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STREETCA

SUMMARY *A commercial corridor in Washington DC transforms itself in just over a decade. What made it happen? The answer seems to be a blend of city initiatives and unwavering support from a community that believed it was possible.*

RÉSUMÉ *Une artère commerciale de Washington D.C. s'est renouvelée en un peu plus d'une décennie. Qu'est-ce qui a permis cette métamorphose? La réponse semble être une série de projets urbains et le soutien indéfectible d'une communauté qui y croyait fermement.*

*A Story of Main
Street
Revitalization
in Washington DC*

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ROAD DESIRE



ate last fall, Arlington, Virginia—the second largest city in the Washington, DC metropolitan area—cancelled plans that had been underway since 2006 to build a streetcar system. “I’m so glad we didn’t do what Virginia did,” muses Anwar Saleem, Executive Director of H Street Main Street, as a streetcar glides past the window of a café on H Street NE in Washington, DC

A formerly vibrant commercial corridor, H Street is reinventing itself after several decades of decline. Back in 2002, the 13-block commercial corridor had a 30% vacancy rate. The street was poorly

lit, in disrepair, and had issues with crime. At the time, Saleem recalls, “you didn’t walk through H Street. You ran through H Street.”

Today H Street has a dedicated Clean Team, a refurbished streetscape, a new grocery store, apartments, and more development on the way. Not yet open to the public, the new streetcar hums along the corridor for training and testing.

What caused this transformation? A series of city initiatives throughout the 2000s certainly contributed to the obvious changes. But the underlying cause of change seems to be a community that believed it was possible. Since the beginning, the voice of that community has been

expressed largely through H Street Main Street.

Formed in 2002 under the city’s Main Streets program, H Street Main Street has worked diligently to retain and recruit businesses, improve the streetscape and attract consumers to the corridor. H Street Main Street has also provided an active community voice in each of the city’s initiatives throughout the last decade.

In 2004 the DC Office of Planning completed a planning process that resulted in “REVIVAL: The H Street NE Strategic Development Plan”. The strategic plan envisioned H Street as a pedestrian-oriented shopping destination well served by bus rapid transit or trolley. To help implement



the plan, the city approved the H Street NE Neighborhood Commercial Overlay District in 2006. The overlay provides bonus density for new construction that preserves historic building facades, and has managed to both encourage development and maintain the corridor’s historic identity.

In the latter half of the 2000s the city’s Department of Transportation began infrastructure and streetscape improvements to H Street. At the time the DC streetcar program was in its infancy and there was no plan to build a streetcar on H Street. However, the community saw the opportunity to bring the streetcar to H Street and seized it. Says Saleem, “if H Street Main Street wasn’t around, I don’t think we

would’ve had a streetcar. Simple as that. We asked for the streetcar. It wouldn’t have been here otherwise.”

In the last few years property values have risen along the corridor. The city—through its Great Streets initiative—has tried to ensure that existing businesses are able to keep up with the changes. Since 2011, tax increment financing has been used to award 30 business improvement grants for small businesses on the corridor, totalling approximately \$2.3M.

The continuing revitalization of H Street is certainly the result of this kind of tangible action by the city. But without the ongoing support and desire of the community for change, it’s unlikely

the transformation would have occurred as quickly or as effectively. According to Saleem, “people believe in the promise—of H Street and the whole revitalization. And it’s a good promise. It’s a promise that’s going to be fulfilled.” ■

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