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Small Business Development Along the Blue Line in Prince George's County

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Abstract

For our Public Policy Senior Capstone, this report analyzes how the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) can help build an ecosystem of support for local small businesses in Prince George's County's Blue Line Corridor. Specifically, our team focused on how to ensure local small businesses in the Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant areas could stay and thrive amid incoming development. To explore this issue, we surveyed small businesses in Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant to determine the issues they're currently experiencing, the resources they can access, and further support they need. We determined that these businesses primarily need assistance with marketing and employment.

This capstone project used background research, surveys/interviews, and data analysis to determine the best methods to support small businesses. It recommends that Prince George's County government highlight these businesses through social media, newsletters, mail flyers, and Yellow Pages; address staffing issues by improving access to workforce systems, job recruiters, and grant programs; and that LISC helps facilitate and inform the creation of community development/business improvement organizations that lead to relationship building and resource allocation among local small businesses.

Executive Summary

Problem Statement

Too many small business owners in Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant lack access to capital resources and vital information, impeding the growth of the Blue Line's local business ecosystem. In partnership with the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), this study evaluates resource accessibility and determines how LISC and other local partners can connect small businesses to the tools (capital, technical assistance, etc.) they need to stay and thrive.

Proposed Solutions

Based on the survey findings, the following recommendations can foster inclusive community development.

Highlight Businesses

- Use hashtags and community stories to promote small business success stories, promotions, and events.
- Develop community “yellow pages” featuring local business updates, community events, and other useful information.
- Use mail flyers to encourage small business engagement and promote discounts or incentives.

Address Staffing Issues

- Partner with county organizations, local non-profits, or recruiter companies to match prospective employees with small businesses.
- Establish a grant program for small business start-up costs to support growth and development.

Promote Involvement and Access to Resources

- Partner with other organizations to host community events and promote collaborations between businesses through initiatives like co-ops and farmers' markets.

Value

Each recommendation addresses the challenges small businesses face in various ways. By highlighting businesses through marketing and advertising, local partners can promote small businesses, attracting new customers. Partnering with local organizations can give small businesses along Metro's Blue Line access to qualified prospective employees and boost productivity. Through this collaborative approach, LISC can help facilitate the creation of a sustainable small business community ecosystem where businesses can learn from one another and access resources to build a strong, resilient community along the Blue Line.

Introduction and Background

Small businesses play a vital role in every community, creating family wealth, fostering community bonds, promoting diversity, and offering local employment opportunities. However, compared to larger enterprises that wield significant influence in the market, small businesses often struggle to access essential resources. The lack of resources highlights adverse selection within the market, driving many small businesses to bankruptcy or foreclosure.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, investigates the root causes of these challenges and assists businesses along the Blue Line Corridor. The Metro Blue Line, operated by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), spans Washington D.C., Virginia, and Maryland, including Prince George's County. In Prince George's County, the Blue Line Corridor comprises four stations: Capitol Heights, Addison Road/Seat Pleasant, Morgan Boulevard, and Largo Town Center. For this study, the scope is the Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant areas. Small businesses in these areas grapple with a lack of capital resources, inaccessible information, and underdevelopment, perpetuating a cycle of hardship.

To address these issues, LISC aims to drive capital resources, including grants, loans, and social capital, to historically underserved communities along the Blue Line. To support LISC's mission, the team developed a small business survey to assess how LISC can collaborate with small businesses and local community members to foster inclusive community development. The survey methods were informed by a comprehensive literature review, providing valuable insights into sustainable business practices and the obstacles small business owners face.

Literature Review

Small businesses are vital to the US economy, but especially vulnerable during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In a research report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dasewicz, Simon, and Ramanujam (2020) emphasize the devastating impact of the pandemic on small businesses and the urgent need for government intervention to ensure their recovery. The study revealed that many businesses lacked access to bank loans and venture capital, forcing their owners to close permanently due to revenue losses. The report recommends short-term measures, such as non-traditional financing tools (i.e., revenue-based financing and crowdfunding), and medium-term actions, such as the development of local financial institutions and markets.

Shields and Shelleman (2015) offer a practicable and applicable structured framework for implementing sustainability strategies for small business enterprises. To accomplish this, they highlight the “SWOT” technique (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to operationalize the objectives of practical sustainable strategies in a small business context. They offer a checklist to determine essential sustainability initiatives that warrant attention that small businesses can use to budget and plan for implementation within their capabilities.

