months, culminating in a two day pre-build on November 6th and 7th, and two day Better Block installation taking place on November 8th and 9th of 2013.

Street improvements included development of pedestrian islands and crosswalks entering and exiting the block, sidewalk bulb-outs to slow turning traffic and create safer sight lines for people, and removal of three parking spaces which would be converted to outdoor cafe seating.

20+ pop-up businesses were introduced into vacant store fronts, including a flower shop, mobile coffee vendor, jewelry maker, gift shops, bicycle stores, and restaurants. Many of the merchants combined their offerings into a single store to activate larger spaces and share marketing for the project.

Stages were built for street musicians, and parking lots were converted to activity centers which included gaming tables, outdoor farmers markets, and merchant stands.

THE VOLUNTEERS

BRENDAN BARSNESS
SONYA BARSNESS
JAHMAEL CAMPBELL
LATRINA CAMPBELL
MARIE CARNEY
BILLY COOK
LESLIE CREWS
JESSY DAVIS
VICTORIA FARR
CHIP FINCH
RUBY FOLEY
ASHLEY GROVE
CHARLES HAUSER
DAUN HESTER
TOM HIGGINS
KEN HOLLEY
NADIYAH HOOD
NIKITA HOUCHINS
KEITH HUNTER
NYISHA JACKSON
PETER JOHNSON
STEPHEN JOHNSON
SIRANO KARIM
MATTHEW KELLY
BLANCA KING
FRANK KRISTON
KRISTEN MAUER
RUTH MCCALL-MILLER
BILAL MUHAMMAD
NAJAH NEELY
JO OKOYE
STACY ORITZ
ZACK PEASE
DAVID PERIN
EVA PETERSEN
JAMIE PICKENS
MARK PIRHALA
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JULLANA SHUKER
LYNETTE SMITH
JOHN STEPHENS
JEN STRINGER
ELLA SWAIN
BRISTON TWTWILA
CHARLES WALBROOK
MARKUS WEGENER
MS WILFONG
BRUCE WILLIAMS
PATTI WRAY

CO-OWNERSHIP

The barn-building aspect of the Better Block project brings community together to help re-build their environments by taking reclaimed wood, metals, and other local resources, and retrofitting them into usable structures for community. Park benches, parklets, pedestrian islands, and crosswalks, are all developed locally by unskilled and skilled community members who collectively share ownership of their space. This ownership transference from a "Them" to "Us" is vital in making a place feel loved and care for.

Simply introducing capital into the area can change the ownership, so it's important that the community looks to a "borrow and build" dynamic for getting things done. If money is needed, it should not be provided by a single individual or group, but collectively raised by local stakeholders who will better understand the need for improvements, and also maintain ownership of the enhanced environment.

This community barn-building process cements much needed ties that help maintain cohesive social and business relationships, all working toward the betterment of the local neighborhood.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

One of the key tenants to placemaking is the need for promoting a community's identity. Places are made unique and embraced through the broader community by their history, culture, art, and cuisine. The Better Block area at 35th Street and Newport Avenue, at its core, is a strongly identifiable African American district with supportive retail, religious institutions, and services that embrace and broadcast the story of the people who live and love the area.

Promoting this asset, while creating strong invitations to the broader Norfolk community, was a major goal of the Better Block project. The Park Place Business Association was instrumental in reaching out to businesses like Croaker's Spot, whose offerings of gourmet soul food, perfectly highlighted the fusion of identity and quality ingredients, while offering a potential "Third Place" for neighborhood residents.

Existing businesses like Granny's Barbeque Restaurant, the Halal Butcher, multiple beauticians, barbers shops, and clothiers contribute to the rich identity of the community. Helping tell their stories and connecting store owners with the community elevates the sense of place, and heightens security as purveyors begin to look out for each other's well being. Murals and historical markers that sporadically dot the block also relay the value that locals place on their past.

