

COUNTY OF YORK

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 7, 2024
TO: York County Board of Supervisors
FROM: Mark L. Bellamy, Jr., County Administrator 
SUBJECT: Business Advocacy

At your Board retreat in February, you asked staff to examine our existing business advocacy plan while examining areas to improve the process by July. Staff and I have had several meetings concerning this topic and have looked at future opportunities to improve our current program.

The attached memorandum attempts to capture existing and future opportunities in the County. This process continues to evolve and additional details will become clearer in the coming months.

Schott/3326

Attachment:

- Memorandum on Business Advocacy dated June 6, 2024.

COUNTY OF YORK

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 6, 2024

TO: York County Board of Supervisors and Economic Development Authority

FROM: Mark L. Bellamy, County Administrator 

SUBJECT: Business Advocacy

As you requested during the February retreat, staff and I have pondered the topic of business advocacy. The following outlines what we currently have in place, how it operates and what an enhanced approach might look like should the Board decide to delve further into business advocacy.

In order to do business in York County, businesses must comply with various rules, regulations, and processes that are managed via several different County departments. For new developments, redevelopments, changes of use, special use permits, and rezoning, there are additional permits and processes to navigate. Business owners, developers, and investors often need help determining the path they must follow that will get them open and operating as quickly as possible.

Existing Business Assistance Positions

While many employees practice excellent customer assistance in their daily roles, there are currently three positions, housed in three different County departments, whose primary functions are responsible for helping businesses through the various permitting processes required to do business in York County. These include the Economic Development Specialist in Economic & Tourism Development (ETD), the Business Compliance Officer in the Commissioner of the Revenue's (CoR) office, and the Development Coordinator in Planning & Development Services (PDS). All three positions are currently filled by full-time staff.

Economic Development Specialist:

One of the main functions of ETD is to help improve the County's business environment and reputation by providing permitting guidance to new and expanding businesses, and to be a liaison between the business and the various County departments involved in the permitting and development processes. All full-time ETD staff members perform this function as needed, however, the Economic Development Specialist is typically the first point of contact. This staff member serves as the County's small business liaison for new and existing businesses and, as such, performs the following related functions:

- Identifies, via retention calls and visits, existing businesses in growth mode. Assists with expansion options and necessary steps, from start to finish. Directs owners to the appropriate department/staff to help them through the entire process, from the search for a suitable location to the ribbon cutting/grand opening.
- Serves as a connector and information broker between the business owners/managers and related professionals, such as architects, real estate brokers, engineers, etc.
- Attends County meetings alongside business owners when concerns or issues arise. Aims to find a solution that is amenable to both the County and business owner.

Business Compliance Officer:

As the title indicates, this position is mainly responsible for making sure all County businesses are in compliance with licensing and taxation requirements. This is done by assisting new businesses with the required paperwork and fees, and offering guidance and assistance with the related processes, either in the office or by conducting field visits to new and existing businesses.

By ensuring all businesses are operating legally, meaning their use is permitted in their current location, they have a valid business license, and they are up to date on their business taxes, this position helps to maintain and grow the County's commercial tax base. This staff member performs the following functions:

- Responds to phone and counter inquiries and assists businesses with tax and licensing compliance
- Processes business license applications and renewals
- Tracks and reviews Special Use Permits and Certificates of Occupancy
- Generates new and closed business reports for sales tax purposes
- Regularly reviews commercial development locations and conducts field visits to completed sites
- Collaborates with other County departments (Treasurer, Zoning, GIS, PDS, ETD, etc.) as needed

Development Coordinator:

While the main functions of PDS are to manage and approve new site plans and subdivisions and to provide oversight and enforcement of the County's zoning ordinance and building codes, staff are also committed to providing guidance and assistance for businesses navigating these processes.

All PDS staff members work diligently to resolve any issues that arise during the plan review and permitting processes; however, staff recognized the need for a position within the department to help businesses navigate the sometimes overwhelming and confusing processes. In 2008, the Board of Supervisors approved a full-time Development Coordinator position, which has since been staffed.

The Development Coordinator is usually the first point of contact within PDS for businesses looking to construct new space, change the use of, or to retrofit existing space. This staff member serves as the internal liaison between the applicant and the County review staff, with the goal of making all processes as fast and smooth as possible. They are often in constant contact with applicants, from their initial County communication through receipt of their Certificate of Occupancy. As such, they perform the following functions:

- Answers citizen/developer inquiries, provides guidance, and/or directs them to the correct person/department, regarding:
 - Potential for property subdivision
 - Code requirements for landscaping and buffers
 - Site plans and related performance standards
 - Use and location of accessory structures
 - If a proposed use requires a Special Use Permit, or Yorktown Village Activity Permit
 - Site-specific land use or developability inquiries
- Suggests and encourages mutually beneficial solutions to development issues that arise during the permitting process, with the goal of creating a “win-win” situation.
- Attends pre-submission and review meetings for new developments

In addition to these three positions dedicated specifically to business assistance, Fire & Life Safety and Building Safety also have front-line staff members available to help businesses with inspections and permit processes under their purview. We believe this comprehensive compliment of staff and processes provides a valuable experience to the majority of inquiries. However, if the Board chooses to allocate additional resources toward this endeavor it might look like the opportunity below.

Future Opportunity

The three existing positions detailed here focus mostly on helping businesses navigate the County’s many permits, processes, code requirements, etc. If additional funds were approved, the Board of Supervisors could fund a position that goes a step beyond and serves more of an advocacy role for businesses.

Business Advocate Position

In order to improve the County’s business environment, we need to be proactive and visible in supporting our businesses and advocating for more business-friendly codes, processes, and practices.

A highly experienced, full-time Business Advocate could work towards improving perceptions of the County as a great place to do business by engaging regularly with local businesses and addressing their most pressing concerns, through activities such as:

- Hosting listening sessions and focus groups to determine a priority list, then reviewing and suggesting changes to related codes and processes, to help them become more business-friendly.

- Resurrecting the Development Community Training Sessions that proactively explained County codes and processes to members of the commercial development and real estate community and connected them directly with staff members in related departments.
- When issues or concerns arise, advocating on the business's behalf, to achieve a solution that satisfies the owner, but also addresses the County's concerns.
- Ensure the County's webpages and relevant business assistance brochures and guides provide relevant information which make various business-related processes easier to navigate.

While we recommend this full time position be housed directly under County Administration, to avoid conflicts or concerns with specific departments, the person filling the position would be expected to be familiar and well-versed with business-related codes, processes, permits, etc. in all County departments. To be effective the position would need vast experience in these realms with the ability to traverse the various layers within the County. They would need to establish and maintain close relationships with County staff members; community groups, such as local chambers of commerce; the development community; the real estate community; and with members of the business community. This will allow them to know "who to call and when" and help facilitate meaningful and helpful business connections. Training for this position would be challenging as no one position in the County currently handles all possible needs someone may have to get their business up and running.

This outward-facing staff member would strive to help businesses and improve their overall experience with the County by proactively working to improve the relationships between County staff and the business and development communities. They would serve as the "voice of business" for York County's companies.

Olsen/3525