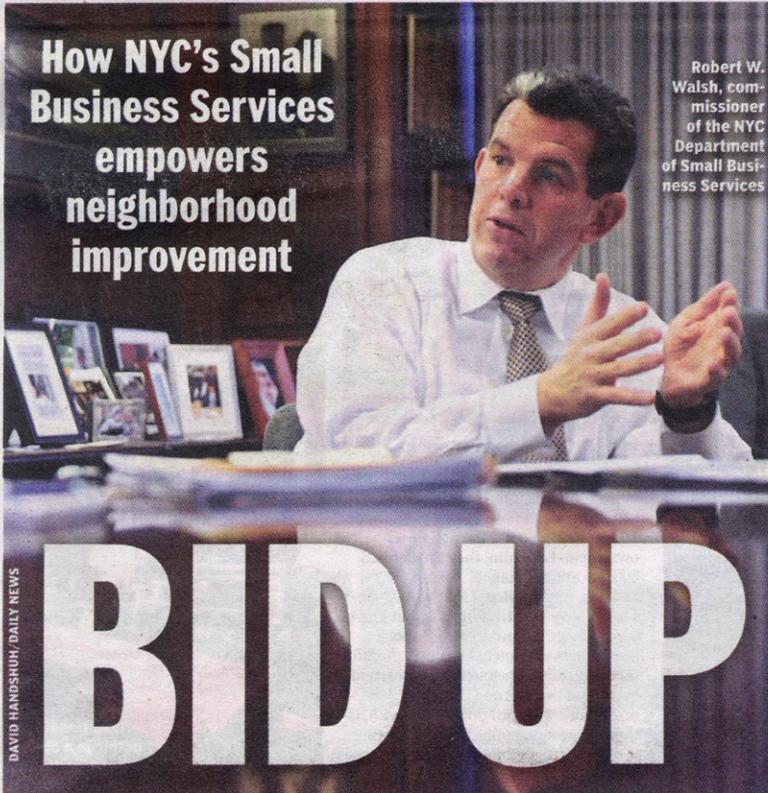


DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

How NYC's Small Business Services empowers neighborhood improvement



Robert W. Walsh, commissioner of the NYC Department of Small Business Services

DAVID HANDSRUH/DAILY NEWS

BID UP

BY JASON SHEFFELL
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Using and sometimes misunderstood, the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) does more to help neighborhoods than most other city services combined. Focusing on commercial and retail corridors that form the backbone of neighborhoods, SBS is dedicated to helping small businesses thrive.

Led by New York City neighborhood improvement expert Robert Walsh, the department has tools that include Business Express, which helps companies get on the fast track to launch; a neighborhood leadership program that provides training to individuals and grants to nonprofits committed to city improvement. It also oversees the Business Improvement District (BID) program, which assesses taxes and implements staff, programs and events allocated for neighborhood growth. It helps with websites, storefronts, logos and small loans.

"This department is at its best when people know us and use us," says Walsh, in his office on William St. "We gave away more than \$1.5 million in grants last year. The goal is to give a vision to a neighborhood. Bottom line is we're here to help businesses do all they need."

BIDs are a strong way. Non-profits devoted to neighborhood improvement, BIDs are pieces of legislation ignited by individuals, real estate interests and business owners. They were first implemented in troubled areas plagued by graffiti, crime and nonperforming retail corridors. Today, they execute strong branding and marketing programs in 67 city neighborhoods. Walsh led the Union Square BID in the late 1980s.

"These were used in neighborhoods that were basically a lawless mess," says Walsh. "Make neighborhoods clean and make them safe was the idea. Today, a good BID director walks their beat and knows their neighborhood as well as anyone. Ultimately, BIDs are a tax people put on themselves to make the city better. It's a public/private partnership that helps us grow."

While certain BIDs in downtown Manhattan neighborhoods have caused controversy over tax collection and due process (Chinatown and SoHo), these are valuable tools for creating neighborhood identity and improving thoroughfares. Here's a look at four BIDs and their directors. All have different needs, growth paths and challenges.

For more on SBS, visit the website www.nyc.gov/sbs.

