Historic Petersburg neighborhood gets facelift to spur homeownership

The house at 135 Liberty Street in Petersburg is vacant and severely blighted. It has multiple safety and code violations. It is in a condition that makes its purchase and renovation by an individual unfeasible without subsidy. And, it is one of a number of revitalization projects underway as part of a larger neighborhood initiative in Petersburg’s historic Poplar Lawn neighborhood.

“This initiative is intended to demonstrate that distressed historic neighborhoods in the region can be saved if resources are focused and targeted on a small area, such as several blocks of a neighborhood,” said Cameron Foundation President J. Todd Graham. The Cameron Foundation is funding the revitalization initiative at Poplar Lawn, and Virginia LISC is providing community development technical assistance and expertise for the initiative. Other partners invested in the initiative include: the City of Petersburg, project: HOMES, Rebuilding Together and Preservation Virginia. The collaboration is called “Partners for Neighborhood Renewal—Poplar Lawn.”

The effort spurred from a 2014-2015 survey done by Preservation Virginia, the city and the Cameron Foundation that assessed the condition of properties in several Petersburg historic districts. In the area of Poplar Lawn, the survey results concluded that of the 163 houses identified in 2005, 21 of those structures no longer stood in 2014. Preservation Virginia staff suggested that many of the homes along Poplar Lawn’s Liberty and Harrison streets could be saved with investment.

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Spring brings April showers, May flowers and most importantly, the return of the SEED and 6 BIZ small business grant programs. Both of these programs provide grants and business coaching to local entrepreneurs interested in making improvements to their businesses.

The 6 BIZ program—a small business grant program done in partnership with Virginia LISC and Capital One—began its second round in Feb. of 2018, with all applications due April 1, 2018.

Existing or new businesses located or looking to locate along Brookland Park Blvd. or Meadowbridge Rd. in close proximity to the 6 Points Intersection are welcome to apply for grants of $5,000 to $10,000 for facade improvements. The 6 BIZ program encourages the grant winners to use 6 BIZ grant funds to leverage the City of Richmond’s CARE program for facade improvements and new signage.

“The city’s CARE program is a great way to make use of city funds to upgrade facades,” explained Candice Streett, executive director of Virginia LISC. “But often, small businesses don’t have the money upfront to put toward facade improvement. The 6 BIZ money can be used to make those changes and then get reimbursed by CARE funding.”

The business owners can use the reimbursement from the CARE program to purchase equipment, marketing materials, or other needs for their business.

Last year’s two 6 BIZ grantees—LSG Enterprises and Stay Focused Hair Salon—used their 6 BIZ money to leverage the CARE program for façade improvements. Changes have been made to the exterior of their buildings, and they are now in discussion with the business coach on how to best use the reimbursement funding from the CARE program.

The SEED program is beginning its 7th round starting April 1, 2018, when applications will become available on the lisc website, www.virginialisc.org.

SEED is a partnership between LISC, Bon Secours and Capital One to attract and promote new and existing businesses along the 25th Street corridor through grants of up to $25,000. As in previous years, applicants have three months to fill out the application and prepare a business plan. The applications are due June 30, 2018. Past SEED recipients are invited to apply for up to half as much funding as they received previously.

Like last year’s round, the 7th round of SEED will have a more targeted focus on the locations of the businesses.

“We are concentrating on blocks O St. on up to Nine Mile along the 25th Street corridor for the SEED program this year,” said LISC Executive Director Candice Streett.

There are a number of reasons for this targeted approach, not the least of which is the grocery store development that is under construction at the 25th Street and Nine Mile Road intersection.

By focusing on bringing business to the few blocks leading up to the grocery store, the SEED program will promote a vibrant business environment to surround the grocery store development.

Another reason for the direct target of these blocks along 25th Street is to work with businesses already established on the corridor, as well as bringing more business to the vacant storefronts on these blocks.

There will be three information sessions for all interested SEED applicants.

Tuesday, April 10 from 6 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. at the East End Public Library (1200 N. 25th Street)

Tuesday, April 17, from 6 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. at the East End Public Library (1200 N. 25th Street)

Saturday, April 21, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. at the Sarah Garland Jones Center (2600 Nine Mile Road)

For more information on the SEED program and application process, please contact SEED Program Coordinator Killeen King at 804.505.4183 or at kking@lisc.org.
Spotlight on LISC investment: Hopewell

Virginia LISC is providing Hopewell Redevelopment and Housing Authority with a $225,000 acquisition loan to purchase a vacant lot, which will be used to build a new public housing development.

Hopewell RHA plans to construct 50-64 affordable apartments on the lot. The apartments will be used as replacement housing for 60 residents from the obsolete and aging Davisville/Bland Court property in Hopewell. Relocation of residents is slated to occur in 2020.