Enhancing the "pride in place" tackles the initial low perception of safety issues facing a block. Changing community dwellers ideas from, "I want to live anywhere but here," to "I can't imagine living anywhere else," begins by taking what most people discard and think of as limits, and turning those into assets that are proudly worn and admired by locals. During the Better Block project, t-shirts with images of the Newport Avenue sign, and metalwork souvenirs were created by merchants to promote the block and remind visitors of the historical markers that made the space unique.

Our recommendation would be to continue promoting the history of the place with public art, events, and to begin using block-themed elements in the infrastructure such as customized tree grates, light poles, and benches.

BROTHERS OF PEACE BUTCHER & MARKET

THE VENUE ON 35TH

HAPAX'S EVENT T-SHIRTS

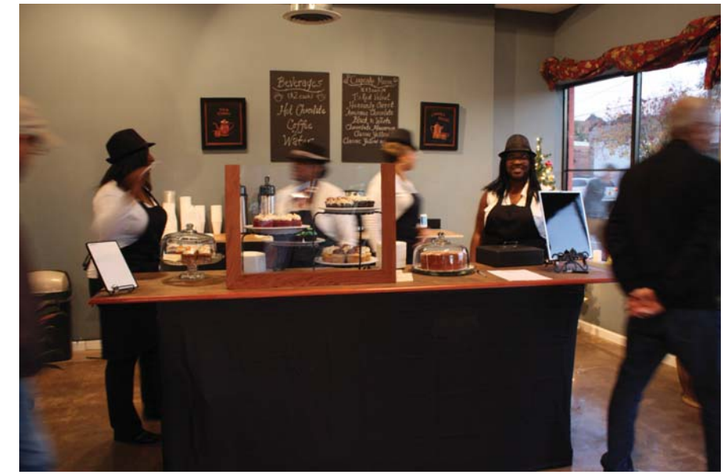
TOUCH OF GRACE

GRANNY'S COUNTRY COOKING

Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well being.

"Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings."

Jane Jacobs



LOCAL BUSINESS INCUBATION

The Better Block project demonstrated a series of restaurant concepts including mobile coffee shops, waffle restaurants, clothing and plant retailers that all were well received and highly profitable. Allowing these businesses to continue and grow with the block will help keep much needed economics and vibrancy occurring in the area. 35 entrepreneurs asked to take part in the Better Block, with over 20 finally committing to the project. Three restaurant concepts, including a waffle shop, a vegetarian shop, and a gourmet soul food restaurant, all reported brisk sales and all sold out of inventory before the project ended. A local plant shop was created and after the effort has asked for a short term lease to continue testing the business concept in the area. The Hampton Roads Realtors Association developed a pop-up shop presence on the block where homes in the area were featured through open-houses during the project. Surveys were taken of attendees to gauge interest in home

POP-UPS THE WHEELIST • ISHMAEL CAMPBELL • CROCKER'S SPOT • HOOPING ON THE BAY • KOMBUCHICK BREWERY • MIKASA LA'CHARLES • HOOPWRIGHT HULA HOOPS • ECO TRENDS • MARY CUP OF JOE • SWEET INDULGENCES • GLASS GARDENS • WAFFLETINA • HANDMADE TWIST • CILANTRO BISTRO • THREE SHIPS COFFEE • GRANBY ST. HOT DOGS • INTELLIGENT LUSHES • ECO MANIAC • BASKETS BY SANDRA

ownership in close proximity to the Better Block, with nearly 50% saying they would be interested in living in the neighborhood.

With new businesses returning to the area, it will be important to "Keep the Lights On!" as long as possible. Great places around the world have different feels during the day and night. It's important to focus on keeping the lights on as long as possible to have energy in and out of the area from dusk til dawn. Attracting retailers like breakfast focused restaurants and coffee shops that invite people in the morning, maintaining shops and services during standard 9 to 5 daytime hours, and arts, culture, and food options in the evening will be mandatory to make the block sustainable.

