

Grants program brings "signs of improvement" to River Road

By Chris Neidenberg, for the River Road Improvement Corporation

An expanded grants program, offered this year by the River Road Improvement Corporation (RRIC), has brought significant "signs of improvement" to the corridor - literally and figuratively.

That's because interested businesses are taking advantage of a new initiative. Through it, the corporation offers a \$1,000 matching grant to business owners desiring new promotional signs or decorative awnings. The grant requires the benefiting business owner to provide their own funding on a 1:1 matching basis and advance the funding for the improvement, the RRIC's grant is on a reimbursement basis only.

RRIC Trustee Arthur Levine explained that the ongoing program was significantly upgraded in 2003 when the corporation dramatically increased the amount of matching funds available.

The additions must meet the corporation's approval, based on design philosophy found in the RRIC's own Design Manual developed by the RRIC in cooperation with a local architect. In fact, funds cannot be released until after a three-member committee of RRIC trustees - Levine, Todd Malkin and Mike Varner - review the proposals.

Their review even includes visiting the location of the proposed sign or awning. These trustees must be satisfied that the adornment will significantly promote the business, and just as importantly, not detract from the district's appearance. Two basic sign types are considered - ground and building signs.

This endeavor is funded solely through revenues the corporation collects from participating district commercial property owners and voluntary contributions. The RRIC oversees the operation and maintenance of a Special Improvement District along River Road, spanning Maple and Harrison Avenues as well as Fair Lawn Avenue, westward from George Street to the Fair Lawn Avenue Bridge.

As with the RRIC's Spring maintenance program, this grants project again shows how these concerned businessmen and women are trying to make things better for the area - and their community - on a 'self-help' basis without going to the residential taxpayers of the community.

No grant is authorized until after the Borough's construction code officials assuring the proposed signage conforms to the Borough Sign and Awning Ordinances, and that a permit has been issued for the work.

At least three businesses have taken advantage of the expanded program thus far: Gotlieb Hearing Center, David Gordon Insurance and Amber Cycle. Xpress Haircutters and lawyer Leonard Miller are soon to join the list of awardees and another is in review.

"I think the signs we have approved this year have certainly made a difference," said RRIC Trustee Charles Wrubel. "This is an excellent program, and we certainly encourage other interested businesses to come forward and take advantage of it."

While approving any new sign or awning is ultimately the borough's decision, Levine noted that the committee works hard in trying to assure any proposal conforms with local ordinances beforehand.

"As long as you have a solid building that's not in need of serious repair, an attractive sign can go a long way in helping a business," Levine explained. "And it probably is any business owner's most easily fixable problem."

Varner said he and his two colleagues take their roles very seriously by rigorously scrutinizing the proposed sign or awning's design, appearance, etc.

"Whenever we review an application, we really have to be convinced that it will significantly help promote the business and improve the property," he explained. "We want to assure it will draw attention in a way that helps attract customers, while not being garish. The committee works very hard at it."

"Any customer who notices a business owner because of attractive signage, and decides to shop or do business there as a result, is a plus for the entire district," Varner added.

Malkin said the significance of attractive signs and/or awnings cannot be underestimated. He pointed out that they can leave important first impressions upon those who visit and do business in the area.

"It's important to the district and the borough as a whole - because it shows the general public that the RRIC is making a continuous effort to assist individual business owners to invest in something that improves the appearance of the district," he explained. "By encouraging investment among the business owners, these business owners are in fact investing in the future of Fair Lawn. It shows current and potential clients/customers/shoppers that these businesses are committed to staying on River Road for the long haul."

Gotlieb Hearing Center and David Gordon Insurance offer different examples of the approaches business owners have taken in signing up for the effort.

Gotlieb owner Talia Gotlieb, whose company assists the hearing impaired, noted that her red signage - actually comprising two "clear red" signs - is attached to her office near the entrance. Those owning David Gordon Insurance received funding for a red-lettered ground-level or 'monument style' sign.

"When we heard this grant was available, we were very happy to take advantage of the opportunity," said Gotlieb, "When people see a nicely maintained and attractive office building, it certainly can help bring in potential new customers."

"We're very pleased with the efforts of the RRIC because we see that they are really devoted to improving the River Road area," Gotlieb added.

So is Mayor David L. Ganz, another corporation trustee. To receive a signage permit, he explained, applicants must meet the terms of an ordinance developed years ago by now-retired Councilwoman Florence "Flossie" Dobrow.

"In fact, these permits are routinely approved usually without major problems," the mayor noted, adding that this grants program is part of an overall beautification strategy for River Road. "We're very pleased because the new signs have made a noticeable difference in the visual landscape."



Gotlieb family from Gotlieb Hearing Center at 14-12 River Road is recipient of Sign and Awning Grant Program for new signs on their building and awning at their doorway.



RRIC Executive members meet with David Gordon Co./Kurnath Insurance staff at 13-13 River Road to deliver grant for their 'monument style' sign.

This is the second in a five-part series examining various initiatives that have been made to improve the River Road corridor, through the efforts of the River Road Improvement Corporation.

Articles deal with:

- Financial institutions "banking" on River Roads future
- Grants program brings "signs of improvement" to River Road
- Traffic flow improvements
- New property investment
- End of year report