

Capital Projects/Beautification

Narrative

Fort Myers Downtown Streetscape

Fort Myers CRA

How do you keep a busy city thriving for four years while large sections are closed for months during a 54-block Downtown Utility Replacement and Streetscape Improvements Project? The Fort Myers CRA succeeded through active public communication and creative business support, resulting in citizen volunteers cleaning reusable historic bricks, the creation of a community destination, and the gain of 18 new businesses in spite of economic downturn. Using a symbiotic partnership between City government, which funded utility replacement, and the CRA, which funded streetscape, this project is believed to be one of the largest of its kind in the country.

Innovation

- In 2004, when the City of Fort Myers was ready to begin underground utility replacement of century-old downtown water, sewer, and storm drain systems, Fort Myers CRA seized the opportunity to partner with them and the utility companies to implement the downtown redevelopment plan's streetscape recommendations following the utility replacement portion of the project. This way, streets were only dug up once to perform both the necessary utility updates and beautification efforts, causing much less interruption to the community than if each project was performed separately. This joint effort saved the City millions of dollars because the CRA paid for all the surface work through TIF dollars and grants, while the City's utility work paid for street demolition and removal that the CRA would have normally had to finance in a standalone streetscape project. An added bonus is that once completed, area businesses and residents concurrently reaped the benefits of 21st Century utility technology in a lovely historical setting.

- The CRA worked with the project partners to solve the problem of keeping a metropolitan area functioning smoothly for the duration of the four-year project in the midst of large sections of the right-of-way being torn up for months at a time.
 - Business support included: Common Area Maintenance (CAM) subsidies for downtown businesses when the street in front of their business was closed to vehicular traffic due to construction; a Co-Op Advertising Program for group business ads in a publication or in the media; a Sidewalk Beautification Program partially subsidizing potted plants in front of businesses on completed streets; weekly "Coffee with the FMRA" progress and event planning meetings; and free bottled water and ice provided during water shutoffs to local businesses.
 - Communication was key to bringing and maintaining pedestrian and vehicular traffic into the area for the 4 years it took to complete the project. To inform downtown workers and businesses as well as inviting visitors downtown, an informational website (www.fmstreetscape.com) posted road closure and alternative routes maps, the project schedule, water shutoffs, FAQs, and a photo gallery; and special events enticed the public into the area and subsequently to local retail and restaurants. While most events were held in portions of the project area not under construction at that time—such as Bike Nights, Car Shows, Downtown Countdown New Year's Eve Celebration, Friday Night Live Free Concert Series, and Kraft Kids' Construction Day—event coordinators for the Halloween event

Spooktacular actually incorporated the fenced, moveable aluminum temporary sidewalks and crosswalks winding through the construction area as a “Haunted Maze”. Once downtown, easy access to the area was promoted through large business signs, pedestrian maps on construction zone fences, and wide aluminum temporary sidewalks and mid-block crosswalks to ensure people could reach their destinations in a timely manner.

Impact on the Community

- The brick-lined streets complementing the blocks of historical buildings surrounding them, along with rows of palm trees, widened sidewalks for outdoor cafés, and coordinated street furniture and fixtures, combine to create a picturesque setting that has spurred a dramatic rise in pedestrian and vehicular traffic. As a result, 18 new restaurant and retail businesses opened during the final 18 months of the project. This increase is particularly notable when considering this occurred as the Fort Myers-Cape Coral region faced one of the worst economic downturns in the nation. The business mix also changed. Some storefronts previously occupied by offices and services were replaced with retail and restaurants.
- Approximately three-fourths of older downtown buildings that had vacant upper floors for years prior to Streetscape have now been renovated. As a result, storefront rents are increasing and offices are being pushed to the upper floors, precisely what is called for in the downtown redevelopment plan.
- In addition to becoming a regional dining destination with 25 restaurants in the Streetscape area, downtown has become a haven for art galleries through monthly Art Walk evenings, where art patrons flock for the inspirational ambience as much as the artwork. The setting also has been the backdrop for a Hyundai car commercial and a Wrangler Jeans ad.
- With the combination of utility and streetscape updates, downtown Fort Myers is now poised for future development along the riverfront.

