

Brookland Park Boulevard Commercial Revitalization Plan 2005

Synopsis



Prepared for the City of Richmond & the Brookland Park Boulevard Community
By the Fall 2005 Urban Commercial Revitalization Class
Master of Urban & Regional Planning Program
L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs
Virginia Commonwealth University
December 2005

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INTRODUCTION

Brookland Park Boulevard and its beautiful surrounding neighborhoods, Ginter Park, Barton Heights, & Highland Park were first developed in the 1890s. During its heyday, Brookland Park Boulevard boasted a theater, a hardware store, a post office, banks, bakeries, laundry facilities, shoe repair shops, and a drug store. Famous Richmonders such as Arthur Ashe and Eleanor Sheppard, the City's first female mayor, grew up in the nearby neighborhoods.

Postwar suburban development took its toll on the community, however. By 1980, much of the middle class population had moved out and many of Brookland Park Boulevard's businesses had closed.

Since then, the community has done anything but sit idly. Over the last two decades organizations such as the Richmond Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) and the Highland Park Community Development Corporation have worked to restore the area's beautiful homes. Neighborhood civic associations such as the Northside Community Civic Association and the Battery Park Civic Association, have worked hard to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. Over the years, merchants and property owners have organized efforts to improve the commercial district as well. In 1996, the City designated Brookland Park Boulevard a RRHA Conservation and Redevelopment area, and the City's CARE program has provided rehabilitation financing and assistance to business owners. These efforts have helped to reverse the decline of the corridor. In the meantime, the pace of neighborhood revitalization has picked up, thanks to the City's Neighborhoods in Bloom program.



Figure 1. Richmond's streetcars helped bring Brookland Park Boulevard to prominence¹.

The Brookland Park Boulevard Revitalization Plan suggests ways to focus and prioritize the efforts of government, businesses and civic associations to achieve revitalization. This document is a summary of that Revitalization Plan².

To prepare this plan demographic, physical and social aspects of the area were studied. Analyses of the housing and commercial markets were conducted and residents, merchants, and property owners were interviewed.

The remainder of this document details the district's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for new development that our research uncovered. Following that is our suggested plan to achieve the complete revitalization of Brookland Park Boulevard.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES & OPPORTUNITIES

Strengths

Brookland Park Boulevard has many strengths on which to build. Its pedestrian scale and historic buildings give the corridor a unique and comfortable feel. The existing post office and library, the cluster

¹Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richmond,_Virginia. Accessed December 10, 2005

²Available from the City of Richmond Department of Economic Development or VCU (electronically)

of beauty and barber services along with other strong businesses provide a solid base for creating a successful neighborhood commercial center. Surrounding historic neighborhoods are experiencing revitalization, and their property values are rising. Along the Boulevard property values are rising faster than citywide averages.

Incomes in the surrounding neighborhoods are also rising, and many seniors in the area seem to have substantial and growing equity in their homes. These seniors and other residents are very active in neighborhood civic associations, working to make their neighborhoods safer, cleaner and stronger. Brookland Park Boulevard also has a relatively strong base upon which to build a thriving commercial corridor. Finally, the Boulevard is close to downtown and has two bus lines passing through its center, making the area a convenient destination.



Figure 2. The Boulevard’s scale and historic buildings are a solid foundation for redevelopment.

Weaknesses

While Brookland Park Boulevard has many strengths, it also has several disadvantages that might hinder revitalization. Crime rates in the area are higher than those in the city in all but two categories. Residents, merchants and property owners agree that crime, and the belief that Brookland Park Boulevard is an unsafe place, are the biggest obstacles to the area’s recovery.

A lack of variety in businesses and services on the Boulevard is another weakness in the area, and the reluctance of merchants to work together to attract customers also hinders revitalization efforts. Potential customers are prevented from shopping on Brookland Park Boulevard because many businesses do not adjust their hours to suit working customers’ schedules.

Last, although the overall condition of buildings along the Boulevard is good, many look neglected and need minor repairs. This neglect, combined with a lack of parking, cracked sidewalks and poorly maintained street trees, makes the area look run down and less attractive to customers.