Geroski, Mata, and Portugal (2010) focus on the initial setup of a new business and effects on its future trajectory. The study considers various factors like the business’s characteristics, industry conditions, and overall economic conditions. Their research uses data from annual business surveys and found that larger firms with well-trained staff in more established industries tend to last longer. The findings highlight the importance of a proactive approach to supporting small business owners, especially in underserved communities like those along the Blue Line corridor.

Masurel and Van Montfort (2006) identify the underlying causes that interfere with small business operational efficiency. The article categorizes barriers into two main groups: internal (i.e., marketing, functional, and informational deficiencies) and external (i.e., procedural complexities, governmental regulations, and environmental concerns). The researchers found internal barriers often impact pricing and operational costs, directly affecting a business’s ability to access resources. Meanwhile, external barriers are linked to socio-cultural and political factors; this provides a framework for analyzing the challenges faced by small businesses within the Blue Line corridor.

Supporting small businesses along the Blue Line corridor requires an approach that addresses immediate needs and long-term sustainability. The studies advocate for prevention rather than intervention by guiding budding businesses into better foundational decisions to ensure their longevity. Based on the findings, targeted financing initiatives and interventions are essential to create lasting economic growth in Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant.

Objectives

This study examined existing challenges, evaluated resource accessibility, and explored collaborative business opportunities within the Blue Line Corridor. This report provides strategies to promote sustainable community growth for LISC and local stakeholders.

To achieve this aim, we:

- explored best practices to inform survey development and gain a general understanding of the challenges small businesses face in similar areas
- gathered insights from small business owners in Capitol Heights and Seat Pleasant to identify challenges and assess the accessibility of current resources

- highlighted small businesses that have overcome challenges and serve as models for others through community engagement
- provided recommendations to address the identified challenges and drive capital resources to businesses around the Blue Line.

Survey

The first deliverable requested by LISC was a survey that could answer the primary research question. The survey was entirely qualitative and fielded virtually, via phone call, and in-person. The administration of this survey was paramount to gaining critical insights and ultimately informed our recommended policies.

Mission

The survey's mission was to learn the challenges faced by small businesses, the resources they currently have access to, and to gauge their familiarity with Blue Line development occurring in the Seat Pleasant and Capital Heights areas. Before beginning any community intervention, it's important to establish a baseline knowledge of the area and become culturally literate (Trickett et al., 2011). That baseline is what we sought to create for LISC in fielding this survey.

Questions

The questions were crafted to be easily understandable by any business owner, but comprehensive enough to elicit relevant information. It was designed to be answered in 10-15 minutes but to also allow respondents more time answering questions. The survey asked eight questions.

1. Can you share a bit about yourself, your business, and your typical customers?
2. What made you choose this location?
3. Have you faced any considerable challenges in running your business, especially those you think may be particular to this part of the county?
4. How do you currently cope with those challenges?
5. Looking ahead one, five, or ten years, what would you like to see happen in the county to help you realize your full business?
6. Can you tell us about any engagement you've had with other businesses, community members, or local organizations that have been supportive?
7. What are your thoughts about development along the Blue Line and what do you think could be the most valuable aspect or opportunities for your business?
8. Would you be open to having a follow-up conversation with someone from our project team?

We also surveyed local Chambers of Commerce to learn more about community issues from their perspective. That survey was slightly different than the business survey, changes that were made to fit this new audience.

1. Can you provide an overview of the Chamber, its mission, and the types of businesses you serve in the Blue Line Corridor (Largo, Seat Pleasant, Capitol Heights, Morgan Boulevard)?
2. Are there recurring challenges or pain points faced by area businesses, or that they come to you for help with?
3. Looking ahead one, five, and ten years, what initiatives, changes, or partnerships would the Chamber like to see in the County to support the growth and success of local businesses?
4. What are the Chamber's perspectives on developments like those planned for the Blue Line and how do you see such developments benefiting or impacting local businesses?
5. Would the Chamber be open to any future engagements to further discuss some of the topics mentioned?

Methodology

We reached out to 38 businesses and received responses from 10. As stated previously, we fielded the survey virtually, via phone call, and in-person, each time using the same survey questions to ensure uniformity. The virtual survey was conducted via Google Forms and was emailed to those businesses we could find online. Email had the lowest feedback, one response. Phone call interviews provided modest feedback, with three businesses and one Chamber of Commerce responding.

