

**CITY
LIMITS****Supporting Businesses, Strengthening
Neighborhoods**

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By Robert Walsh

The city's commissioner of small business services says New York's efforts to bolster Business Improvement Districts will help to preserve the mom-and-pop character of neighborhood retail.

City Limits' [November issue](#) examined the multifaceted threats facing small, independent businesses in New York, and the promise and pitfalls of Business Improvement Districts, or BIDs. Here, the city's top small business official talks about his agency's efforts to preserve mom-and-pop New York.

New York City is home to 64 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)—by far the largest network of BIDs in the country. BIDs contribute over \$100 million in supplemental services to more than 64,000 businesses. Over the past nine years, BIDs in New York have flourished, growing in both size and scope. From day one, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been bullish on BIDs.

When thinking about BIDs in New York City, the large multimillion dollar organizations often come to mind, including the Times Square Alliance, Grand Central Partnership and Downtown Alliance. These groups have done a tremendous job making our city cleaner and safer. But New York is also home to smaller BIDs. In fact, of the 64 BIDs, 39 have budgets under a half million dollars and 58 have budgets under \$3 million. We've taken the development of these BIDs seriously; of the 20 new BIDs created in the past nine years, 18 are in boroughs outside of Manhattan and 14 have budgets under \$500,000.

In addition to BIDs, New York City boasts a robust network of community-based organizations—local development corporations, merchants associations and other groups—that focus on commercial revitalization. In FY2011, we're investing \$1.8 million in support of 47 of these groups through our *Avenue NYC* program.

For these smaller organizations and BIDs, providing core services, interacting with constituents and stakeholders, hosting special events, raising money and promoting their neighborhoods can be a lot to handle. The all-volunteer boards might not have the time to get deeply involved. Often, a single executive director will be given the keys to the organization and told to get started. And in typical New York fashion, the stakeholders want lightning-fast results.

That's why we've spent the last few years helping to build the capacity of both BIDs and local

neighborhood organizations by developing workshops and technical assistance panels—on fundraising strategies, social media and website development, board development or financial management, for example—to support programs and operations. We also host a series of neighborhood tours called *Spotlight on a District*, where local businesses, property owners, government officials, urban planners and real estate professionals come together to identify major problems and potential solutions in commercial districts.

Now, we've taken it to the next level. Alongside our partners in the Coro New York Leadership Center and the Association for a Better New York, we launched the *Neighborhood Leadership Program* in February. This innovative leadership training program, which just graduated its inaugural class, provided a cohort of 20 individuals working to strengthen New York City's commercial corridors with the tools, experiences and networks needed to lead change in their organizations and communities.

The class received hands-on training on a number of related topics and issues, including conducting a neighborhood logic study, understanding small business fundamentals, promoting and marketing business districts and improving tenant mix through targeted retail leasing strategies.

During times of lean budgets, government must innovate and develop new ways to provide critical public services for low costs. And that's

what we've tried to do with *Neighborhood Leadership*. It's my hope that the program will have a "magnifying effect"—by empowering local leaders to create change in their communities, the city can have a much greater effect than it would otherwise.

I recently had the opportunity to tour some other cities and view the support they give to local development organizations and Business Improvement Districts. Everyone agrees that a fundamental purpose of local government is to serve as a watchdog to ensure that both public and private dollars invested in these organizations are being spent honestly and effectively. But while some cities stop there, we view our responsibility to include growing and strengthening these organizations, giving them the ability to have an even greater impact in their communities. It's a delicate balance of oversight and growth that is critical for an optimal city hall-downtown organization relationship.

We often take them for granted, but New York City is a place of over 180 diverse and unique neighborhoods. New Yorkers come from over 50 ethnic groups, speak 170 languages, and live and work across the five boroughs. The character of New York is found beyond its bridges and big buildings—in its mom and pop stores, on local streets and sidewalks, and in its nearly 200,000 small businesses.

As these neighborhoods grow and thrive—become safer, cleaner and more livable—they open up opportunity for entrepreneurs and small

businesses. We see it as critical to our mission to prepare the advocates of those businesses and give them the tools they need to lead their communities. And as they lead their neighborhoods through growth and development, we'll be there for support, doing our best to help every step of the way.