Opportunities for Revitalization

Many opportunities exist for improvement of the Brookland Park Boulevard corridor. Our market analyses show strong potential for new housing, especially senior housing, on the Boulevard and North Avenue. Housing development could attract new businesses, such as medical offices, restaurants, consignment shops and a specialty bookstore. Our market analyses also found potential for a small grocery store, specialty food stores, small apparel and shoe stores, music and appliance stores, and a small electronic equipment store. Also, the existing beauty and barber services cluster can be highlighted to attract even more customers from across the region. Much of the foundation for financing improvements already exists through programs such as Richmond’s Commercial Area Revitalization Effort (CARE), Federal and State historic rehabilitation tax credits, Enterprise Zone funding, the Neighborhoods in Bloom program and RRHA programs.

REVITALIZATION PLAN

Brookland Park Boulevard can achieve a full reawakening by nurturing two complementary types of development. The goals that follow offer suggestions for achieving this development:

- A Neighborhood/Convenience Shopping Center. This might include a grocery store, sandwich shops or a restaurant, a bakery, women's clothing, a pet store, a video rental or music store, housewares or small household appliance store, and household and personal services. The existing library and post office would complement these businesses. New housing development along the Boulevard and North Avenue, especially for senior apartments and condominiums, would add to the vitality of the retail market. It would also strengthen demand for other uses, such as medical services and a consignment shop.
- A Regional Beauty/Barbershop Center. The Boulevard has a unique cluster of beauty and barber shops. These shops should be marketed as a regional attraction. This draw could be enhanced through the addition of a beauty/barber school and perhaps a beautician's supply shop.

GOAL 1 STRENGTHEN EXISTING BUSINESSES AND RECRUIT NEW BUSINESSES

Retaining existing business is important in the corridor because many are successful stores with established customers. New business recruitment is also necessary because the corridor has a high vacancy rate. Promoting a greater variety of businesses to fill vacant buildings is essential. This will help create a thriving neighborhood retail corridor that offers shopping opportunities to a wide range of consumers.

If the Boulevard is to become a pleasant and convenient shopping destination, retail establishments should be concentrated in the heart of the district, between Barton and Haynes Avenues. The area immediately outside this core (between Haynes and Fendall on the west and between Barton and Lamb on the east) should be devoted to non-retail uses, such as medical offices, personal services, and housing. Beyond this buffer area, housing and parking would be ideal uses (see Map 1).

Opportunity sites should be developed to establish anchors, which draw more customers to the area. The sites, which are areas we have identified as prime locations for redevelopment, can be seen on Map 1. Businesses that were identified in the market analysis as having unmet demand, such as a bakery, sandwich shop or deli, music or video rental store, and others, should be actively recruited in order to provide a healthy and diverse mix of businesses in the area. The RRHA will play a key role in this process by assembling property to provide sites for new stores.

Workshops should be held for merchants, demonstrating ways to provide better customer service and improve storefront displays. The reorganization of a merchants' association is a key element to achieving this goal. Participation should be promoted under a new name. The newly developed merchants association will facilitate and coordinate joint advertising among merchants. The association can also promote use of the CARE program and educational assistance from SCORE, the Small Business Administration's Senior Corps of Retired Executives.

GOAL 2 CREATE RESIDENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES ALONG BROOKLAND PARK BOULEVARD

Based on resident feedback and a housing market analysis, there is a strong case to be made for senior housing along the Boulevard and North Avenue (Sites 1 and 2, Map 1). Residential and business development will complement each other: the locations identified on Map 1 will make shopping and services convenient for seniors, and the seniors will strengthen the businesses.

Property owners will be encouraged to use the second levels of their buildings for apartment space with the use of small business loans. Updated zoning should allow for these housing uses.

GOAL 3 CREATE A WELL-DEFINED IMAGE FOR BROOKLAND PARK BOULEVARD

Customers remember shopping areas for their unique feel, so it is important to set Brookland Park Boulevard apart from other retail districts. Markers can be used to create a sense of arrival and departure at gateways to the commercial district. Signage such as banners at key intersections will also help to create a sense of place. Particular care should be taken to beautify and maintain the central focus area at the intersection of North Avenue and the Boulevard (outlined on Map 1). Because this is the busiest intersection in the district, customers' impressions of the entire district will be influenced by how this central area looks.

