



For small biz, city sharpens its red-tape scissors

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Friday, May 21, 2010

Mayor Bloomberg is trying to do for business what he's already done for individual New Yorkers: bring a spirit of customer service to government bureaucracy. But it's not as simple as setting up a 311-style hotline—which, in fact, they hope to make more responsive to businesses' needs.

At least 20 agencies are already knee-deep in the process. A website, NYC Business Express, is one of the first offerings. It spells out the permits and licenses that entrepreneurs will need in order to open their businesses. A restaurateur who wants to serve alcohol and have a pool table, say, needs no fewer than 11 city permits and licenses.

The vision in the mayor's office is to eventually provide business owners with one-stop shopping for permits and licenses. Thirty-three licenses can now be applied for online, but that leaves more than 400 paper-based city licenses, permits and certifications, and exams.

City officials say merchants slapped with violations often complain, "I've never heard of that rule." In part, that's because agencies issue hundreds of rules each year. Many are redundant or contradictory. Anthony Crowell, counselor to the mayor, says the administration is streamlining the city's rules to make it easier for businesses to comply with them.

Part of the challenge is cultural. City lawyers are being asked to consider how the rules they write to implement municipal law may overburden small businesses. Agency inspectors who hand out fines may soon find themselves in training sessions that stress customer service.

The administration hopes to allow businesses to be able to pay or adjudicate violations online within 18 months. But the day when business owners won't need expeditors to deal with the city may not come until after the mayor has left office.