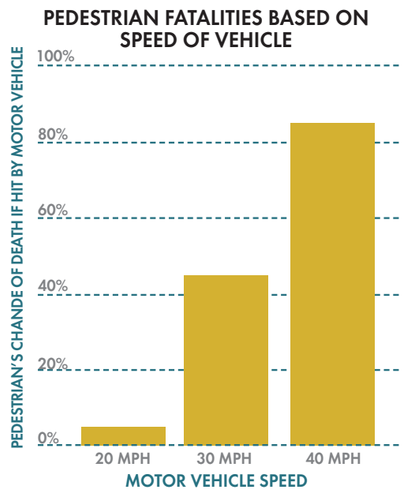
RIGHT SIZING THE STREET

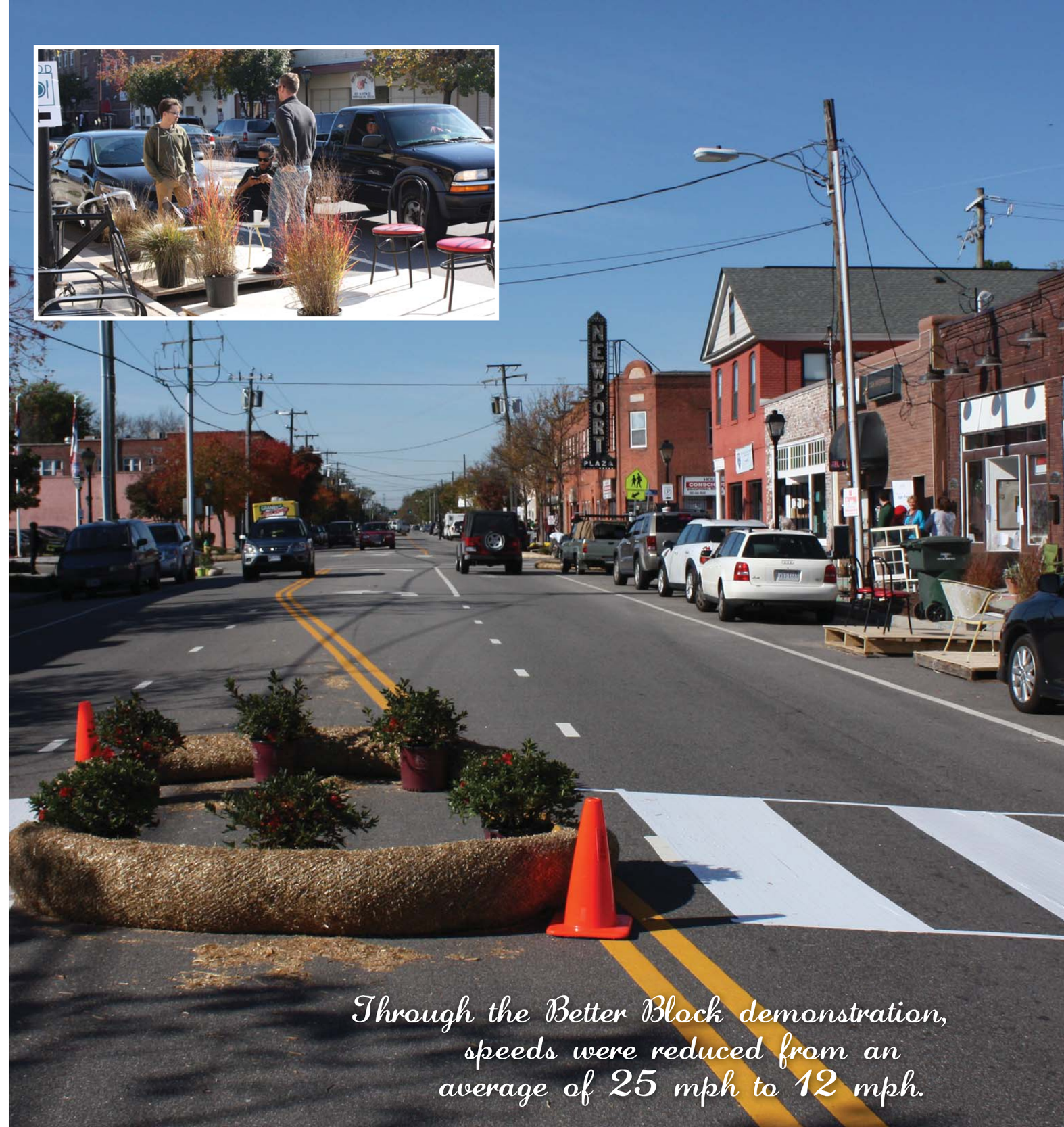
Prior to the Better Block project, solid investments in improved sidewalks, lighting, and streetscaping had taken place. The street itself offered sufficient on-street parking, but the traffic speeds in and through the area reduced the perception of safety for pedestrians enjoying the block.