Funding

- As previously stated in the **Innovation** section of this narrative, the partnership between the City’s utility update and the CRA’s streetscape created substantial monetary savings for both parties. Of the \$61.7 million project, Fort Myers CRA funded \$12.5 million for the streetscape portion through tax increment funds and grants. Streetscape funding breaks down as follows: a 12-year, \$7.5 million loan from the Bank of America at 4% interest; a \$4 million loan from the City of Fort Myers being repaid with tax increment funds; a \$500,000 grant from the Florida Department of Community Affairs; and a \$500,000 grant from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Problem Solving

- To mitigate the impact of disruptions from unintentional water main breaks during deep excavation work, the CRA always kept 30 to 50 five-gallon bottles of water on hand to support restaurants impacted by the water shutoffs and boil-water notices, providing delivery service as well. Large quantities of ice were also delivered on an as-needed basis through a partnership with an ice company. As for planned water shutoffs when the lines were shut down to connect a new section of pipe, all were done in the middle of the night between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., after the downtown nightclubs closed. Free water and ice were provided to the restaurants during these shutoffs as well.

- Excavation of asphalt streets revealed half a million original bricks that posed a “green” brick paving solution for sections of the main arteries in the streetscape area on First, Hendry, and Main streets, if these bricks could be cleaned and reused. The community rallied together to put sweat-equity into their downtown heritage as local volunteers, people needing community service hours, and inmates toiled brick-by-brick to clean each one for reuse. Restoring the original brick to these sections of road amplified the historic value of downtown Fort Myers and kept construction costs down. The streets are once again paved with the very brick that winter residents Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone walked. Likewise, the 7-Up Triangle, a concrete marker from the original 1906 sidewalks embedded with enlarged 7-Up bottle caps, was carefully removed, cleaned, and returned to the new brick-lined sidewalks at the foot of the majestic, neo-classical Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center.
- On at least 8 different occasions, the construction company was asked to fill in their construction site and temporarily pave it in order to host parades, boat shows, art festivals and hymn sings that were long-cherished traditions for the community.
- Retrofitting a nationally-designated historic district to Americans with Disability Act (ADA) requirements took special care. Buildings could not be damaged or altered to fit ADA needs, so the streetscape had to be adjusted instead. The main roadway, First Street, required a gently sloping 1-foot ascent on its southern side. Additionally, sidewalks with edge trim sloping steeply into the streets incorporate planters and guardrails to keep pedestrians free from injury.
- Wider sidewalks capable of hosting sidewalk café tables, palm tree bulbouts, and curb bumpouts were incorporated as traffic calming methods.
- Street furniture and fixtures were coordinated both with each other as well as with the historic setting. Street lights are actually the same design as the City’s original fixtures. Low-profile traffic signals were introduced as a way to reemphasize the historic feel of the area.

Applicability to Other Communities

- Other communities may find the following useful in planning their own Streetscape projects:
 - Partner with utility projects or similar work, together scheduling implementation to reduce the impact of construction to businesses and the public as well as lowering costs to all agencies;
 - Plan and activate a communication strategy to maintain goodwill and a steady in-flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic during construction;
 - Anticipate disruptions such as unexpected water main breaks, and have a plan of action prepared and understood by local property owners, residents; and businesses;
 - Realize that creative solutions may need to be found to bring the streets and sidewalks up to ADA standards without damaging the surrounding historic buildings; and
 - Host and promote special events and similar activities as part of the process to ensure that the public continues to visit the area and its businesses during construction, and as part of a reintroduction to the beautified streetscape once the work has been completed.

Other Exemplary Aspects of the Design, Plan or Program

- The sheer size of the project, a 54-block section in the middle of the city, is notable in that it is believed to be one of the largest continuous streetscape and utilities projects in the country.