These phone calls consisted of an introduction of the interviewer, the mission of LISC, and reading the questions for the business owner to answer. We wrote down the answers as the respondents were speaking. In-person surveys were the best received, resulting in five businesses responding. The survey was administered in the same way as the phone calls, but the responses were more comprehensive and in-depth. The in-person method was the most effective and we were able to achieve the most with it.

Challenges

Though a good experience, this survey process was not without its challenges. The main challenge was most businesses' disinterest in participating in the survey, resulting in a significantly smaller number of responses than planned for. This reluctance likely stemmed from the community's unfamiliarity with LISC. It was clear that some owners were suspicious and distrust the work.

For example, one phone respondent repeatedly asked who we represented (LISC) even after multiple explanations. This indicated that the explanations weren't enough to assuage his curiosity and concern. Unfamiliarity created a slow-to-warm environment with this business owner, but upon hearing the benefits of the survey, he was more willing to participate. Seeing as this was the

first time that LISC was working directly with this community, this reaction isn't surprising. Recommendation 3 discusses potential solutions to this challenge.

Additionally, the businesses conveyed that a major issue is understaffing. Therefore, the low response rate may be related to business owners being unable to step away from operations to participate in the survey. Through the literature review, we found that minority-owned businesses have the least access to capital and are least likely to accept outside support. These factors indicate why increased access to collaboration and resources is necessary. These business owners are unlikely to seek these opportunities on their own due to distrust and lack of time, so it's useful to facilitate an easier method of resource distribution.

Another challenge for the report was determining where to direct time and energy. The area is large and it's unrealistic to visit every business. Narrowing the study to certain strip malls or businesses wasn't easy. It wasn't feasible to visit some businesses for logistical reasons. Sometimes we would speak with a business and receive promises of further interaction, but when the time came, many businesses declined.

Findings

Business surveys in Seat Pleasant and Capitol Heights identified key issues and helped in developing strategies for allocating funds and implementing policies. The range of responses was diverse, from dismissive to deeply engaged. But in this diversity, there were common themes.

The most frequent concern was the sense of disconnection within the community. This was exemplified by two businesses focused on promoting health—an herb shop and a gym—both of which were concerned with the lack of local healthy options. Interestingly, these businesses were unaware of each other despite sharing similar values, which emphasizes the need for greater community collaboration.

Another issue identified was the lack of effective marketing, which may correlate with the community's sense of disconnection. By fostering partnerships and calling on each other as resources, businesses can amplify their reach and visibility. However, the challenge lies in overcoming the apprehension to collaborate, often driven by a scarcity mindset among business owners.

Furthermore, many of the area's small businesses struggle with understaffing, making it difficult to provide quality customer service. Community events can be used to promote employee training opportunities, simultaneously attracting potential customers and addressing the staffing shortage. Additionally, businesses raised concerns about community development and crime, with suggestions such as distributing surveillance signage to promote a sense of security.

Addressing these issues through collaborative efforts and strategic initiatives can contribute to the overall prosperity and well-being of the community and its businesses.

Legacy Business Highlights

This section highlights some of the businesses surveyed that demonstrated a commitment to the community. Cafe Curbside tells a history lesson through their food, offering trans-Atlantic flavors on the go. Elife Restaurant (formerly Everlasting Life Vegan Restaurant) provides plant-based soul food that addresses nutritional gaps in the community. Sultanah Secrets Spa offers Nigerian beauty products and services that help women feel comfortable in their own skin. These three small businesses treated us with immense kindness and honesty as we discussed their struggles and successes.

Cafe Curbside



Cafe Curbside is a carry-out breakfast and lunch restaurant located at 72 Ritchie Road, Capitol Heights, MD, 20743. Chef Dre Kellz aims to tell a story about trans-Atlantic Black food through his cooking, featuring flavors from West African, Central American, and North American culture. The business began 10 years ago as “Cooks and Chefs” catering before Chef Dre, along with managing partner Chef Anthony, moved into the brick-and-mortar store. The catering services and Cafe Curbside are both owned under the “Curbside Experience” hospitality group. Cafe Curbside has now been open for over six months serving food such as their Smothered Brisket and Grits and

Salmon Grilled Cheese.

