



Madison's Central Business Improvement District (BID)

August 9, 2010

Recommendations for City of Madison Development Approval Process Review Board of Madison's Central Business Improvement District (BID)

Madison's Central Business Improvement District encompasses the greater State Street and Capitol Square areas. It includes some 220 commercial properties and 370 retail, restaurant, entertainment and service businesses, many of which are locally-owned and/or small businesses.

The aim of the BID is to increase the vitality and health of the district and promote business within it. Our constituents are commercial property and retail business owners in the district, and their customers, both residents and visitors. Specific BID goals include:

- Increase retail sales within the district
- Attract, retain and expand businesses
- Reduce/eliminate retail vacancies
- Foster a healthy business mix: retail, restaurant, entertainment, hospitality, service
- Create a positive experience and welcoming environment for customers: clean, safe, well-maintained, and attractive.

Meeting these goals benefits the city, contributing to economic development, jobs, a healthy tax base, and a vibrant downtown—all especially important in the current economic climate.

To meet these goals, BID property and business owners regularly engage with city staff and approval processes (planning, zoning, building permits) in order to open and expand businesses, and to maintain and improve properties and businesses. Projects range from larger developments to (more frequently) smaller projects requiring approvals for signs, awnings, outdoor dining, building expansions, build-outs, change of occupancy, liquor licenses, etc.

To support achieving these goals, city approval processes need to be clear, consistent, efficient, and need to encourage and facilitate those who want to establish or expand businesses, improve their properties, or propose development projects.

The BID Board recommends improvements to the development and project approval process in two main areas:

- Process
- Customer Service Orientation

I. Areas to Look At

A. Process:

- Efficiency: Current process can be overly complicated even for small projects or approvals, with many committees, layer of approvals, delays.
 - Communication: Requirements and processes can be unclear. Small business persons do not have the expertise to understand long and complicated ordinances, and they do not have the money to hire experts to help them. They need the help of city staff to go through the process.
 - Consistency and clarity: It can be hard to identify where decision-making authority lies. Business people report conflicting decisions by committees; inconsistent responses from staff; and staff requiring changes after approvals already obtained in the process.
- Multiple changes, delays and last-minute requirements are very costly to small businesses. Time = money. Changes and delays that require a few months and/or a few thousand dollars have huge impacts for businesses, especially small ones.

B. Customer Service Orientation

For many business and property owners that the BID represents, their first interaction with local government is with front line staff for permitting and approvals. Many city staff members excel at being helpful, responsive, and customer oriented. However, feedback from businesses indicates that not all staff members meet this standard. It's understood that part of the job for city staff is to enforce rules and policies that people may not like. A customer service orientation can make approvals, regulation and enforcement work more smoothly for staff as well as customers.

- Business and property owners are assets to the community. The city will benefit from a customer-oriented approach to the city approval and licensing processes.

II. Recommendations

- Prioritize funding and staff to create a “Guide to Opening and Doing Business in Madison” manual and website which should be easy to read and understand. Include concise “What and How To” permitting and approvals summaries and flowchart from the business (not city process) perspective, e.g., “I am a _____; I need to _____. ” The 2003 publication “Taking Care of Business” (City of Madison, Office of Business Assistance) provides an existing model to update; the current “Business Licenses & Permitting,” and “Do I Need to Obtain a Permit” web pages are good starts.
- Boil down processes and requirements into simple steps, checklists, definitions, info sheets, so that they are understandable to those going through the approval process (e.g., “Step by step explanation of business licensing.”). The “Alcohol License Application checklist,” “Street Vending application web page,” and “Signs and Street Graphics: Non-residential” process overview web page are good starts.

- Implement a “project management” approach: planning, organizing, and managing resources; and assigning tasks and responsibilities to achieve the project objectives (i.e., approvals) on time and to the specified cost, quality and performance. Identify timeline for successful completion (successful timeline = meeting both business and city deadlines).
- Simplify, streamline process for smaller projects. Have staff “walk” small businesses through the steps. Consider “cross training” to give front line staff members knowledge about many aspects of permitting and approvals for small businesses and projects.
- Assign project manager for larger projects.
- Identify where decision-making authority lies, with the goal of consistency that includes flexibility to consider unique project attributes or extenuating circumstances. In particular, merchants recommend flexibility for signage on side streets to help them stay in business.
- Implement customer service improvement, starting from the top and supported by consistent staff training, evaluation and rewards.
 - Prioritize a customer service attitude for staff involved in approval processes. Approach with a win-win, problem-solving attitude. Recognize that business goals (i.e., helping business operate and succeed, getting decisions on time and within business’s budget) are also the city’s goals.
 - Self-evaluation tools, such as customer satisfaction surveys, exit surveys available at the Planning/Zoning counter, post-project review and debriefing, etc.
 - Ongoing customer service training for staff, to give staff the “how to’s” for maintaining a positive customer service attitude while enforcing city policies and procedures. Create staff incentives for successful customer service.

III. Models, Examples

Recognizing that not all city approvals or processes work perfectly for businesses, several city departments have good models for process and/or customer service orientation:

- Health Department approach to food business licensing and regulation, which is one of education, partnership, wanting the business to succeed. Health inspectors utilize an education approach when visiting businesses, giving appropriate time and progressive steps to correct problems.
- Street Vending licensing website: Describes an approach “designed to assist you in becoming a successful street vendor in Madison, Wisconsin. Information has been organized by vending category. Applications, maps, licensing instructions, checklists, and other materials are included to support you in achieving your goal.” Vending also uses progressive steps, education, in correcting problems with street vendors.

- Street Use Permit Application and process. Clear information and checklists are readily available. Staff are helpful and permits are processed quickly. The Street Use Staff Commission brings together relevant staff and departments to review all aspects of the application.
- Engineering Department: The Engineering Dept. has implemented business-sensitive street construction procedures and contract requirements, and improved communication with businesses and property owners about construction. Engineering took a leadership role in the recent “Road Construction Survival Guide” and Roadworks websites and email listserve. Engineering staff at all levels display sensitivity to business concerns, prioritize good communication, and act quickly to address business issues.

Some BID business owners also own businesses in neighboring communities, and can provide examples of practices that could be good models for Madison. For example, in Fitchburg, city staff came out to a new business site to meet the owner and provide a “Welcome to Fitchburg” business information packet and guide. These customer-oriented actions communicate a goal of supporting business in the community.

Submitted on behalf of the BID Board of Directors,

Mary Carbine
Executive Director
Madison's Central Business Improvement District (BID)
P.O. Box 2136
Madison, WI 53701
t: (608) 512-1340
mcarbine@visitdowntownmadison.com