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RENEWAL

Hampton Undergoes Transformation

Grants, volunteers and determination mend a community

by Mary Lou Hildreth
City of Hampton



In 2014, the **City of Hampton** was on the verge of being dissolved by the Legislature. The auditor general reported 34 findings in an audit of the city's financial practices. The city was given 30 days to prove that it could turn things around.

A communitywide effort was needed. The city did meet the deadline, but it was just the beginning of an overhaul and rejuvenation for City Hall and for the community.

The residents of Hampton are fiercely proud of their small rural city, incorporated in 1925. Multiple generations of families are part of its fabric. They did not want to

be absorbed into Bradford County, so they banded together to save the city. Around Hampton, questions were heard such as "What can we do?" The long road to answers and solutions began.

The only option was for the city to re-invent itself. Repair work had to be done in every single aspect of municipal functioning: administratively, operationally and financially. To survive, Hampton had to create a new beginning.

A special election was held. A new council was elected, and a new city staff was hired. Now it was time to rebuild the city from the ground up. It involved many



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meetings, constant planning and citizen input. Residents stepped up to volunteer. The process was long and arduous, but in the end, it was successful and worthwhile. Hampton regained its pride and honor, as well as its right to be a city.

City leaders revamped by being thrifty, using volunteers and applying for grants. Over four years the city was awarded 11 grants totaling over \$1.6 million. These grants were used for water and street infrastructure improvements and an update of the city's comprehensive plan. For a city with an ad valorem rate of 0.5, which brings in less than \$4,000 per year in property taxes, obtaining grants is crucial. It was important for residents to see tasks being accomplished and the city moving in a positive direction. Parks are being mowed, litter is picked up, picnic tables and grills have been added and new swings have been installed on the playground.

City leaders encouraged more citizens to take note and become a part of the process. Residents volunteered to answer phones and to help renovate City Hall. The historic structure needed new flooring, drywall, a drop ceiling and lighting, doors, windows and paint. The county sheriff donated furniture. People would anonymously plant a gardenia bush, then later mint, then aloe. This was a small gesture, but it spoke volumes about the pride in our city. All the little things started to add up.

The city worked with the county to bring back the volunteer fire department, which reduced the fire rating from the Insurance Services Office and saved residents money. When the open house was held, county officials could not believe what a transformation had taken place in so little time.

Even people coming into City Hall to pay their water bills were amazed. A new

communal sense of pride was felt. All over the city, people were talking about the transformation taking place. Some of the comments heard at City Council meetings were "thank you," "fantastic job" and "incredible difference."

The transformation was no overnight success. The process never ends; however, constructive movement in City Hall and the community have a positive effect that ripples outward and draws in others. People like to be a part of a successful campaign. It eventually becomes a social phenomenon, of the people, by the people and for the people. (To see the slides from a 2017 Florida League of Cities webinar on "Leadership Against All Odds" that featured Hampton and other cities, go to bit.ly/2G2koLV.)

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