Chef Dre began cooking as a child for his family and his church, but never saw it as a career path until the caterer of a friend’s wedding canceled at the last minute and he filled in to cook for the event. Everyone loved his cooking, which led Chef Dre to consider becoming a chef full time. After consulting with his children, he began attending cooking competitions to meet chefs and watch their techniques. He then began his catering business and started hosting dinner parties to teach the community about Black history and culture through his food. He hopes to become a local staple and build a genuine relationship with the community.

Cafe Curbside offers a wide variety, including breakfast and lunch selections, homemade beverages, desserts, and free coffee. This is an excellent culinary experience. Follow Cafe Curbside on Instagram at [@cafe.curbside](#) and [@ChefDreKellz](#).

Elife Restaurant



Elife Restaurant (Everlasting Life Vegan Restaurant) is a locally owned and operated vegan restaurant, at 9033 Central Avenue, Capitol Heights, MD, 20743. For nearly 30 years, owner Dr. Baruch has served the community with vegan alternatives to traditional soul food, proving that healthy living and enjoyment can go hand-in-hand.

Elife also offer performances by local musicians or see mannequins adorned with thoughtfully made clothing from local seamstresses. This atmosphere of creativity is crafted intentionally for the purpose of edifying the community.

Though Elife has been operating since 1995, not many know about its rich history and deep community roots. When Dr.

Baruch held an office job, he realized that the people around him were suffering due to unhealthy diets and a lack of nutritious food options. Instead of ambulances coming through his community for crime or accident-related injuries, paramedics were arriving to deal with chronic health issues. Knowing that diet was the main cause, he established Elife. The business is a direct response to the oppression faced by communities of color in the form of food deserts and swamps. Rather than dilute the culture of its customers, Elife aims to emulate the known and loved comfort of soul foods. With menu items like Mac-and-Cheese, Curried Chicken, and Candied Yams, Capitol Heights residents can access food that tastes like home without the associated health risks. More information can be found at <https://www.eliferestaurant.com> and at <https://www.instagram.com/eliferestaurant/>

Sultanah Secrets

“Bringing the beauty secrets of Northern Nigeria to the DMV area”

Sultanah Secrets is a full-service, holistic body care spa in Capitol Heights, Maryland created with the mission to create a space for women to glow. Inspired by the experience of not being able to find natural or safe products that fit her skin complexion, owner Nana Shehu set out to “try to focus on what people aren’t focused on” and help women like her love their skin. Now about three years into her business, Nana provides a range of services based in the deep knowledge of both traditional methods she learned growing up in Nigeria, and modern American methods learned in obtaining her certifications, offering trustworthy products that won’t be harsh for her customers complexions.

Services range from traditional full-body baths and scrubs to modern aesthetician services, and her own line of all natural skin care products with organic ingredients from Nigeria, all aimed to make women feel comfortable, confident, and glowing. Shehu operates her business with a passion to offer a unique space for women of different racial and cultural backgrounds. She serves their skincare needs with intentional respect to their culture, which is especially important, given the lack of such a space in the community.

Shehu's soft-spoken, gentle aura and her dedicated work effort speaks to her unwavering commitment to building and maintaining trust with her customers, nourishing their skin in the spa's comfortable, calming, safe, and private setting. Shehu hopes to expand her community engagement by teaching women about the natural herbs they can use to fit their personal needs and making her knowledge of skin care more easily accessible by hosting workshops.

Sultana Secrets is a gem in the Blue Line Corridor, and Shehu's dedication to her mission aims to build community support, bring together women with shared underrepresented experiences, and allow them to learn from each other. As she says, "the more you teach, the more you know." More information can be found at <https://www.sultanahsecrets.com>

Current Programs in Prince George's County

In an interview, Ted Wright, Business Development Specialist at the Prince George's County Chamber of Commerce, spoke about the programs available in Prince George's County. The Prince George's County Chamber of Commerce (PGCOC) has been operating for 100 years and serves 760 businesses across varying sectors including retail, hospitality, construction, and healthcare.

Businesses pay membership fees, offered at different rates based on business size, which allows more small businesses to participate. PGCOC assists their member businesses in many ways.

