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City's red-tape team aids hurricane-hit businesses

December 11, 2012 | 12:34 pm by Andrew J. Hawkins



Members of the Restoration Business Acceleration Team helping a business owner in lower Manhattan.

Back in June, Mayor Michael Bloomberg set up a **new office to help small businesses**, especially restaurants and bars, navigate city bureaucracy so they could open more quickly. Six months later, Superstorm Sandy devastated thousands of small businesses, temporarily altering the office's mission from customer service to recovery.

Three days after the storm, the Bloomberg administration's New Business Acceleration Team became the **Restoration Business Acceleration Team (RBAT)**, helping dozens of storm-ravaged businesses slash through the red tape that might otherwise impede their recovery. Since then, the team, headed by executive director Robinson Hernandez, has aided almost 50 businesses streamline clean-up and re-opening.

"When the hurricane hit, we realized we had a team in place that would be equipped very well to work with some of these businesses," Mr. Hernandez said. "Many needed to rebuild. They would have to go through some of the regulatory agencies to get approval, put their drawings through, and we have that staff in place to facilitate that process."

For some businesses, the damage from Sandy has proven insurmountable. A city trade group estimates that at least 70 businesses closed permanently because of the storm, while another 50 are barely getting by, **the New York Post reported Tuesday**. The federal Small Business Administration has received more than 20,000 applications for loans related to Sandy. As of Monday, it has only given out 55 loans totaling \$5.13 million, the paper said.

Most businesses are just looking for loans or federal assistance to help pay for the clean-up. But when the rebuilding process begins, Mr. Hernandez and his team hope to serve as a one-stop shop for bureaucratic advice. The team consists of 25 staff members from 10 different regulatory agencies.

"A business will call us and we'll be able to identify which regulations they'll have to meet," Mr. Hernandez said. "We can provide them with a consultation and a site visit where we send inspectors and a client manager."

South Street Seaport's **Acqua Restaurant and Wine Bar** was one such business in need of assistance. RBAT helped the owner identify the type of work permit she needed to begin replacing the restaurant's floors and equipment, and how to obtain Landmarks Preservation Commission approval for that work. Thanks to the team's intervention, the notoriously exacting landmarks commission turned around Acqua's permit in one day. The restaurant is hosting a **re-opening Tuesday**, with free wine and food for guests.

"That gave her the opportunity to start work immediately," Mr. Hernandez said.

Andrew Rigie, executive director of the New York City Hospitality Alliance, said his industry group has already hosted two seminars with RBAT for business owners affected by Sandy.

"I know their team is out there working hard to coordinate recovery assistance efforts for what can be a very overwhelming process for many business operators," Mr. Rigie said. "While there aren't always easy answers to get a business back up and running, I know RBAT has been able to consolidate and disseminate information

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and streamline the reopening process, which has been helpful.”

Tokumbo Shobowale, the Bloomberg administration’s chief business operations officer, said RBAT was working with the city’s Department of Small Business Services and Business Outreach Team to identify the hundreds of business owners who will likely need help cutting red tape.

“This is the tip of the iceberg,” Mr. Shobowale said. “We’re going to see many more businesses over time after they’ve had the chance to assess the landscape.”

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