
SMALL BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE ACTION PLAN STATUS UPDATE

October 2011

Description: Evaluate how to make it easier for small businesses to get started or expand in Arlington County based on feedback from small business owners, such as by: streamlining processes; improving quality of, and access to, information about requirements; and offering solutions-oriented assistance to business owners.

Milestones/Deliverables and Timelines:

1) Information for, and communications with Small Businesses:

The Small Business Roundtable listening sessions highlighted a number of shortcomings and disconnects with regards to the availability, consistency, and comprehensive nature of information regarding the processes related to opening or expanding a small business in Arlington. The following are specific action areas staff proposes to modify in order to address these concerns:

- **Business Center Portal Web Page** – The portal page has been modified to address the need for a centralized place to get information. It now brings key topics to the surface and makes them easy for the user to locate information. It also breaks down silos from various departments where key information had been harder to find. **Status: Complete.**
- **ACG Web Site Content** – Staff is in the process of reviewing and updating the content that remains deeper within the County’s Web site, as well as removing redundancies and contradiction of terms and information. Staff continues to work with the various departments to improve the Web content with an eye toward making it more user-friendly. **Status: Staff is actively working with an outside vendor to redesign the ISD and Zoning portion of the ACG Web site. The redesign will include a new information architecture (IA) structured by audiences. The focus will be on residents, businesses, contractors and developers and design professionals. Approximately 50% of the IA has been finalized. The vendor is developing a new look and feel for the site and the new content based, on the IA. An internal working group is reviewing content in other departments including AED, DES and DHS, to remove jargon and inconsistencies. The estimated date for completion is end of Jan. 2012.**
- **Checklists On ACG Web Site** – Information from various departments is being reviewed and compared for accuracy. An effort to get the information more streamlined and widely distributed is underway. Checklists designed to make it easier for someone opening or expanding a business in Arlington will be developed subsequent to the process improvements below. **Status: AED and COR staff are working together to develop a tool that will include the step-by-step process for starting a business, which will illustrate which steps may be done concurrently and those that need to be done consecutively, thus shorting the overall process. The estimated date for completion is Dec. 2011.**
- **Training/Workshops/Counseling** – BizLaunch, Arlington’s small business assistance network, will hold over 30 workshops and conduct over 500 counseling sessions to assist people looking to start or expand a small business, during FY12. New workshop content will cover improvements in regulatory processing, customer service, and information availability. **Status: FY12 sessions**

began in Sept. 2011 and will run through June 2012. An additional SCORE counselor, who is fluent in Spanish, was added to the program, who specializes in the franchising industry. Expanded services with the Latino Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) has provided BizLaunch with a weekly loan officer (previously monthly) to counsel business owners. BizLaunch is working on a potential Business Plan competition, and is looking to secure a sponsor to fund a grant contribution, awarded to the Arlington business with the best business plan. BizLaunch will hold workshops to help businesses prepare for the competition.

- **Outreach** – Staff will use existing County communications vehicles (email blast, online newsletters, e-boards and AVN – including a series of video segments highlighting business tips and promoting the BizLaunch program) to disseminate information regarding small business assistance, and promote the services available to current and potential small business owners. **Status: BizLaunch worked with AVN to produced two videos to assist small businesses. The first video is to help business develop the “Perfect Pitch” and the other is focused on starting a business entitled “Know your BizLaunch.” A third video on financing will be produced at the end of 2011 or beginning of 2012.**

2) Process Improvements:

Many of the Roundtable comments were centered on the regulatory processes; e.g., they are complex, involve too many different staff, and take too long. County staff engaged in an analysis of current regulatory processes in order to identify potential improvements that would make regulation more streamlined, timely, understandable and efficient:

- **Internal Analysis** - Staff developed a diagnostic tool to document the entire regulatory process from conception to final launching a new business. Staff used the relatively complex scenario of opening a restaurant as a case study. This will be used to help small business owners understand both the steps and time it takes to start or expand a business. **Status: Complete.**
- **Modifications** - Staff will make use of the analysis to streamline the process and reduce the length of time needed for issuing permits. **Status: Through development of the diagnostic tool, staff was able to identify portions of the regulatory process that could be done concurrently, thereby shorting the length of time required to start or expand a business. These steps will be outlined in the online checklist and guide (below.)**
- **Guide** - A condensed version (brochure) of the process will be produced for customer guidance and education. **Status: In development, estimated date for completion is Dec. 2011.**
- Staff will continue to stress the need for business owners to attend initial and interim **“pre-construction” meetings** with staff to educate the “customer” and make sure they are informed of the various steps in the process. **Status: Ongoing.**

3) Customer service improvements (Arlington BizTeam):

The Roundtable discussions identified improved customer service as an issue. This was related to knowing and understanding the regulatory processes all the way throughout a project and the

availability of staff to provide direct assistance on a timely basis. In lieu of a formal ombudsman function, the County will establish a team of individuals from relevant departments to focus on:

- Addressing problems on an exception basis when they require some extraordinary intervention, e.g. Westover Beer Garden; American Flatbread and most development related relocations.
- Staffing a desk function one half day per week and market the availability of staff to answer questions, e.g. “BizTuesdays @ CHP.” With a team of four or five, each member would only be present once a month.
- Conducting heavily promoted workshops through the BizLaunch network directed at providing information on regulatory processes.
- Promoting the services provided by the BizTeam at all BizLaunch events and during counseling sessions as well as through BizLaunch’s Small Business Coordinating Council.
- Conducting process improvements to enhance efficiency and customer satisfaction.