Team Better Block worked with the City of Norfolk to develop pedestrian islands at the entry and exit points to the block to create a "gateway" effect which broadcast to drivers entering into the area that they should slow and pay greater attention to the space. Beyond helping pedestrians, the historic building stock and small businesses that occupy their spaces are built to the sidewalk, which requires slower speeds for drivers to see the broad assortment of merchants.

The adjacent graph describes how reducing pedestrian fatalities and creating an ideal environment for walkable districts requires lowering automobile speeds to below 20 mph. Through the Better Block demonstration, speeds were reduced from an average of 25 mph to 12 mph.

We recommend a strategy of nominally decreasing parking in the area at a rate of -3% per year, while incrementally increasing density by +3%. This subtle transformation, with time, will enhance the walkability of the neighborhood, create more invitations for people to live within the area, stabilize the affordability of the community, and create greater parity for multi-modal infrastructure.





Through the Better Block demonstration, speeds were reduced from an average of 25 mph to 12 mph.

CONNECTING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Creating parity for transit options so that the focus for the built environment is not taken over by a single mode should be encouraged when developing a Better Block project. One of the largest transitions undertaken is reshaping the right-of-way to not only accommodate pedestrians and bicycles, but to also make the infrastructure connecting the block to the neighborhood "irresistible."

Fortunately, in the case of the 35th Street Better Block project, sidewalks were built wide and lined with historic lighting. Landscaped bulb-outs were created at intersections to slow auto traffic and create a more predictable and inviting pedestrian environment. Limited space was available to create strong bicycle connections, but on-street "sharrows" were painted to note to drivers that the street was open to cyclists as well as cars.

The majority of attendees did arrive by automobile, but nearly one-quarter arrived by foot. Approximately 10% arrived by bicycle. More invitations for multi-mode transit from the neighborhood and other community destinations should be developed in ongoing efforts.

HOW DID YOU ARRIVE?

