

Avoiding bad business: City works to make Aurora "business friendly"

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AURORA | For years, local business owners have lobbed complaints about the city of Aurora, saying Colorado's third-largest city seemed to go out of their way to make it hard to do business.

At Addis Ababa Ethiopian restaurant on Havana Street, the store's owner butted heads with business inspectors last year about the wall separating her kitchen from an adjoining business.

When 7-Eleven tried to open a new location in 2010, company officials said Aurora had some of the harshest building rules they'd ever seen.

Gayle Jetchick, executive director of the Havana Business Improvement District, has heard plenty of those complaints about doing business in Aurora first hand.

"You would go in and you'd hit a brick wall, nobody was offering solutions," she said.

But city officials say they are working to fix those woes.

Late last year, city officials unveiled the "All 4 Business" initiative that puts emphasis on customer service and aims to transmit clear, understandable information about expectations of city zoning codes and ordinances for both small and large business owners. Those interested in starting or expanding a restaurant, for example, or filling existing vacant office spaces, will receive more personalized, tailored assistance from the city as a result of the plan.

City officials noticed a need for this type of comprehensive change after studying the business environment over the past year and noticing that much of Aurora is fueled by small business start-ups and infill projects.

"I think that because of the change in clientele, there is a need to better explain how to get through our processes," said Nancy Freed, deputy city manager. "The question is how do you explain that information in a way that one of our customers who isn't used to our process can navigate the system."

Jetchick said the initiative was an important step for the city, especially considering businesses can always go to another city if they feel Aurora is too hard to work with.

"It's just the way we've got to be in order to be competitive," she said.

Over the next few months, the city's planning and development officials will be creating a customer service training program and launching a website where developers can track their applications, fee payments, and progress on their projects, among other things.

"The new website and the way the information is going to be communicated is probably going to be really significant for those folks who don't know exactly where to start," said Vinessa Irvin, the city's manager of the Office of Development Assistance.

City staff will also be working on reorganizing the zoning code to make it easier to read and use.

The All 4 Business initiative is the result of an extensive outreach process conducted over the past year that yielded nearly 1,000 comments from 315 participants.

While several local business owners contacted for this story declined to comment on the record because they didn't want to cross city officials they will have to work with again, business people who took the surveys weren't shy about their complaints.

One of the questions included in the survey asked businesses: "In your recent interactions while doing business in Aurora, what did not work so well?"

The question netted some scathing responses.

“The building techs are really unimpressive — not friendly, not knowledgeable, and not effective at their jobs,” a residential architect wrote. “I cannot understand why the submittal process needs to be so convoluted when other jurisdictions have managed to work out solutions.”

Another retail architect seemed ready to yell at someone from the city without pausing for a breath.

“Inconsistent and changing expectations unpredictable process not business-friendly high application cost EXTREMELY LONG review process redundant review process,” the architect wrote in a punctuation-free screed. When asked what went well, some respondents said the system was “fluid and friendly,” and others said city staff was helpful.

Still, even when asked what worked well, some couldn’t think of much.

“Very little. The process was quite confusing and no one there was of much help as to what steps needed to be,” a fence contractor wrote.

Kevin Hougen, president of the Aurora Chamber, said he welcomed the campaign and hoped it would streamline things for businesses hoping to open in Aurora.

“That’s what businesses are always looking at is that predictability,” he said.

Particularly when construction was booming in Aurora, that predictability wasn’t there for business owners, Hougen said.

In large part, the problem was that inspectors were overworked by the rush of new construction a few years ago, and that meant businesses sometimes met with one inspector one day and another the next, he said. Sometimes, the two inspectors interpreted rules differently, leading to headaches for a business owner.

Issues as simple as appropriate light bulbs for fire exit signs or sidewalks that were just one piece from completion could delay a business’s opening, he said.

“That predictability was frustrating, as simple as that might sound,” he said. “It could cost a business a lot more money if they weren’t able to get through the planning process.”

City Councilwoman Molly Markert said the problems can be even more pronounced when business owners speak English as a second language and have to navigate difficult city rules.

“We have some pretty silly rules and to try to explain them in English is difficult enough,” Markert said. “But then you try to put the translation in there, it’s even more complicated.”

Markert’s Ward IV includes a stretch of South Havana Street that is home to a bustling ethnic dining scene, packed with dozens of Middle Eastern markets, and restaurants with Asian, African and European fare.

Markert said the campaign is appropriate, but it’s important that city officials and business owners come together while businesses are in the midst of struggling with zoning and code woes, not after.

Jude Sandvall, a local real estate agent who ran for mayor last fall, said that during the campaign, he often heard from business owners who said Aurora wasn’t a business-friendly place.

“By and large, everybody had some story about how difficult it was to deal with the city,” he said.

Even a church nonprofit said getting the permit for a special-use tent in a parking lot took several trips to city hall and hours of work, Sandvall said.

Any effort to make it easier to do business in Aurora would be welcome, Sandvall said, but the plan needs to be followed through on.

"I'm glad to hear that they are talking about streamlining and making things better, but we have been hearing that for years and years," he said. "It needs to be the primary focus of what they are doing in the city."

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