

History of the Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency



The City of Sebring created the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) in October of 1981, pursuant to Chapter 163, Part III, Florida Statutes. The agency was created to stem the tide of deterioration that had been taking place in downtown Sebring as development activity increased on US Highway 27, and had an auspicious beginning with a budget of \$1,500 donated by the three banks located in the downtown and intended to develop a plan.

The CRA and City Council decided instead to hire an Executive Director to review all previous plans, most of which were sitting on shelves gathering dust, then develop and implement a new redevelopment plan. At that time ground floor retail vacancies made up over 65% of the building inventory downtown, some buildings had been boarded up and there were more business failures than successes.

The City and the CRA hired the University of Florida School of Architecture, School of Urban and Regional Planning to prepare the redevelopment plan that was required by Florida Statute. That plan was completed and adopted by the City Council in December of 1983. In 1984 the CRA successfully persuaded the City Council to sell property owned by the City on US 27, and to loan the proceeds of the sale to the CRA, at zero interest, with ten years to repay the debt. The loan, totalling \$216,398, was to be used as seed money for the program until the tax increment revenues could be received from the City and County, and would be repaid out of those revenues in ten equal payments. It should be noted that the loan was repaid to the City three years early.

In 1982 the CRA was instrumental in negotiating leases of \$1.00 per year with the Highlands Art League and Highlands Little Theatre for City owned buildings adjacent to the Sebring Civic Center. The master plan called for the creation of a Cultural Center with the Library, Civic Center, Theatre of the Performing Arts, Art League museum and classrooms, and archival depository for the Sebring Historical Society, a restored City Pier and landscaped grounds. The Sebring Noon Rotary Club took up the challenge of renovating the City Pier and developed plans for the creation of Rotary Park leading into the pier. Others involved in the initial development of the Cultural Center were the Sebring Garden Club, Kiwanis Club and Sebring High School Key Club, Sertoma Club, the Woman's Club, Junior Women's Club, Sebring JAYCEE'S, and The Sebring Historical Society. The City of Sebring committed funds for the construction of the parking lot and the County constructed the lot and made major drainage improvements within the complex. The long term result of the project has been a Cultural Center the likes of which very few small cities could ever hope to achieve. In 1988 and in 1990 the

CRA prepared two Cultural Facilities Grant requests on behalf of Highlands Little Theatre which were approved by the Department of State totaling approximately \$250,000 for additions and equipment for the Theatre. In 2002 another grant in the amount of \$158,000 was obtained from the Department of State for the construction of a rehearsal hall addition. The City has acquired the adjacent property to the south of the complex and has leased it for a dollar to the Art League for the development of an Artists Village.

In 1995 the CRA prepared an application to the Department of Environmental Protection for a grant, with a local match from the City to create a beach within the complex, which was completed and opened to the public in 1999. Since then funds were appropriated by the CRA and City to construct a playground on the site.

The CRA negotiated a similar \$1.00 a year lease in 1982 with the Sebring Bridge Club. They had purchased a building from the Catholic Church and needed a location. The CRA arranged for them to locate the building on City property behind City Hall. They deeded the building to the City and received the lease for the facility in return.

In 1985 the CRA commenced construction on the first streetscape project. The Circle streetscape called for the removal and replacement of 1920's vintage sidewalks around the Circle and out to Wall Street (the alleyway around the outside perimeter of the Circle). During the development of the plans for the project, CRA staff and Mary Bryant the Chairman of the CRA, located over sixty of the original cast iron street light poles at the City dump. The 1920's light poles were refurbished and installed around the Circle. Also found at the dump were nine of the original twelve light poles that were installed in Circle Park in 1914. These were the first electric streetlights installed in the City of Sebring.

In 1986 the CRA, on behalf of the City, the CRA made application to the Florida Department of Community Affairs for two Community Development Block Grants. One was in the Housing Rehabilitation category and the other was a Commercial Revitalization Grant.

The Housing Rehabilitation Grant was approved and subsequently the CRA was successful in obtaining additional Housing Rehabilitation grants in 1987, 1989 and 1991, totaling \$2,300,000. The Commercial Revitalization Grant for \$575,000 was also approved that year and provided the funding for Streetscape Phase II. Phase II extended the streetscaping outward from the Circle approximately two to three blocks in each direction. Additional Commercial Revitalization Grants were obtained in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2010 to continue the streetscaping downtown, construction of additional off street parking, the placement of utility lines underground as well as landscaping. To date, the CRA has been responsible for obtaining \$5,000,000 in commercial revitalization grants with local match commitments from the City totaling \$550,000 and an additional \$500,000 from the CRA for local match and engineering expenses.

By 1984 the CRA had established a low interest loan pool with five area banks to assist in attracting re-investment dollars into the downtown area. The loans were made available to qualified borrowers at one half a percentage point below bank lending prime,

amortized for up to twenty years with a balloon at five years. Since the establishment of the loan pool program approximately \$3,000,000 in low interest loans have been processed by the lenders. As lower interest rates were made available in the market the loan pool program was gradually discontinued. The CRA has also run a very successful facade grant program. This program has been modified several times over the years, and now reimburses an approved applicant 30% of the cost of exterior facade improvements to buildings, up to a maximum grant of \$3,000. This program is paid out of tax increment revenue, which is derived from only those properties located within the boundaries of the redevelopment area downtown and not the city as a whole. The CRA has granted up to \$60,000 dollars a year in facade grants. Many of the projects were more than \$10,000 dollars in total cost. The result has been an average of approximately \$235,000 per year in improvements to downtown properties, until the recession began to negatively impact investments .