66.7% BY CAR

23.8% BY FOOT

9.5% BY BICYCLE

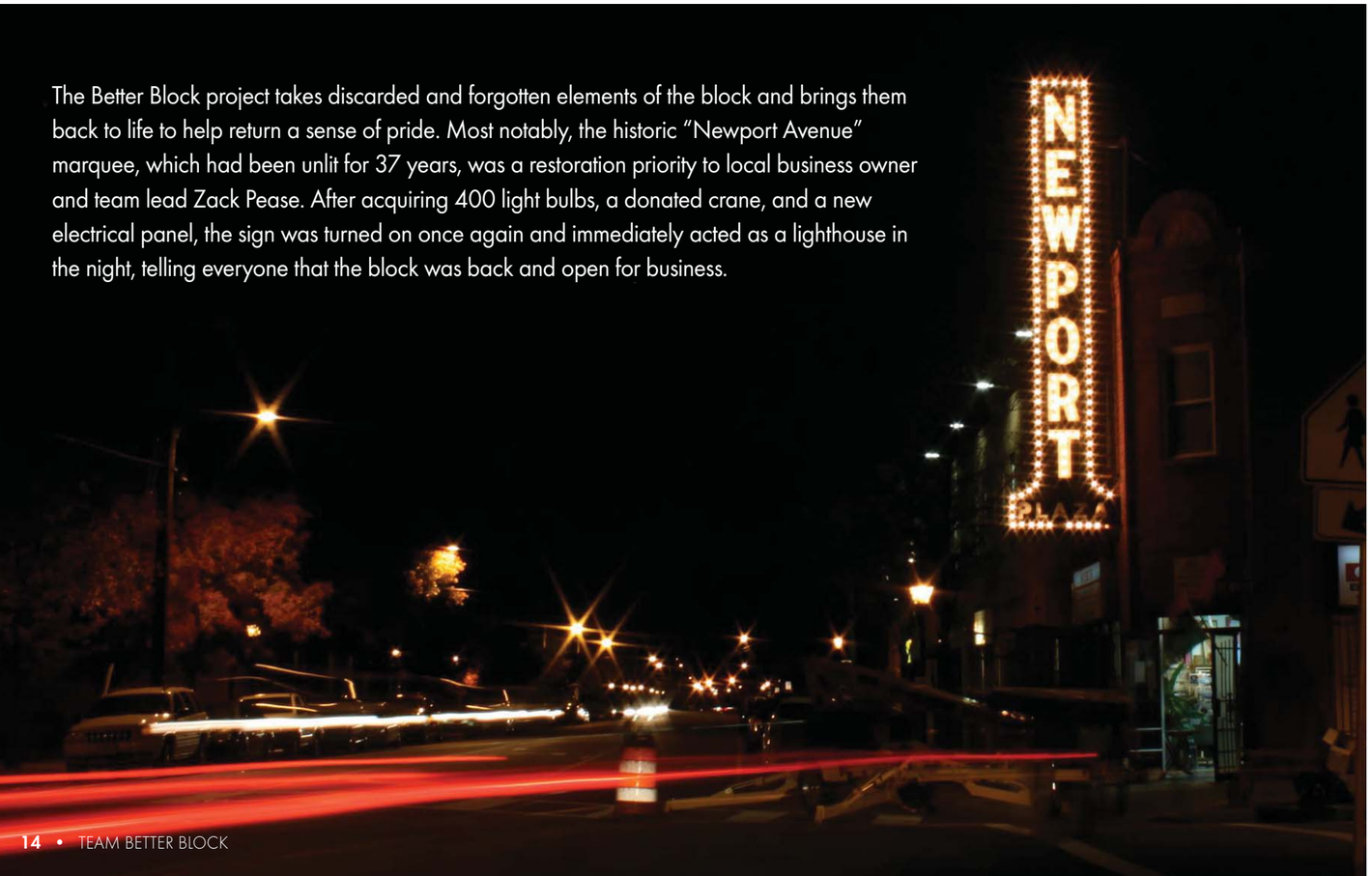
PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

If a place feels unsafe, everything else fails. It's important to be mindful of the most risk averse in our society when gauging the health of a block. The elderly and young mothers are often bellwethers that, when seen in large numbers, help relay to visitors and residents alike that a place is safe.

The Park Place neighborhood had suffered from high disinvestment and increased crime in the recent past. These two elements reduced the real and perceived safety of the neighborhood and created a narrative that the place was equivalent to "the bad side of town". This perception can rapidly spiral downward, negatively affect home sales, new business development, and reduce the number of "eyes on the street," and ultimately, become a self-fulfilling prophecy if not addressed.

The first step to changing perception is re-taking the name and telling others that "Park Place is a great place!" Though simplistic, this act alone begins changing the local and regional psychology of the neighborhood, instilling pride and returning ownership to the community. Surveys taken during the block project showed that the perception of safety was high, and when further asked "Would you buy a home near the Better Block?" 43% of surveys said, "Yes".

Team Better Block recommends continuing to develop an irresistible outdoor presence on the block to enhance street life, vibrancy, and economics. Being mindful of what makes people feel welcome and comfortable should be prioritized by area stakeholders.



