

# Cities work to attract small biz

## Officials review 'hoops' and master plans

BY NANCY KAFFER

CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

In Royal Oak, it can take nine months to pull a permit. But the actual process takes about two weeks, said interim City Manager Donald Johnson.

That's dead time a task force aimed at business attraction is trying to cut.

Composed of members of the local business community and a Royal Oak-dwelling process consultant, the task force has taken a deep dive into the intersection of business and bureaucracy.

"We have a mission statement to review ... what steps, hoops and circles do business people have to jump through at City Hall to open a business," said Andrey Tomkiw, partner at Royal Oak-based law firm **Tomkiw Dalton P.L.C.**, and a member of the task force. "Streamline what's there and see if some processes are still required."

Royal Oak isn't the only city that wants to become more attractive to small business. With the recession in full swing and vacancy rates rising across the region, the ability to attract small businesses has become a key ingredient in any city's commercial mix.

"We have the **Somerset Collection**, we have the Big Beaver corridor. ... Big Beaver needs to change from being not only a loca-

tion for offices but a mixed-use atmosphere so there's more of a 24-hour life," said Mark Miller, Troy city planner. "And also so we're not putting all our eggs in one basket."

Troy is involved in a massive overhaul of its master plan, designed at creating more mixed-use areas through zoning flexibility. The city hired a San Diego-based municipal consultancy to review its planning, building and engineering department processes.

"They provided us recommendations and identified our good points, but also if we want to be cutting edge, how to go," Miller said. "We took a close look at ourselves and confirmed that we're pretty good, fast in our reviews, but if we want to be great, where we need to improve."

The city is focused on making fast, fair, consistent decisions with regard to regulations and building permits, he said, but it also asks business owners to meet with city officials before starting the permitting process, a measure that's proven particularly helpful with small-business owners.

"One of the things that happens with small-business owners is they're not experts in redoing businesses and developments," he said. "So we need to spend time with small-business people to explain what needs to be done. Some-

times we have to retrain them."

And cultivating a small-business community gives Troy a more diverse tax base, Miller said.

"Obviously our tax revenues have decreased dramatically," he said. "A lot of the Big Beaver corridor was basically office ... the **Kmart** headquarters left, (**General Motors Corp.**) used to have quite a few office facilities in the city, like the **Saturn** headquarters and **On-Star**. If we create a mixed-use environment, we're less likely to lose (occupants) and have so many vacancies like what happened."

Royal Oak plans to start meeting with business owners before the permitting and approval process begins, Johnson said. A lot of the dead time in Royal Oak's permitting process comes from forms that aren't properly filled out.

"We send it back because it wasn't done right by the customer," he said. "So we're looking at what can we do to help them do it right the first time. If we can make those kinds of changes in the process — communication, extra meetings up front — we help them understand the process and what we're trying to do without short-circuiting the inspection process."

"We're trying to make this so people will see Royal Oak as a good place to do business."

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