

Outstanding Rehabilitation, Renovation or Reuse Project

Narrative

City Center 41
Fort Myers CRA

U.S. 41 (Tamiami Trail), known locally as Cleveland Avenue, is the major north-south corridor running through Fort Myers. Outside of the downtown center, Cleveland Avenue was the pre-eminent business corridor for Fort Myers, and in the 1960s, became the location of first suburban, one million sq. ft. mall in southwest Florida. It was also the home of Lee Memorial Hospital and several large strip centers. As a result of these activity generators, the corridor attracted numerous retail and restaurant uses, service establishments, as well as new car dealers and medical offices. Over the years, the roadway expanded from a two-lane street to a seven-lane major thoroughfare. The roadway widening as well as the aging buildings and continued flight to the even more distant suburbs took its toll on the corridor, and in 1998 Cleveland Avenue was designated a redevelopment area. The initial redevelopment plan was replaced with a comprehensive Corridor Plan in December 2007. The Plan was formally adopted in 2010 following additional public input. City Center 41, a 40,000 sq. ft. formerly-vacant shopping center, became the pilot project showcasing the Cleveland Avenue Redevelopment Plan goal to create a landscape buffer between the 45 MPH traffic lanes and the pedestrian and bike path. It also transformed the community's negative outlook of Cleveland Avenue by turning a vision into reality. Along the way, lessons learned from working with the property owner were used to streamline the CRA Landscape/Façade Matching Grant Program. The project also generated over 50 new, permanent jobs for the community.

Innovation

- City Center 41 became the pilot project for redevelopment along the Cleveland Avenue Redevelopment District corridor. One of the recommendations in the 2010 Cleveland Avenue Plan is to improve safety along U.S. 41 by moving pedestrians away from the busy 7-lane state road. This would be accomplished by installing an 8 ft. wide landscaping zone adjacent to the road, which in effect pushes the sidewalk away from the traffic. An 8-10 ft. sidewalk would then be constructed (sidewalks are currently 5 ft.) in a Throughway Zone. The additional width in the sidewalk would allow for cyclists and pedestrians to comfortably pass each other.
 - In the case of City Center 41, the property owner not only agreed to provide the City with an easement should they ever get permission from FDOT to set the sidewalks back, but the property owner agreed to be a pilot project to show the community what the Cleveland ROW could look like.
 - The landscape plan was created to allow for the possibility that one day the sidewalks might be set back from the roadway in the Throughway Zone. The landscape architect then created a design plan with small shrubs located in the "proposed sidewalk" area and made sure that the palm trees were located in areas where they would not need to be relocated down the road.

Impact on the Community

- This pilot project instills hope in the Cleveland Avenue business and surrounding residential communities by transforming the vision into reality.
- City Center 41 improves the aesthetics of the corridor to help spur adjacent properties to upgrade.
- This completed project will lead to increases in the tax base and make more TIF funds available for other improvements along the corridor.

- City Center 41 improvement has activated the area, which should lead to a reduction in crime.
- The Center is expected to produce an estimated 50 new, permanent jobs once a final tenant is procured to occupy the remaining third of the property, joining current businesses Great World Supermarket and Dollar General.

Funding

- Funding was provided through a Public/Private Partnership by CRA development assistance and landscape/façade grants totaling \$105,000. The private investment in the project totaled over \$2 million.

Problem Solving

- City Center 41's original blighted condition brought up issues that helped to clarify and streamline the CRA's Landscape/Façade Grant program. The applicant originally approached the CRA to request funding to improve the exterior of the building in response to some code violations. As the CRA and the applicant began grant discussions, the City's code department informed the CRA that if one were to stand inside the building, they could look up and see the blue sky. When asked about this issue, the applicant said his intention was to improve the exterior of the building to get some potential tenants interested, after which he would improve the interior at that point.
 - In the middle of the applicant preparing his plans, the CRA revised its Landscape/Façade Grant program to require that any project receiving grant funds must be tenant ready by the time construction was complete.
 - The applicant was very cooperative and agreed to redesign portions of his project in order to meet the CRA's redevelopment goals.
 - Although the cost of bringing the building's interior to a tenant-ready condition cost the applicant an additional \$1 million dollars, he was pleased by the results: 2 out of 3 tenant spaces were leased prior to completion of construction.
- The City's code required 9% green space on this project, and as part of his redevelopment upgrades to the property, the CRA asked the applicant to locate almost all of that green space in a new landscape area along Cleveland Avenue to help mask the parking lot. Putting almost all the green space along the main road created two problems, however:
 - The first issue was that the new landscape area's depth and placement meant that the applicant's originally-planned parking islands—where irrigation and electrical services had already been installed—had to be relocated at additional expense. This problem was solved when the CRA granted additional funds to help the applicant cover these charges which had resulted specifically from the CRA's request to place most of the green space along Cleveland Avenue.
 - The second issue was that the Cleveland overlay called for a certain number of palms to be located on center within the applicant's property along Cleveland Avenue, but since City Center 41 project had been designated as a pilot project to showcase the 2010 Cleveland Avenue Redevelopment District Plan's features—features which include leaving room for a future relocation of the sidewalk away from the street—installing the required number of palms on center would have meant major difficulties and expense when the day came to

move the walkway. Although he could have chosen to plant the remaining trees inside his property along the side streets bordering the parcel along the north and south, doing this would have meant removing more parking spaces, in addition to the parking spaces already lost as a result of honoring the CRA's request for new green space along Cleveland Avenue. To solve the problem, the applicant entered into an agreement with the City of Fort Myers to donate his trees to the City, which he would install and irrigate in the City's right-of-way along the side streets (as opposed to placing them within his own property), and thereby fulfill his tree requirement in this manner.

Applicability to Other Communities

- Other CRAs can model their grant programs after Fort Myers CRA's revised program, which requires the project to end up with a tenant-ready building by the time construction is complete.
- Communities may be inspired by the idea of including provisions for a future easement into their grant agreement to achieve the district's ultimate, desired result down the road.
- Partnering on a particular project to showcase recommendations contained in the district's redevelopment plan may be a useful tip to other communities facing pessimism concerning the plan.

Other Exemplary Aspects of the Design

- Project takes up one entire block along US 41. The design and necessary steps to procure an easement have been put in place so that in the event that the City receives permission from FDOT to move sidewalks away from road, construction could start quickly thereafter—with the goal to unveil to the community the true “Cleveland vision” contained in the Plan.