



SBS Commissioner Cites Department's Successes

BY THOMAS COGAN
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Robert Walsh, commissioner of the city Department of Small Business Services (SBS), had not been in Sunnyside since the power blackout in the summer of 2006, so he was glad to have a happier occasion, the Sunnyside Chamber of Commerce June luncheon at Dazies Restaurant on June 14, as the basis of his return. His address before a full house covered the jobs situation, Business Improvement Districts, encouragement of entrepreneurialism, cutting into bureaucratic delays and what he would like to see done before Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration comes to a close. He believes the city government can be effective at job creation, was gratified to see a BID had been started in Sunnyside since he was last there, praised entrepreneurial "incubators" and said that small business aspirants these days are finding fewer impediments to opening their enterprises. This last development, achieved through an initiative in his office, must be made to work even better before the current administration expires, he said.

Walsh told the luncheon crowd that SBS was formed during the mayor's first term to replace the Department of Employment. It has employment

centers in several spots around the city, including LaGuardia Community College, and programs at the Queens Borough Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library. The commissioner said he does not find that government has "a broken product" in its job-finding function. In addition to employment centers, the city administration supports entrepreneurial growth ventures. Walsh cited a recent course for more than 100 entrepreneurs that resulted in what he said was a 54 percent growth rate among the participants. The city works with nonprofit entities such as the Kaufman Foundation and for-profit entities such as Citibank, which has funded some of its Business Solutions programs. The problem for many people is access to capital, so Business Solutions has been created as "a proactive, not a reactive program", he said. Walsh said Citi has been helpful steering loan applicants it has turned down to other loan sources that might accommodate them. Eileen Auld, Citi vice president for community relations in Citi offices at 1 Court Square in Long Island City, got particular praise from the SBS commissioner. In addition, he said that 20 law firms have done pro bono work for SBS. Walsh also brought up Business Express, which works to achieve a more efficient permitgaining process for small businesspersons. He referred his audience to its Web site, www.nyc.gov/businessexpress.com, urging them to read it and tell others about its message.

Walsh was enthusiastic about BIDs, having had considerable personal experience with the Union Square BID in Manhattan. He said that there are close to 70 BIDs now in existence; 20 of them have been formed since Bloomberg took office in 2002; and of those, 18 are outside Manhattan. At the time of his last visit to Sunnyside, the Long Island City BID was recently formed while the Sunnyside BID was slowly assembling itself, finally being realized in 2008. Now the process to form a BID in Woodside has been started. The commissioner said he was head of the Union Square BID for nine

years, 1988 to 1997. He knows that the economic situation is troublesome nowadays, but he recalled the time when “improvement” in Union Square seemed unlikely. At one time, students from Xavier, a Jesuit high school not far from Union Square, could be suspended from school if they hung out in Union Square Park, and even when the BID was new, Walsh said, the building on the north end of the square that now houses a Barnes and Noble bookstore was empty and the prospects for its ever being occupied seemed slim. The lesson is that working to correct bad business situations can result in success.

Before the administration changes in 2014, Walsh said, there are more good relationships to build and many more people to get back to work and in business. Though these days there are others who would disagree, Walsh maintained: “We’re on to something that government should be doing.”