- Monthly community events that businesses can sponsor by providing food, equipment, or services and so publicize their business to the community.
- Connections to financial resources and business developers for businesses in the Blue Line Corridor.
- Training sessions and mentorships to strengthen business models.
- Collaborations with businesses in the same industry on shared issues, such as laws that inhibit business practices, to create a strong voice when advocating for greater local government support.
- The Chamber has relationships with staffing organizations and workforce systems, such as Employ Prince George's, that can connect businesses to potential employees. These organizations can help alleviate high turnover rates that some businesses experience because

they ensure potential employees are committed to employment prior to pairing them with a business.

- Business directory with contact information.

These are useful resources for Prince George’s County businesses, but they require payment and may not be accessible to all. Prince George’s County government can examine these services and the survey results to identify gaps and programs that would be beneficial to the Blue Line Corridor small business community.

Best Practices

Purple Line Corridor Coalition Small Business Action Team

The PLCC’s Small Business Action Team uses a comprehensive support strategy modeled on business analyst and journalist Jill Schlesinger’s “three-phase small business COVID recovery framework” (*Small Business Action Team*, 2020). Along the Purple Line, the strategy focuses on six areas with high small business displacement and general vulnerability. The action team divides its work into four categories: management and technical assistance, advocacy, marketing, and research and engagement (*Small Business Support Action Plan*, n.d.).

Management and technical assistance are the main features of PLCC’s “on-the-ground” work, which includes direct resources and services. The coalition’s advocacy efforts help influence local, state, and federal policy to support small business owners and ensure equitable access to opportunities, especially for minority-owned businesses.

Marketing focuses on connecting Purple Line businesses to consumers through public campaigns, art, and regional marketing such as the “Purple Line Coffee Trail” or “pupusa trail” (*Small Business Support Action Plan*, n.d.). The 2021 action plan anticipates the effects of the pandemic on small business development. The PLCC continues to explore initiatives, along with its partner organizations, to sustain existing businesses.

Like the Blue Line, the Purple Line runs through Prince George’s County (Purple Line: Overview, n.d.). Its approaches can be adapted and implemented to support small businesses along the Blue Line facing similar challenges and opportunities.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Highlight Businesses

An overarching problem among this community is the lack of outreach and advertising but there are ways to solve this issue. First, establishing a community social media presence will foster connections among businesses and residents. Social media tools include hashtags and community stories on Snapchat and Instagram. These outlets can be used to share success stories, promotions, and events hosted by small businesses to increase visibility.

Newsletters are another option to increase visibility. Developing a monthly or quarterly community newsletter featuring updates on local businesses, upcoming events, and relevant news. It can include articles on the unique offerings and stories of local small businesses; provide tips and resources for healthy living, part of the services offered by health-focused businesses; and showcase employee training opportunities and job openings to address staffing issues. Mailed flyers can be designed to formulate visually appealing promotions, including the local “yellow pages,” emphasizing its role in supporting local businesses. The newsletter could include:

- testimonials from satisfied customers and businesses to build credibility
- highlights of the diverse range of businesses to encourage exploration
- QR codes or unique URLs for easy access to digital versions or additional information.

Promotion could also include practical items advertising the “yellow pages,” such as fridge magnets with the logo and contact information. Items could also offer practical value by including emergency contacts, community resources, or a local events calendar. The products could be distributed to households and businesses as part of a community outreach initiative.

The visibility and usefulness of the “yellow pages” should be promoted through various channels, including social media, newsletters, and mailed flyers. Listed businesses could offer incentives or discounts to encourage engagement. The “yellow pages” should be regularly updated and based on community feedback to ensure relevance and usability. Implementing these strategies can effectively promote small businesses in Seat Pleasant and Capitol Heights, strengthen community connections, and support economic growth.

Recommendation 2: Address Staffing Issues

Some solutions here are derived from conversation with the Prince George’s County Chamber of Commerce. In addition to the proposed solutions, LISC could also work directly with the PGCOG to help fund member dues for under-resourced businesses, giving them access to the Chamber’s services.

Workforce Systems

Many businesses are understaffed or unreliably staffed and need to connect with reliable employees. A workforce system that provides occupational skills training and connects people to jobs could help. The PGCOOC works with Employ Prince George's, which hosts job fairs, resume writing workshops, information sessions, and more. The Prince George's County government and local nonprofits can partner with organizations like Employ Prince George's to match prospective employees with businesses seeking staff members. Local governments could also create a similar model to provide free seminars to help businesses attract employees and to assist residents seeking employment.