In 1986 the CRA was instrumental in obtaining a Florida Main Street designation from the Florida Department of State. That same year, efforts commenced to place the Circle area on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic District. Numerous other properties were also placed on the register as individual listings over the following three years. Efforts were begun in the early eighties to place the Seaboard Coast Line or AMTRAK train station on the National Register and to find a source of funds to renovate the station, which was constructed in 1924. Renovation of the station was one of the first goals established by the CRA when it was created. In 1988 the property was placed on the register but funding for the renovation wasn't obtained until 1994 through the ISTEA program through the Department of Transportation. The renovation of the building was finally completed in 1997.

The CRA has been involved with special event activities in the downtown since 1983. The Roaring Twenties Festival and Taste of the Highlands, now known as the Taste of the Race, were started by the CRA. Taste of the Race is now run by the Greater Sebring chamber of Commerce. In 1996 the CRA raised the money and organized the City's Fourth of July fireworks display.

A number of ordinance initiatives have been spearheaded by the CRA over the years. Some examples are; Minimum Maintenance, Historic Preservation, Sidewalk Café and Fair Housing. The CRA initiated a Comprehensive Plan amendment approved by the Department of Community Affairs and the Sebring City Council in 2010, to change the future land use within the CRA boundaries to Mixed Use. Currently, the CRA is working very closely with the Planning and Zoning Department Staff and Board to develop zoning language specific to the nature and unique needs of the downtown area.

The Sebring CRA was also instrumental in persuading the Highlands County Commission to construct a new and modern County Administration building on property located downtown rather than County owned property outside the city. The CRA had prepared a space needs analysis of all county staff offices and those of the constitutional officers, and presented the County Commission with a cost comparison between the different sites being considered, to show that the downtown location was not only the most cost effective, but also the most accessible. The new County administration building, located adjacent to the Highlands County Courthouse was completed in 1998.

Business recruitment and marketing have also been CRA priorities. In 2009 a Marketing Study was completed that provided the CRA with the current data necessary to identify problems, trends and develop strategies to bring about change. The CRA has contracted with Casey Wohl to provide assistance in implementing the marketing plan. The CRA maintains a listing of vacancies within the CRA District and assists property owners, or their representatives, by making referrals and providing information on the various incentive programs available downtown. It also sponsors events, provides opportunities for collective advertising and marketing, established the Buy Downtown Program, "What's Up Downtown" meetings to involve the business community and property owners, developed the www.downtown.org website and the Downtown Sebring Electronic News Letter. The CRA Commissioners have implemented the Downtown Advantage Program, a business recruitment program that provides incentives through the development of partnerships between landlords, tenants and the CRA. The highest business recruitment priority is for restaurants. The CRA has established a restaurant Incentive Program to provide financial incentives to attract restaurants into the older buildings downtown. The goal is to create a cluster of restaurants with sidewalk cafes, which will in turn help to attract a variety of retail surrounding them.

The CRA has also provided grant writing services for the City of Sebring and has been successful in obtaining Historic Preservation grants, Cultural Facilities grants, Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program grants, Land Conservation grants and others, to include the Economic Development Block Grant that made the drainage improvements required by the State of Florida, making the Albertson's project a reality and opened up properties North of Fairmount Drive to annexation.

Since 1988 revenues generated by the CRA for these kinds of City Projects total \$1,394,500. Some of the projects for which the CRA has obtained finding, along with the Pier Beach project are; new baseball and softball fields at the Max Long Complex, Playgrounds at the Max Long Complex and Charlie Brown Park. Veterans Beach improvements, Cultural Facilities grants, Historic Preservation grants and ISTEA grants for bicycle paths and highway beautification.

The CRA has also been involved in the development and administration of an Economic Development Category CDBG grant for the construction of a Holiday Inn Express on US HWY 27, North. Other Economic Development CDBG projects include the multi million dollar Amerikan Plastics manufacturing plant and the development of a Marriott Residence Inn. All of these projects resulted in the annexation of substantial commercial properties adding to the City tax base.

At the request of the City the CRA also coordinated the effort to obtain the Harder Hall 108 Loan in the amount of \$5, 250,000 and the \$1,000,000 Economic Development Initiative companion grant. Also at the request of the City, the CRA developed a new CRA District has been created on the thirteen acres at Harder Hall as an incentive for redevelopment of the property.

In April of 2004 the CRA submitted a Redevelopment Plan update the City Council, which not only updated the 1983 plan, but expanded the boundaries of the CRA district by nearly 50%. Working with the County Economic Development Authority, the CRA has also been successful in seeing the two CRA Districts designated as approved Florida Enterprise Zones. In 2005, the CRA submitted an Design Review ordinance to the

Sebring City Council for adoption. The CRA is now responsible for the design review of all major restoration/rehabilitation projects, as well as any new construction located within the CRA district. Probably one of the most recent and visible examples of the process are the improvements made at the Town Square shopping center, where an old eyesore has been transformed into an attractive shopping area.

Downtown Sebring is currently undergoing considerable change as a result of the recession and consequently the vacancy rate has increased considerably. The current efforts of the CRA, on behalf of the City of Sebring, are intended create new opportunities for economic growth as the economy improves.