“Virginia LISC supports the preservation of low-income housing, and this project will bring, new, quality affordable housing to low-income residents living in Hopewell,” said Schirra Hayes, the senior loan officer at Virginia LISC. “These are the types of projects that Virginia LISC strives to take part in because we believe that every resident deserves to live in a neighborhood with quality, affordable housing.”

The four acres of vacant land is located in the City of Hopewell at the intersection of Winston Churchill Drive and Westover Ave. Amenities, services, churches, access to transportation, city offices and medical facilities are all within a 1.5 mile radius of the planned housing site.

This is Virginia LISC’s first project with Hopewell RHA, and LISC staff is excited about the new partnership.

Historic Poplar Lawn continued

The Cameron Foundation came to Virginia LISC to seek community development expertise for Poplar Lawn.

Virginia LISC staff recommended a multi-pronged strategy that included rehabilitating owner-occupied homes as well as partnering to acquire and rehabilitate vacant homes and rental properties to make them habitable again.

135 Liberty Street before construction started. Photo credit: the Cameron Foundation

“Distressed neighborhoods like the Poplar Lawn Historic District struggle with many challenges, such as low rates of homeownership, an inventory of larger houses requiring extensive renovation with market values too low to support a mortgage and rehabilitation costs,” explained Candice Streett, the executive director of Virginia LISC. “Additionally, due to the special designation of houses in a historic district, rehabilitation costs can be higher, as well, to satisfy the preservation standards set by the local architectural review board.”

Streett explained that working with nonprofits and community development corporations to acquire and rehabilitate vacant single family homes for sale to homebuyers, “will help to preserve this historic neighborhood, establish higher market values and generate market interest in the Poplar Lawn neighborhood.”

The 135 Liberty Street house is older than houses in many of Richmond’s neighborhoods. Photo credit: the Cameron Foundation

Project: HOMES, a longtime housing partner for Virginia LISC, is the organization rehabilitating the vacant and blighted house at 135 Liberty St. to create a model home. The Cameron Foundation is funding the complete renovation.

Marion Cake, director of neighborhood revitalization at project: HOMES, explained that the house at 135 Liberty Street is possibly the oldest house that the organization has ever rehabilitated, predating the Civil War.

The City of Petersburg is actively involved in the Poplar Lawn initiative as well, allocating Community Development Block Grant funds for housing renovations. The city also sent area homeowners correction notices in 2016 as part of its code enforcement program. Since then, seven neighborhood properties have completed repairs and repairs have begun on eight other properties. Rebuilding Together Richmond worked on two of the properties, making minor repairs.

The Partners for Neighborhood Renewal strategy is gaining momentum and attraction locally and regionally. The initiative was featured in a workshop at Preservation Virginia’s 2017 conference and has been featured in Petersburg and Richmond local media.

Our 2017 impact

$8.4 million in loans to advance neighborhood projects
$8 million in New Markets Tax Credits allocated to Church Hill grocery store
$588,447 in capacity building grants to nonprofit partners
$423 clients served by Virginia LISC Financial Opportunity Centers; 70% receiving two or more of the services of employment, financial and benefits coaching
$10,936 was the average net income change by our FOC clients in 2017
$128,000 in grants to 7 small businesses in Church Hill and Highland Park
How Darius Kelly-Taylor found a career that suits his life passion

Darius Kelly-Taylor first heard about the Greater Fulton Financial Opportunity Center, called NRC Works, from his uncle who was a client there.

His uncle knew that Darius was searching for a job and encouraged him to go to the Greater Fulton FOC to talk with the employment coach, Sharon Overton.

“A lot of people come through our door because a family member recommends them,” said Overton.

Overton and Darius met and did some visionary planning to see what type of work he was most interested in doing.

“During the visionary planning it came out that he liked to cook, so I suggested that he look for jobs in that field.”

It only took Darius a week to find a job in the culinary field. He works at Max’s on Broad, an upscale restaurant in Richmond on Broad Street. He wears a variety of hats at his job, from dishwasher to line cook to preparing food, and each job is teaching him a different skill that is important to the culinary field and will move him toward earning a living wage.

Even though Darius found a job right away, Overton said he still goes to the Greater Fulton FOC to work with the financial coach.

“At all three of the Virginia Financial Opportunity Centers, we strive to have clients receiving at least two of the three service areas—employment, financial and benefits coaching.” explained Virginia LISC Neighborhood Partnerships Manager Shekinah Mitchell, who provides network management of the Virginia LISC FOCs. “Clients receiving at least two of the three coaching services are more likely to reach financial resiliency.”

Darius is well on his way to reaching financial stability with his new job and his continued dedication to financial coaching.

For more information about the Virginia LISC FOC Network, please contact Shekinah Mitchell at 804.505.4697 or smitchell@lisc.org.