Subsidized Recruiting Services

At the PGCOOC, Wright also pointed to the usefulness of recruiters to find reliable staff. Many businesses feel overburdened due to a small staff; owners dedicate their time to ensuring operations run smoothly, rather than marketing or professional development.

People are hesitant to use recruiting companies due to the fees. However, these companies can be helpful in hiring a manager or senior-level employee, ensuring they're qualified and can handle day-to-day operations. It is easier to post on job websites such as Indeed.com, but recruiters ensure that people are responsive and reliable. To make these services more accessible to businesses regardless of finances, Prince George's County can partner with recruiting firms to subsidize services for qualifying small businesses. Hiring a manager or senior employee can greatly reduce owners' stress because it allows them to allocate duties and reduce the overall burden. Owners are less likely to experience burnout and preserve their passion for their business.

Grant Programs for Employee Salaries

An additional barrier to hiring new employees is an inability to fairly compensate them. Opening a new business is a financial risk. Paying employees prior to making a profit can lead to concerning levels of debt, leading new business owners to take on all tasks themselves instead of hiring.

To remedy this, a grant program that assists new businesses with start-up costs can cover costs for new employees, equipment, rent, and more. This grant program would give new business owners the financial security to begin operations and train employees. An additional grant can be created for existing businesses to expand their staff or business operations, with the similar intention of minimizing financial risks.

As noted, business owners can improve their business when they have a staff to cover operations. Creating this grant opportunity would increase thriving businesses in the Blue Line Corridor and create employment opportunities for Prince George's County residents, benefitting all parties. As

businesses improve operations and generate greater profits, it uplifts the local economy and improves overall well-being.

Recommendation 3: Promote Involvement and Resource Access

Collaborative Events through LISC and Local Organizations

This recommendation is closely tied to the theme recognized throughout this research process, to expand the scope of knowledge sharing across the community. We see a distinct unfamiliarity with local support organizations such as the Local Initiative Support Coalition (LISC) and their role. This unfamiliarity leads to apprehension and distrust among small business owners to sharing their experiences and information in the survey and overall effort.

To build trust in organizations such as LISC, facilitating community involvement and collaboration events would be beneficial. LISC is looking to assist in forming community development and business improvement organizations. By hosting events that connect organization members to community members and that enable community businesses to collaborate, LISC can demonstrate a community commitment, enabling them to establish community development corporations.

These connections can facilitate cooperative efforts among businesses to support each other's success, and thereby expand LISC's role and presence within the community. Additionally, multiple businesses expressed concern about a lack of accessible healthy food options and prioritizing farmers' markets offering fresh produce could be effective. An accessible farmers' market would facilitate community connection, demonstrate investment in community health and betterment by providing better food options, and can be an avenue for cooperative efforts to expand product access.

Capacity Building for Young Adults

As LISC works to facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing among businesses, a community liaison position in community development corporations can provide existing knowledge from within the community. One potential approach is opening this position to younger age groups, such as 16- to 18-year-old high school students or undergraduate students.

This approach would offer an opportunity for teens and young adults to gain professional experience. It could provide an outlet for community youth in their free time and reduce the issues of crime experienced by local businesses. It would also provide the perspective of younger

minds who have a different understanding of the community and may be more equipped to connect with small businesses owners.

For instance, young adults may be familiar with small businesses and their employees already and feel a personal stake in a businesses' success. Further, this approach may relieve finance challenges as younger adults can work on a volunteer or part-time basis. Overall, it could facilitate a positive impact on Blue Line Corridor communities, possibly inspiring a new generation of public policy-driven, engagement minded individuals.

Resources and Training

Consistent with the recommendation to increase familiarity with LISC and in alignment with LISC's objective to promote Blue Line Corridor small businesses, initiatives to provide accessible resources and training for small business operations is essential.

Many small business owners have restricted time and resources while operating their own businesses. Further, given this financial restriction, most owners handle their business's financial elements themselves as they lack the resources for an accountant. Providing education for small business owners on the financial responsibilities of their operation, such as the structure of the county and State taxes, how to save, and properly balancing their balance sheets, is a crucial step to accessing grants or loans. One business owner shared that she hadn't even considered reaching out for financial resources because she doesn't know the processes and is navigating her current finances.