The Better Block project takes discarded and forgotten elements of the block and brings them back to life to help return a sense of pride. Most notably, the historic "Newport Avenue" marquee, which had been unlit for 37 years, was a restoration priority to local business owner and team lead Zack Pease. After acquiring 400 light bulbs, a donated crane, and a new electrical panel, the sign was turned on once again and immediately acted as a lighthouse in the night, telling everyone that the block was back and open for business.

SOCIABILITY

Spontaneous, meaningful social interactions are most prevalent in places that allow people of all ages to co-exist and potentially bump into each other on a regular basis. In modern times, an emphasis has been placed on individuality and privatization, but this state is highly unnatural to our well-being and limits the possibility for new relationships that ultimately lead to a greater sense of community, new business opportunities, romance, growth, and more. The Better Block project looks at all spectrums of the human condition, building environments that embrace young children, seniors, entrepreneurs, the risk averse, and creates a stage with invitations for each.

In the 35th Street Better Block project, chess sets were set outside where young people played with grandparents in welcoming settings that allowed meaningful interactions, and promoted lingering in the space. Former parking spaces were converted to outdoor cafe seating using parklets built by neighborhood advocates. Vacant buildings provided springboards for new businesses like bicycle shops, flower shops, jewelry makers, and restaurants. More than half of attendees surveyed ranged in age from 18 to 35, a key demographic showing the trend of young families interested in walkable communities like the Park Place neighborhood. Comments from attendees and volunteers at the Better Block included, "We need to do this more often!" and "I met so many great people... it felt like a neighborhood!"

Programmed activities that invite all ranges of people to the block will be important to maintain within the block. Street festivals, music concerts, food events, outdoor films, and more should be in continual rotation.

"It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished." William Whyte

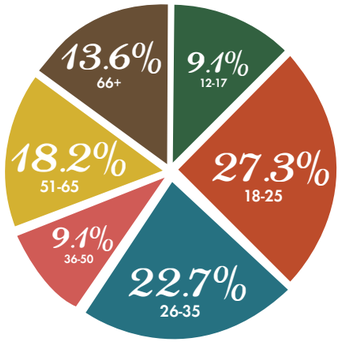
ROMANCE

You know great places around the world by the number of people taking wedding photos in and around the environment. It's not difficult to create these places, but we often overlook the need for blocks to convey a mood, especially one that invites romance. All too often, places are built with fear in mind. You'll notice this with the advent of bars on windows, conveying danger, overly wide streets, conveying high-speeds, and a car-over-people focus, lack of lighting, making areas feel dangerous at night, and boarded up doors.

The Better Block project looks at simple aesthetic repairs and awareness of the senses that move the built environments spectrum from fear to love which changes the overall psychology of the street. Sights, sounds, and smells are all vital to making places feel welcoming.

Landscaped crosswalks, pedestrian bulb-outs, re-lit historic signs, grilled food on the sidewalk, freshly painted building facades, and live music pouring from open windows all created a mood that found people holding hands, taking photos, and courting openly and naturally. Newport and 35th Street became a place to break routine, slow down, and enjoy life. Though this is a natural state that humans thrive in, it's one that exists in so few places.

AGE OF THE AVERAGE BETTER BLOCK ATTENDEE:



INCREMENTAL DENSIFICATION

One of the most obvious problems facing the existing built-environment is encouraging smarter and increased density in Better Block areas so that the local businesses have enough immediate patronage to sustain themselves. Early on, invitations must be made to the broader region in order to bring enough traffic to the area to keep businesses alive and profitable. While this process is occurring, on the back-end, promoting development of granny flats and mixed-housing into the single family neighborhoods will allow for affordability to be maintained, bring more "eyes on the street" which raises the block's perception of safety, and provide more opportunities for enhanced sociability. Granny flats provide a simple neighborhood level solution that allows older people the opportunity to rent out back houses so that they can live longer in their homes. They also provide much needed, small and affordable housing for students fresh out of school, recent empty-nesters, and travellers wishing to get a more local feel when visiting cities. This alone provides a one-room convention and visitors bureau for a city.