The BizTeam will be comprised of designated participants from AED, CPHD (Planning, Zoning and ISD) and DES with assistance from DHS. They will be trained in all of the regulatory processes so that they can perform the desk function, but will bring in other team members as specific problems are addressed. They will meet regularly and have team responsibilities recognized in the key elements of their performance plans. By sharing responsibilities across departments, the BizTeam approach will not unduly burden any single department nor necessitate the addition or designation of an FTE. It should improve customer satisfaction, increase staff capacity and capability to aid businesses, and improve internal processes. **Status: BizTeam staff will be trained Sept. – Dec.2011 and desk service (exact times and form of availability to be determined) will begin in Jan. 2012. A comprehensive FAQ document will be completed Dec. 2011.**

4) Retail policies:

Policies should recognize the evolutionary nature of retail and be designed to foster an environment in which retail can be successful. The following items were identified as next steps by the Retail Task Force:

- **Retail Action Plan (RAP) Update** – The plan is under review and the update will expand the focus of the existing plan to address commercial areas throughout the County and will suggest an assortment of different uses – varying levels of commerce – within appropriately concentrated retail nodes where businesses can thrive, benefit from synergies with other complementary uses and contribute to an overall active streetscape. In addition, it is envisioned that the updated RAP will incorporate broader narratives of the types of commerce envisioned, statistical information about retail within Arlington, graphics of best practices and provide illustrative examples of a “this, not that” nature. It is anticipated that the updated RAP will assist developers in designing projects, provide guidance in the review of special exception site plans and offer strategies for retailers looking to locate in Arlington. Staff has convened a working group to have initial

discussions about retail – defining retail and locations for retail. Given the extended process required for the sign ordinance, the projected schedule has been extended to allow for more public process than originally planned. **Status: Under review, draft language in first quarter CY 2012 and estimated date for completion third quarter CY 2012.**

- **Site Plan Conditions** – CPHD Planning has been coordinating an update of site plan conditions – including extensive staff review by all departments and upcoming discussions with stakeholders including NVBIA/NAIOP, SPRC and commissions. **Status: Draft condition language submitted and under review. Estimated date to begin discussions with stakeholders is fourth quarter CY 2011.**

Several site plan conditions pertain to retail and were highlighted by the Retail Task Force.

- **Retail Attraction & Marketing Plans (RAMPs).** Staff has recommended the removal of the RAMP requirement. Instead, staff would require developers to work with retail brokers in marketing the retail space within their project. For site plans with a significant amount of retail, staff would work with both the developer and the broker on appropriate attraction and marketing strategies. The updated RAP would also provide guidance for site plan projects.
 - **First Floor Design.** Staff is proposing updated condition language to address greater flexibility with facades and, in particular, first floor facades for retail. However, staff still wants to ensure appropriate infrastructure is in place for successful retail: service corridors, ventilation, loading and trash, etc.
 - **Retail-Specific Signage.** In updating site plan conditions, staff has proposed removing the requirement for comprehensive sign plans. Signs would be permitted, administratively, by the parameters set forth by the Zoning Ordinance. The sign ordinance is currently under review. Staff has been working to ensure that the needs of the retailers and small businesses are balanced within the overall regulatory obligations of the County. **Status: Updated sign ordinance adoption in Dec. 2011 and July 2012** (see below).
 - **Alternative Uses in “Retail” Space.** Staff would work with developers as projects move through the design process to ensure that space can be designed to accommodate a variety of uses. Implementation of such a strategy was seen in the approval of 1900 Wilson Boulevard. This is site specific; however the updated RAP will provide additional guidance.
- **Zoning Ordinance**
 - **Retail-Specific Elements of the Zoning Ordinance.** Staff has highlighted elements within the Zoning Ordinance where retail uses are specifically mentioned or identified areas in which retail remains undefined. Definitions and updates to the Zoning Ordinance will be undertaken with the Zoning Ordinance update. Research and data gathered in the RAP update will provide direction for the Zoning Ordinance update. **Status: Anticipated start date in mid-2012.**
 - **Sign Ordinance. Status:**

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- **Schedule:** The review schedule has been revised in order to allow the CB to consider some issues relevant to the small business initiative in the short term, while allowing more time for review of the broader revisions to the sign regulations, as follows:
 - November RTA for Dec. consideration: sidewalk signs (sandwich boards), umbrella signs, way finding parking signs
 - June RTA for July consideration: comprehensive revisions to the sign regulations
 - **Outreach:** A first round of outreach to obtain feedback on the purposes of signs and concerns with the existing ordinance was completed in June. The second round of outreach is underway to obtain feedback and engage the public in discussion of a draft revision of the sign regulations.
 - **Next Steps:** Following this second round of outreach, staff will continue to review comments received and incorporate changes to the draft proposal. ZOCO review is planned to continue through to the anticipated June RTA.