Existing street trees should be replaced with ones appropriate for an urban setting. A small park or community garden with a mural in a vacant lot will provide a focal point for the community and enhance the beauty of the corridor.

The beauty shops on the boulevard attract customers from around the region, and should be showcased. The Boulevard should be advertised as a destination for beauty and image services. A newsletter for these merchants should be created. The presence of a beauty school in the corridor will encourage merchants to improve their skills and draw future beauty professionals.

The creation of a logo and slogan for the boulevard can assist with efforts to market the area. The merchants association can use the media for advertising and the promotion of positive news stories about the area. An annual festival and other seasonal events such as holiday lighting can be sponsored by the civic and merchants associations. Art produced by students of Chandler Middle school can be displayed in store windows throughout the year.



Figure 3. Markers show shoppers that they have come to a unique place

GOAL 4 CREATE A SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE PEDESTRIAN ENVIRONMENT

Access and mobility are very important concerns for customers. While sidewalks exist throughout the Boulevard, they are narrow and don't provide enough room for shoppers to comfortably walk. The sidewalks near tree wells are only three feet wide; otherwise they are seven feet wide. Widening the sidewalks to 10 feet will allow more room for pedestrians, as well as new trees and street furniture, such as benches and trash cans, at bus stops. Raised crosswalks at key intersections will provide opportunities for pedestrians to safely cross the street and will slow traffic along the corridor. The use of curb extensions at corners will designate parking lanes, shorten crossing distances for pedestrians and calm traffic. Increasing the access and mobility along the Boulevard is important to the overall vitality of the retail activity (See Map 2).

Currently, merchants and employees are using prime on-street parking spaces in front of the stores. This problem could be addressed by building a parking lot, primarily to be used by merchants, but also available to customers. Parking limits for one and two hour spaces should be enforced to provide more on-street parking along the corridor. Existing parking lots in churches and other businesses can be used during their non-operating hours for parking as well.

Map 1. The Brookland Park Boulevard Redevelopment Plan



GOAL 5 REDUCE REAL AND PERCEIVED CRIME IN THE AREA

The first step in revitalizing Brookland Park Boulevard is reducing crime. This involves an increased police presence and more eyes on the street. A police facility on the corridor will naturally reduce the opportunities for crime. Having patrol officers visit and sign-in at local businesses, patrol the Boulevard by bicycle and concentrate on crime hot spots will help reduce crime and give merchants, shoppers and the police opportunities to build relationships. Including merchants in the neighborhood watch program will be another deterrent. Continued public involvement in civic association meetings and the Community Assisted Public Safety (CAPS) program is essential.

It is also important to look at the physical environment as a crime-fighting tool. Creating unobstructed, consistent pedestrian lighting and placing street furniture close to these lights can prevent criminals from committing crimes in the first place (See Map 2). Merchants can keep their currently available store lights on at night as a further deterrent.

Keeping the area well-maintained warns potential criminals that there are people nearby who take pride in their community and will resist illegal activity. This united front against the unwanted criminal element begins with fixing signs on businesses and removing unattractive billboards. The placement of trash cans with a consistent design will improve the appearance of the area while reducing the amount of trash on the streets. Private spaces between buildings should be secured by using locking gates to reduce the potential for crime.

Enforcing existing laws will create the desired outcome. Loitering should not be tolerated because this creates an unsafe feeling and creates the opportunity for unwanted behavior. 'No Trespassing' signs should be posted behind buildings as a temporary measure to discourage loitering. Enforcing building condition and use ordinances should be a priority. This will allow for enforcement of laws such as the Uniform Controlled Substances Act, which makes drug use on properties a nuisance, at which point the property can be taken away from the owner.

CONCLUSION

There is tremendous potential for Brookland Park Boulevard to be completely revitalized and to serve the community as a high quality neighborhood retail center again. With the committed engagement of City agencies and private sector partners, this vision can become a reality. This plan should guide the City, its agencies, merchants, residents and other stakeholders toward realizing the vision of a revitalized and flourishing Brookland Park Boulevard. It is our hope that this plan can help spark renewed interest in the area from residents, merchants, property owners, the City and developers. While there are many challenges to overcome, Brookland Park Boulevard holds enormous promise. Its time has come.

Map 2. Brookland Park Boulevard Physical Improvements Plan

