

BIDs cash in on city contest

Business improvement districts in East Elmhurst, Washington Heights and Brooklyn Heights were among the winners of city grants awarded on Friday.

By Ali Elkin

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Storefront restorations in East Elmhurst, a branding initiative in Washington Heights and a forthcoming "Funderpass" in Brooklyn Heights were among the winners of the city's Department of Small Business Services' BID Challenge announced Friday.

The city agency is awarding grants of up to \$75,000 for inventive proposals to improve neighborhoods. The total amount being distributed is \$250,000.

Small Business Services Commissioner Robert Walsh said he and Deputy Mayor for Economic Development Robert Steel conceived the idea while talking about the Obama administration's education program Race to the Top, through which schools applying for funding are awarded points based on a variety of criteria. The commissioner and the deputy mayor wanted to find a way to channel funding to districts that were already doing a lot with a little.

"That challenged cities across the country with being innovative and creative and we thought we could do the same thing on the street," Mr. Walsh said.

The city launched the challenge in June. Only districts with operating budgets of less than \$1 million were eligible, meaning about 52 of the city's 67 districts could apply. The city received 37 proposals, from which the seven winners were selected and given \$20,000 to \$75,000.

The winners were chosen by a committee led by Jonathan Fanton, former president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (known for its "genius grants") and currently a visiting fellow at the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College. *Crain's* columnist and former publisher Alair Townsend also served on the committee.

The Atlantic Avenue BID in Brooklyn Heights, Boerum Hill and Cobble Hill got the largest grant, \$75,000, to transform the poorly-lit Brooklyn Queens Expressway underpass between Brooklyn Bridge Park and Atlantic Avenue into a "Funderpass" to attract pedestrians. The Funderpass will feature a bike service station, seating, murals and directional signage, in addition to better lighting.

Two winning proposals were each given \$50,000. The 82nd Street Partnership, which represents Jackson Heights and Elmhurst in Queens, will use the money to launch a storefront improvement program to address chronic noncompliance with landmark requirements in the historic district. The project will assist building owners and tenants in restoring facades.

The other \$50,000 grant went to the Washington Heights BID for a new marketing initiative called "Explora." The district will work with the School of Visual Arts to highlight the neighborhood's fashion, culture, history, food, nightlife and public spaces through banners, signs, promotional materials and

a launch party. Explora will also include themed events and promotions, including a Restaurant Month and a Beauty Month.

Washington Heights was the only Manhattan winner. Queens also had only one winner, while Brooklyn had two. The Bronx had the most with three, though those projects will receive the smallest amounts, between \$20,000 and \$28,000.

One application from Staten Island, for a marketing campaign, was not strong enough to get funding, Mr. Walsh said. He added that he would like to see an initiative to encourage recreational ferry riders to spend more time on the island.

"I would love to see an idea from Staten Island aimed at the 22 million people who go over on that boat every year," Mr. Walsh said. "I'd like a campaign that said, 'Miss the next boat.'"