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How cities can support small businesses - by Victor Regino

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The success of small business is vital to a city's success in making vibrant places and offering a high quality of life for its residents. Municipal economic development departments that spend time and resources supporting small businesses will reap the economic and social benefits that small businesses provide. The city of East Providence has focused on developing programs and resources that benefit main streets and small businesses, which is yielding private investment on the existing commercial corridors of Warren, Waterman, Taunton, and Bullocks Point Ave.

Small businesses thrive in East Providence because they can take advantage of the unique assets available to them such as a sufficient population density, access to transportation and labor markets, and close proximity to customers and suppliers. Additionally, East Providence has implemented numerous initiatives to support entrepreneurship and existing small businesses. In particular, the city recently launched the Storefront Improvement Program, which utilizes funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to fund grants to repair or replace windows, doors, awnings, siding, and architectural details for small businesses. In addition to grants, East Providence offers tax stabilization agreements on taxable improvements in excess of \$150,000 so the added cost of taxable improvements can be phased in over a five-year period. In addition to grants and tax stabilization, the city also offers a loan program that provides loans to small businesses looking to start up or expand.

While grants and loans are helpful, providing technical support through dedicated city staff serving as a small business liaison to help small businesses navigate the processes of licensing and permitting has proven to be one of the more effective tools in providing support to small businesses.

To compliment programming directed towards improving the economic climate for small businesses in East Providence, the city has also made legislative changes to improve outdated ordinances not reflective of the needs of the current business environment. Some of the changes include adopting a mixed-use zoning overlay district, which allows more uses on commercial corridors, as well as a reduction in the minimum parking requirements in these areas. The legislative changes have targeted key areas with existing infrastructure for higher density development along existing public transportation routes and utilities, which helps welcome new residents to the community who in turn support the local businesses and increase tax revenue to the city.

Small businesses, visitors and residents are what make places vibrant. Therefore, it's important for municipalities to continuously innovate in ways they provide support to small businesses as the business climate, labor market, and economic conditions evolve. Cities that are proactive in their support for small businesses will realize the greatest benefits. East Providence does this through the combination of staff liaison support, innovative grants, commercial loans, and legislative policy.

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