Fixing a tarnished image in Boynton Beach

Grassroots effort aims to undo damage

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If any city ever needed an image makeover, it's Boynton Beach.

The city has recently been pulverized with highly publicized cases of political and police corruption, which has pushed its already tarnished image into the dumps.

This year alone, former commissioner Marlene Ross resigned amid an ethics probe, just weeks after it was learned that she sent naked pictures of herself to her cousin. There is an open internal investigation of Boynton Beach police sergeant Frank Ranzie, who was caught with porn on his city computer. And former Mayor Jose Rodriguez was suspended for corruption.

Now, though, a group of city officials, residents and artists are saying enough is enough -- and they've set out on a mission to fix Boynton's image. Most of the work is being done by volunteers who say they have had their fill of Boynton bashing.

James Brake, a resident and Realtor, is one of those at the forefront of the effort.

"I want the city to be the best city it can be," he said. "I want the people out there to know it and love it as the city I know."

"The city has had issues in the past and we are going through things now," he said. "We have to embrace it and focus on the things that we do really well. We don't want to get caught up in the negatives."

The campaign is unusual because the city isn't bringing in a high-priced consultant to fix things, Instead, it's coming from the inside out, grassroots style. To this group, it really is a labor of love.

Marketing experts say Boynton has a tough road ahead, but the task isn't impossible. Cities, states, and counties all over the nation have successfully rebranded their images, said Richard Lutz, a marketing professor at the University of Florida.

But a city must clean up the municipal muck before it tries to change people's minds.

"You can't just put lipstick on a pig," Lutz said. "You can't promise something that isn't true, and you can't blatantly false advertise, people will see right through it."

James Gray, chair of the marketing department at Florida Atlantic University, said Boynton will need to be determined to make a change.

"People are resistant to change," he said. "It takes repetition and persistence, a lot of time and money to get the point through."

One of the first steps in the campaign was to come up with a statement everyone could get behind. They came up with this: "Breeze into Boynton: America's Gateway to the Gulfstream. Catch a wave. Catch a fish. Catch your breath."

"The brand promise is a unique promise from the community. It promotes the positive things that Boynton Beach has to offer to people at this very moment," said Dale Carlson, a marketing consultant who helped develop the Boynton Beach brand promise statement.

The rebranding efforts started rather informally in 2011, when a coalition of artists approached the Boynton Beach commission about the city's lack of identity. So, the commissioners decided to see what residents thought.

Those who responded to a city survey didn't have much good to say. They cited bad schools, high crime rates, political corruption and a boring downtown scene as the major problems within their city.

"The perceptions of the city were absolutely not surprising, they were overwhelmingly negative," said Carlson.

In addition to the recent issues, Carlson also cited the lingering effects of a highly-publicized gang shooting at Boynton Mall on Christmas Eve 2006.

"People are still remembering the shooting as if it was yesterday," she said. "We want to give them a new yesterday."

While the responses from the survey were largely negative, residents did say they were proud of their proximity to the beach, their thriving artist community, the marina and the city's eco-friendly landscape.

That became the foundation of the rebranding.

City rebranding campaigns can cost millions of dollars for recognition in travel magazines and marketing fees. So far, Boynton Beach's tab is about $20,000, thanks to the free labor of its residents.

"It'd be a great thing if they can pull it off," Gray said. "It always depends on the quality of people working. If cheap was the only criteria, the whole world would be a Walmart."

Boynton is getting somewhat of a boost from Palm Beach County – it's one of 12 cities chosen to be part of a tourism rebranding campaign and it's getting a tourism website as part of the deal.

"Boynton Beach has this casual laid-back attitude that visitors appreciate," said Shirley Talbert, chief marketing officer of the Palm Beach County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "That's where the 'breeze' in the branding statement comes from."

The city hopes that the easy-breezy attitude of Boynton also will attract artists, and a big part of the campaign relies on a public arts program.

This month, the city library hosted a "Breeze into Boynton" art exhibit and new kinetic art pieces have popped up along Ocean Avenue. Kinetic art is part of Boynton's growing artistic identity — artists from all over the nation come to Boynton for the opportunity to display their moving artwork on city streets.

In February, the city will host the International Kinetic Art Exhibit and Symposium, which will feature moving artwork made out of titanium, steel and brushed metal.
The future identity of Boynton is unclear, as it teeters between an artist community and a city with tarnished political legacy. But those seeking a new image for the seaside city say they're not giving up until the job is done.

"With all that we've been through, I know that we're on the cusp of something great," said Interim Assistant City Manager Carisse LeJeune. "I believe we're the best kept secret in Palm Beach County."

For the box:

Bad Times for Boynton:

Dec. 24, 2006: Berno Charlemond, 24, died in a gang shooting at the Boynton Beach Mall.

July 1, 2011: David Britto, Boynton's 2010 Police Officer of the Year arrested for trafficking methaphetamines. During the investigation, he cut off his ankle bracelet and fled to Brazil.

November 2011: Boynton officers Michael Arco and Michael Mulcahy investigated for inconsistencies in police report about an armed robbery. Mulcahy was placed on restrictive duty. Arco resigned.

November 2011: Officer Alex Lindsey charged with official misconduct for lying about an arrest. In the report he said he found the suspect's gun at the scene, he later admitted he found it on the suspect at the police station. Lindsey was placed on restricted duty.

January 2012: Mayor José Rodriguez suspended after arrest on criminal corruption charges for allegedly using his position to intimidate Police Chief Matt Immler and interim City Manager Lori LaVerriere.

July 12, 2012: Former commissioner Bill Orlove resigns for a job at FPL. Without a tiebreaking vote, the commission begins to deadlock and can't decide on a replacement for Orlove.

Oct. 2, 2012: Mayor Woodrow Hay asks Marlene Ross to resign after it emerges that she sent nude photos of herself to her cousin.

Oct 10, 2010: President of Florida State Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police wrote in a letter to the mayor urging former commissioner Marlene Ross to resign for sending nude pictures to her cousin.

Oct 12, 2012: Sgt. Frank Ranzie is found to have porn downloaded on his city computer. His case is still under investigation.

November 2012: Commissioners approve an official review of the Boynton Police Department.

December 2012: Commissioner Marlene Ross resigns before the Palm Beach County Commission on Ethics follows up on two corruption charges brought against her.