Block stakeholders should partner with local organizations, universities, and young entrepreneurs to incubate these spaces temporarily with the ultimate goal of permanent change. Creating a model for ongoing maintenance and administration should also be built into the block. Tools such as Business Improvement Districts (BID's) allow for small quasi-governmental entities to levy local taxes with a block boundary to keep funds within the constraints of a block. Though these are normally created and overseen by local governments, there are models that exist where blocks have self-organized and levied their own 1% tax which is managed by a "Business Association" fund for public administration. Finding the right size and fit for the block should be an early undertaking for the merchants who will help administer the growth of the area.

"There simply aren't enough rooftops to support local businesses here"

Rodney Jordan, Property owner on 35th Street

MITIGATING THE DOWNSIDE TO GENTRIFICATION

The potential to destabilize a places identity can occur when over-investment takes place as the block becomes more desirable for business. It will be important for property owners to understand and maintain the legacy of the area through this growth period, as the desire to quickly monetize with duplicated business concepts, regardless of how proven their models may be, is tempting for short-sighted revenues. Like traditional investment, slow and incremental growth lowers risk and provides a steady platform for continued sustainability. Also, local ownership creates greater stewardship over the public space amenities and broadcasts to the region that this place is managed and loved by the people who live and work in it.

Though gentrification can lower crime, increase tax revenues for maintenance and upkeep of the area, and improve property values, the risk of displacement and segregation by socio-economics must be addressed. A sustainable neighborhood should have a mix of income levels, a broad age range, and a diverse racial/cultural make-up.

So few small walkable districts exist in most US cities, though their composition is highly desirable. Since supply is limited, demand can elevate to the point that prices become untenable for all but a small subset of the population. It's important to understand this dynamic, and for cities to rapidly create as many small walkable districts within neighborhoods as possible in order to level the risk of over-demand.

The Park Place Business Association should continue its role as steward of the block to help maintain the character of the place while being mindful of symbiotic businesses that will continue the legacy and growth of the area. 35th Street is one of a handful of small historic building stock nestled into a neighborhood. Its potential to be oversaturated with capital that stifles small business incubation that makes the place special should be managed and carefully considered for any future development that occurs. While the block is seeing increased use and vibrancy, it will be important for the city of Norfolk to look to creating more neighborhood-focused blocks to level demand and maintain equitability.

THE WAY FORWARD

Continued activity programming and investment will need to take place in order to maintain the momentum developed from the Better Block project. The Better Block is no different than planting a tree, it helps begin the process of incremental improvement, but must be watered and nurtured in order to grow and thrive.

Creating small incremental additions that "fill the gaps" between buildings is a simple first step to begin bringing more activity and life into the area. Monthly farmers markets, encouragement of beer gardens, outdoor movies, and passive play areas that invite families to linger should be an early focus.

Working with city officials to creatively activate long vacant buildings with day and night use is imperative. Existing zoning ordinances can often be too rigid and uniform in order to allow for interesting mixed-uses that spring up from innovative business ideas. Like the internet, places must be able to adapt rapidly to changing patterns in society. Staple block businesses that once could thrive on a retail presence alone, like book stores and music shops, must create mixed uses in order to maintain patronage. The "third place" model is the way forward, where the business becomes a part of the social interaction of the neighborhood, redefines our past ideas on traditional business models.

Programmed activities such as holiday markets, food festivals, art and music events, clean-up days, and group bike rides will keep energy and activity on the street. Through the surveys taken at the Better Block project, "More Activities" was cited as the most desired by attendees.

The Better Block is no different than planting a tree, it helps begin the process of incremental improvement, but must be watered and nurtured in order to grow and thrive.

OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS, WHICH WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE OF ON THE BLOCK?

ACTIVITIES	40.7%
BUSINESSES	18.6%
SEATING	15.7%
STREET-NARROWING	9.3%
LANDSCAPING	9.3%
SHADE	6.4%