DUMBO Improvement District

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Alexandria Sica

YEAR FOUNDED:

2006

2012 BUDGET:

\$575,000

BOUNDARIES: Along the East River waterfront on the north; Old Fulton St. to the west, York St. on the south and around Gold and Bridge Sts. to the east.

WEBSITE: dumbo.is

Events, art galleries, waterfront parks and a glass box by French architect Jean Nouvel encasing a historic, perfectly refurbished carousel have given this gem of a Brooklyn neighborhood a jolt. What it needs and deserves is foot traffic.

"We want people to come spend the day in DUMBO," says BID director Alexandria Sica, who rides her bike from her Red Hook home to work whenever she can. "We have 90 retailers now and great cultural institutions. Marketing the neighborhood has

been a big aspect of what we do. We have very strong geographic limits that work for and against us. It helps build community, but it also keeps us isolated."

It's the first New York neighborhood to offer free wireless Internet service in public spaces. The Archway under the Manhattan Bridge has become a neighborhood center, offering public space under the bridge in a colossal plaza reminiscent of ancient Rome. There might not be a cooler public plaza in New York. The idea for it came from the BID.



Alexandria Sica in front of the DUMBO Archway, which the BID helped create.

FYH

PHOTOS BY JEFF BACHNER

BID director Jennifer Brown knows her neighborhood is about a lot more than a historic building — but it helps.



Flatiron/23rd St. Partnership

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Jennifer Brown
YEAR FOUNDED: 2006
2012 BUDGET: \$1.935 million

BOUNDARIES: 38 square blocks from 21st to 28th Sts. and parts of Sixth Ave. over to but not including Third Ave.
WEBSITE: Discoverflatiron.org

Serving nearly 20 million square feet of office space with more than 4,500 companies, this BID presides over one of the most successful and visited neighborhoods in the U.S. Mario Batali's Italian food extravaganza Eataly, the Flatiron Building, Madison Square Park and some of the city's top restaurants call this area home. Tiffany's

world headquarters and Grey Advertising recently moved into 200 Fifth Ave. But things weren't always this rosy, says director Jennifer Brown. "The BID has overseen a massive physical transformation and beautification program. It's night and day since 2006. We have two new public plazas and over 40,000 square feet of public space."



Michael Blaise Backer and the BID have helped this retail corridor grow.

Myrtle Ave. Brooklyn Partnership

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Michael Blaise Backer
YEAR FOUNDED: 1999
2012 BUDGET: \$450,000

BOUNDARIES: Myrtle Ave. from Flatbush to Classon Aves.
WEBSITE: myrtleavenue.org

Once dubbed "Murder Ave.," Myrtle Ave. has morphed into one of Brooklyn's top retail successes. Spearheaded by Michael Blaise Backer with support and direction from Thomas Schutte, president of Pratt Institute, this BID includes small boutiques such as Green in Brooklyn, an eco-product lifestyle shop (432 Myrtle Ave.).

A two-block plaza from DOT will soon give Myrtle Ave. public space. Constantly executing innovative ideas, the BID recently installed 40 custom-designed tree guards and initiated an "Eat Fresh" plan. "Retail vacancy is at the lowest ever, with just 7% empty," says Backer. "The main thing is to continue to attract foot traffic."

Laurel Brown aims to change perceptions people have about Jamaica.



Jamaica Center Business Improvement District

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Laurel Brown
YEAR FOUNDED: 1979
2012 BUDGET: \$758,000

BOUNDARIES: Jamaica Ave. from Sutphin Blvd. to 169th St., and Union Hall from Jamaica to Archer Aves.
WEBSITE: jamaicacenter.org

One thing Jamaica Center has is foot traffic. The population is 643,000. As a major transport hub with the Long Island Rail Road and the JFK AirTrain, Jamaica counts 86,000 visitors per day. What it needs is better publicity.

One of the first things BID director Laurel Brown did was hire a marketing firm to come up with a plan. The logo

"Jamaica Center: Come to Life" came from that. "A strong commercial and retail stretch is the smile of a neighborhood," says Brown, a Harvard-educated lawyer. "Jamaica is a little city with so much potential. A BID can play a vital part in the revitalization of a neighborhood. If people came out here, they would see how great this is."