

Opinion

A small business crisis clarion call

By Robert Benfatto

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The Coney Island Boardwalk businesses are seen closed early Wednesday morning during the coronavirus pandemic outbreak on May 20, 2020. (Luiz C. Ribeiro/for New York Daily News)

Small businesses are the heart and soul of our communities and the backbone of our economy: This assessment reflects a rare consensus in public life. Unfortunately, the storefront entrepreneurs — retailers, personal service providers, restaurants — that make New York City thrive are facing unprecedented challenges and the genuine threat of extinction.

This was true before the pandemic, when businesses were operating on thin margins due to online competition, unfunded government mandates and bureaucratic red tape, but the COVID-19 crisis has left small businesses grappling with health concerns, operational challenges

and social unrest in their beloved neighborhoods, all of which make recovery seem like an impossible dream. Now is the time for targeted, innovative assistance and real, fundamental change.

The NYC BID Association represents over 93,000 businesses in 76 neighborhoods across all five boroughs. Our members have been on the ground throughout the pandemic, observing how relief measures, despite good intentions, are insufficient and that without further action, thousands of establishments will go out of business, causing their employees to rely on unemployment for survival. Genuine economic hardships have gutted established businesses and have been particularly devastating to the minority, women and immigrant entrepreneurs whose neighborhoods have been especially hard hit.

We propose that New York government take the following steps to enable small businesses to come back to life and bring the city's economy along with them:

1. While different agencies report to different deputy mayors, Mayor de Blasio should appoint one senior official in City Hall to oversee and coordinate an all-agency approach to business recovery.
2. With little to no income right now, small businesses' biggest concern is paying rent. Our local, state and federal elected officials must work together to find a way to bring rent and mortgage relief to our commercial corridors.
3. The city should expand the innovations of the Open Restaurants Program to other storefront establishments and retail sectors by providing reasonable guidelines and rules, then requiring individual businesses to follow those rules.
4. The city should maintain existing siting criteria for mobile vendors and enforce current regulations. Currently, there is no agency enforcing for food or general vendor activities, despite the legal authority to do so. The sidewalks are crowded and pedestrians are at risk, as are brick and mortar businesses trying to avoid bankruptcy and eviction.
5. New York State should streamline the State Liquor Authority process to support entrepreneurs who are willing to make new investments and allow businesses in NYC to operate on temporary licenses as they are permitted to do elsewhere in the state.

6. New York State should activate sales tax exemptions to spur consumer interest similar to those previously employed for clothing in the back to school season.

7. The city should support non-profit organizations working to create markets and pop-up venues in parks and city spaces by easing rules and regulations and by expanding the use of existing, successful programs such as Weekend Walks.

8. New York City should make patrons responsible for their own actions, not the business owner. As long as the owner has set up shop in accordance with the rules, enforcement by police and others should be focused on individuals who violate those rules. For instance, businesses should not pay the price if people buy to-go alcohol and drink it without social distancing on the sidewalk a few doors down.

9. New York State and City should continually review and revise outdated and burdensome rules and laws.

Small business cannot remain the backbone of New York City's economy unless government finds better ways to support their recovery.

Let's act quickly and strategically to get businesses back up and running so we can rebuild our economy and save our neighborhoods.

Benfatto is co-chair of the NYC Business Improvement Association, the umbrella organization for all 76 NYC BIDs. He is also president of the Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance.

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