

Minority Business Roundtable Report

Final Report to the Carrboro Town Council



Presented by:

Betsy Bertram, Interim Economic Development Director

Anita Jones-McNair, Race and Equity Officer

Jon Hartman-Brown, Economic Development Director

Background

In response to the racial issues in our nation and our town in addition to the impacts of COVID-19 led the Council to make a recommendation to the Economic Development Department to reach out to minority businesses in our community. Interim Economic Development Director, Betsy Bertram, and Race and Equity Officer, Anita Jones-McNair, had many meetings to discuss the best way to begin a thoughtful and long-term, sustainable support structure for our minority businesses. Bertram and Jones-McNair decided that the best first step would be to simply listen and hear directly from our minority businesses what support looks like in these times. Bertram and Jones-McNair saw the minority business roundtable discussions on Zoom as a first step in a much larger effort to engage and sustain our minority business community. This specific initiative is also a part of the Town Council's larger initiative to provide better outreach, increase access to information, resources and civic processes for those who have been historically underrepresented in government decision making.

On July 23 and July 24, Town Staff held minority business roundtable discussions meetings via Zoom with various BIPoC business owners and support organizations for BIPoC businesses (BIPoC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and will be used in this report to more specifically differentiate this group from other minority businesses owners such as women). Both meetings lasted approximately one hour with seven attendees on July 23 and three attendees on July 24. Staff attendance included Betsy Bertram as the previous Interim Economic Development Director, Anita Jones-McNair as the Race and Equity Officer, Jon Hartman-Brown as the Economic Development Director. Meetings were attended by African-American and Latinx business owners and support organizations.

The meetings were advertised via email from the Town's business database, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce email database, social media, direct outreach to BIPoC business support organizations, posters that were displayed around the Carrboro and Chapel Hill area and word of mouth.

Findings

During these meetings, staff heard multiple recurring concerns and issues related to being a BIPoC business owner. A phase that continually reoccurred was lack of resources. Staff worked to better distill what specific resources were needed. There was a general challenge in finding financial resources as well as guidance resources for opening, running, and growing a business. It was suggested by one of the participants to consider developing a resource hub that would address financial and guidance resources, but also would address holistic concerns of being a business owner of color, such as access to affordable housing, personal financial advice, and access to transportation, crisis management, and counseling resources. As one participant put it, "if I have trouble paying my rent or for childcare, how am I supposed to have enough money

to start my business?" Generally the discussion resolved down to this concept: if Carrboro wants BIPoC businesses, then those business owners need to be able to afford to live in Carrboro, or they will have to find affordable, reliable transportation to get to Carrboro and if they cannot then they will start their business in the community in which they live.

Another major topic of discussion that continued to arise in both meetings was that of access to facilities or equipment. In addition to affordability issues related to housing, there also seem to be concerns with affordability of business facilities and, as a result, access to appropriate business equipment. More specifically, ensuring equal access to high speed Internet, commercial kitchen space, and training space. We recognize in order to ensure equal access to business startups and/or small businesses, owners need to be able to do basic business/office tasks, such as printing off forms for state licenses or certifications, making copies of documents, and having access to a fax machine or the ability to scan documents to email. Many of these services are offered by the private sector, but can be expensive for a new startup business or small businesses with very little capital. Oftentimes access to these basic resources are overlooked by governmental agencies in exchange for more "flashy" resources that make a good impression on the community, but that may not be as helpful to a fledgling new business.

A lack of transparency in the process of starting a new business was also a challenge that was brought up during these discussions. The participants stated they felt there was a lack of understanding on their part of where to go, what to do, and when to do it as they started or are starting their new business. This was also echoed by many of the BIPoC business support organizations as a problem that they frequently hear about. A lack of complete understanding of how to start a business (especially in particular sectors) can result in significant challenges and potential fines later in the business's life which could easily cause a young business to die.

Lastly, there was a great interest in continuing to have the types of discussions that were held during these roundtables on some sort of regular schedule. Many of the participants stated that they found these discussions extremely helpful and provided an opportunity for them to learn from other BIPoC business owners and BIPoC business support organizations. This type of unstructured discussion allowed for these business owners to openly discuss their challenges with operating a business as a person of color, provided the opportunity to know they're not alone in their endeavors, and that there are resources available to them. These meetings illuminated that the disparities in our business community are great and that there is a real need for long-term support, especially in these unprecedented times, for our BIPoC business community.

Recommendations and Actions

As a result of these discussions, Town Staff are recommending four actions to help resolve the challenges these BIPoC business owners face and to encourage new BIPoC businesses to start.

One, we need to build and foster relationships/partnerships with BIPoC organizations in Carrboro and Chapel Hill. Town and Economic Development Staff must begin to form relationships and improve partnerships with BIPoC organizations within the area, such as the NAACP, El Centro, EmPOWERment, and CommunityWorx. BIPoC business owners look to these organizations for resources and guidance. In the past, the Economic Development Department has not placed an emphasis on reaching these businesses. As such, it will take time and intentional effort to gain the trust and confidence of BIPoC business owners. By continuing to build relationships and partnerships with these existing BIPoC support organizations, we believe this will help speed the building of trust and create valuable partnerships along the way. In addition to these relationships and partnerships, we must work to better our database to include all minority businesses so that we can have consistent communication and equal access to information.

Two, we must provide a centralized point for resources, information, and guidance for starting a business including educational/training opportunities, financing, and other life issues (such as housing and transportation). The obvious solution to this action is to create a webpage or website which can easily be found, and which contains all the necessary information for starting, growing, operating a small business in the Town of Carrboro, Orange County, North Carolina, and the United States. Based, however, on the feedback we received from the discussion and challenges with reliable access to the Internet, it is important that this centralized point also manifests itself physically somewhere within the town limits. It wouldn't necessarily need to be a large, dedicated space, but for those without Internet access it would be a critical step in helping them get their small business started and ensuring that these resources are equally available to everyone.

Three, space should be set aside where some form of co-working facility may be operated. A co-working facility doesn't have to be large. A co-working facility could be a space as small as 500 square feet, but it should be located in a professional business environment and contain basic business/office equipment and services such as printing, copying, faxing, scanning, Internet access, package receiving, and even access to computers. Oftentimes, co-working facilities have fee-based memberships increasing over time and as the business grows. Having such a facility would help provide equal opportunity for those who may not be able to afford a private office when they're starting their business. The goal would be to have these businesses get started in the co-working facility, then "graduate" from the program and open their own building or space in Carrboro. This concept could easily be a public-private venture, but funding will need to be assigned to such an initiative to, at least, offer reduced membership fees for

new businesses that cannot afford a private membership at a co-working facility. Perhaps space can be used in current or upcoming Town owned facilities.

Fourth and last, town staff should continue having conversations with BIPOC business owners no less than once a quarter. It has become clear through this process that the BIPOC business owners and business support organizations who attended these round table discussions were yearning for this conversation and for the opportunity to learn from one another. In order to better ensure equal access to these discussions, translation services should be made available to provide limited English assistance or live translation as necessary. As we communicate, we must also understand that not all cultures place a strong emphasis on the written word as a form of communication. We need to incorporate more graphics, infographics, and other forms of communication that may go beyond a written language to communicate to our businesses. It was unanimous from all participants that these discussions must continue in order to provide fertile ground for these businesses and future BIPOC businesses to be successful in Carrboro.