Along with educating small businesses on finance, social media workshops would help support operations. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Etsy are applications that can be complex and challenging to use effectively. Many small businesses owners, either through inaccessibility or a generational gap toward social media use, would benefit from learning how to use social media platforms to reach a broader community with their services to increase sales.

Limitations

In the survey we encountered some limitations. First, we had a month and a half to conduct surveys before we had to begin analyzing the results and constructing the final report. With conflicting schedules, it was difficult to arrange field visits and in-person interviews. Capitol Heights is 30 minutes from campus; travel and interview time took three to four hours per trip, which had to be figured out to avoid business closing time or peak business hours. These factors and limited travel means made it difficult to complete the surveys. However, the five in-person visits to the Blue Line Corridor were essential in gaining the responses that informed our report.

Another limitation was establishing credibility with businesses. Even explaining that we were University of Maryland students had little success in generating survey responses. Because most of the businesses were unfamiliar with LISC, they were hesitant to answer and were unsure of our overall purpose. Some businesses were more willing to answer when they learned we were promoting small business success. The businesses most willing to participate were those we had an established contact for. For example, a LISC representative provided the names of some business owners and a reference from the Capital Market helped establish our credibility. However, we were much less likely to receive responses when we were not introduced to a business and could not connect with an exact person to speak with. Establishing stronger contacts prior to visiting may have helped the response rate. Likewise, for LISC establishing familiarity and communication with businesses can help them provide assistance on future projects.

Future Research

In-Depth Application of Policy Issues

The survey research revealed broader, fundamental themes and there are several areas that would be valuable topics for future research. Some key areas were revealed through the conversations with business owners, while others were generated by background research. Some relevant policy issues that weren't explored in depth include the impact of COVID-19, women- and minority-owned small businesses, sustainable development, and the effect of transportation on business accessibility.

The three areas of future research that emerged most tangibly include zoning and grant availability, safety concerns, and multi-layer tax structures.

Zoning and Grant Availability

The first area to research further would be grant availability, particularly in relation to zoning. One small business owner was frustrated that her business fell just outside, but across the street from the Blue Line Corridor boundary, used by LISC to evaluate the use of grant money. It would be beneficial to research the boundaries and remedy any imbalance to enable grant access to community members.

Safety Concerns

Safety was a theme revealed in survey responses. Multiple small business owners expressed concerns about speeding cars on area roads, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr. Highway. Researching strategies and mechanisms to combat speeding, such as traffic cameras, speed monitors, radar or speed reductions should be considered.

Additionally, safety concerns involving shoplifting, carjacking and other motor vehicle related

incidents also came up. Survey feedback revealed that convenience stores are at particular risk for shoplifting, so much so that one owner who ran a convenience store changed the scope of his business to avoid attracting shoplifters.

With these safety concerns in mind, small business owners tend to focus on themselves and their operations; if a safety concern arises, they may not have the time or resources to bring attention to it.

Permit Barriers and Multi-layer Tax Structures

Future research is needed to better understand the barriers businesses face when starting up, a time they are restricted in time and resources. It would be useful to offer financial literacy training, particularly in complex tax structures for small businesses.

The surveys generated feedback about a lack of understanding of permits, licensing, and property taxes, and the notion of being “triple taxed” for fixtures via State, county, and vendor taxes. One owner shared his frustration and confusion, calling it “a bad dream for months,” being taxed for fixtures such as his stove, refrigerator, or light fixtures, after already paying taxes.

The lack of direction from the county or State on the purpose of these taxes, and a lack of resources make it useful to research appropriate taxing procedures for small businesses, to understand if and why this “triple taxing” may be taking place, and what systems can be used to re-evaluate the taxing.

Conclusion

Before improvements can be made for Blue Line Corridor small businesses, organizations such as LISC, local representatives, and their partner organizations need a fully comprehensive understanding of the community making up the Corridor.

This doesn't just mean background research, but also steps to demonstrate a committed investment to personal efforts, building a rapport with or presence in the community, connecting to individuals to build the trust needed to reach a comprehensive understanding of shared experiences. Establishing faith in the project's goals and demonstrating why and how those goals will be achieved, creates an opportunity to generate willing participation from businesses. Easing apprehension and creating realistic abilities for small businesses to participate, act, and engage with organization representatives.

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