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By **Hayden Mitman** 08/24/2011 12:12 pm

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(From left) Tracy and Mia Levesque outside of their newly renovated Yikes, Inc. storefront. The Office of Business Services helped them rehab the buildings.

The Office of Business Services is using the web and local directors to help spur business in a notoriously unfriendly business culture.

Even as Fishtown's Johnny Brenda's has grown in popularity and prestige over the years, visitors to the hip eatery and music venue couldn't be blamed for noting the lack of surrounding scenery.

Most glaring were the vacant and (sometimes) boarded up windows of 204-206 E. Girard, located just across

the street from the tavern's spacious dining room windows.

Today, patrons instead look upon the stylish and super environmentally kosher headquarters of Yikes Inc., a Web development company.

And, according to Yikes co-founder Tracy Levesque, that renovation and the jobs that come with it might never have been if it weren't for the helping hand of the city's Office of Business Services.

Levesque said the city agency was a huge help when it came to securing the funds needed to transform their new building from a water-damaged mess into a new and sustainable office space.

"I tell other small businesses about it," she said. "It's hard for [the Office of Business Services] to get word out about their services, but they are just great."

It's stories and results like those the agency wants hear more of as they launch new initiatives aimed at making doing business here easier.

Doing what they can

Starting and sustaining a small business in a big city like Philadelphia can be complicated. There's plenty of paperwork to complete just to legally operate in the city.

Also, it's long been a complaint that businesses are faced with being taxed twice as they need to pay a tax on gross receipts and the city's business privilege tax.

But, the city's Office of Business Services is ready to combat any confusion and help support small business owners.

The office is launching a new Web site that expands the services offered and helps business owners organize information and keep track of their dealings with the city.

To help grow businesses, Kevin Dow, chief operating officer of the city's Commerce Department, said a new Web portal — which will launch in September at

www.business.phila.gov — will allow each business owner to create a personalized account to organize their paperwork.

A key aspect will be what he called a "wizard" feature, an element that lets would-be entrepreneurs select the type of business they are hoping to bring to the city and find out the steps they need to take to get it done.

"It will kind of create a home page for you," said Dow. "Businesses can create their own account and it will help organize their paperwork."

Dow said that, while the issue of how the city taxes business owners may be out of his hands, his agency helps in other ways.

"We recognize the tax structure isn't as conducive as we'd like," said Dow. "But, we focus on what services they get for those taxes."

"If we can make [starting a business] an easier process, business owners might be more comfortable in the City of Philadelphia," he continued.

Start ups and growth

Bringing new small businesses — and helping those here to grow — is a major focus of the Office of Business Services, said Dow. The city needs these types of businesses if it's going to grow as a thriving urban center, he said.

"Government doesn't create jobs," he said. "Businesses do."

Dow said his office works with lending firms to secure capital for starting and struggling businesses. helps businesses acquire vacant properties for expansion. and helps owners find tax-incentive programs in order to save some money.

Locally, the office is helping the New Kensington Community Development Corp. to secure a vacant property at 2721 Ruth St.

Sandy Salzman, executive director of the NKCDC, said the property has been a concern for some time. Last year, because of damage to some of structures, roughly two-thirds of the buildings on the property were demolished by the city. All that remains is a concrete building that she said could be used as an art workshop for metal work or something similar.

"The Commerce Department has been really helpful," she said last week. "With a little luck, we will get that building and turn the neighborhood around."

"It's just really sad," she said. "The building just sits there deteriorating."

A local focus

To help support local businesses, the Office of Business Services divides the city into service areas based on ZIP codes, which are then managed by a business services manager.

Jericho Evans works as the services manager in Bridesburg, parts of Port Richmond and areas of North Philly.

Evans said he works directly with local businesses to ensure they can clear the many hurdles and red tape of City Hall that can confuse and frustrate those hoping to start a business.

"Lots of businesses have problems with L&I," he said, referring to the city's Department of Licenses and Inspections. "That unit is just so large; we try to help navigate that."

Recently, he's worked with owner Tom Burke of Wall Street Systems Trucking Company and Burke Plumbing and Heating at 4055 Richmond St. to handle some issues with L&I.

Evans said the business, which employs between 10 to 20 people, had concerns so complicated that its owners considered leaving the city.

That threat is over, and while Burke said last week he didn't want to talk about the issue because he's not yet finished with the necessary paperwork, Evans said the business is now in complete compliance and should have no fear of having to leave the city.

"We had a conversation with the business owner, and it was actually the fault of L&I," said Evans.

Dow said that without employees like Evans — the city is separated between about seven managers working directly with small businesses — the office wouldn't be as "active and reactive" to the needs of business.

"They get to know the businesses out there," he said. "We want to grow all of them."

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