



Looking at the city thru the eyes of small business owners

This article is part of a series exploring what various sectors of the community value about their city government. Local small business owners say well-implemented laws and regulations make it easier for businesses to get up and running, operate in a safe environment and attract customers.

Larry Miller is the founding partner and president of Asset Management & Planning in West Columbia, which has been in business for nearly 15 years. Miller also is an active member of the community, serving as vice chairman of the West Columbia Planning Commission and chairman of the West Columbia Beautification Foundation. Being involved with both boards has given Miller insight into how city services are valuable to businesses.

"Working on the Planning Commission allows me to understand the overall master plan the city has for the future," Miller said. "We can therefore make better informed decisions on zoning, water and sewer, traffic or other items involved in new development."

Projects completed by the Beautification Foundation make the city more appealing for everyone, Miller said. "A better-looking area attracts people who want to raise their families here. It also makes it more appealing for any business to do business in the area."

Miller said his company has grown over the years because of the business-friendly climate in West Columbia.

"West Columbia wants business—they do all the things necessary to make a business feel wanted," he said. "Our clients feel good about coming here."

John Bauknight feels good about his restaurant, RJ Rockers, moving back to its roots in downtown Spartanburg in August 2009.

"Had it not been for the speed of city permitting, as well as grant dollars made available, we could not have made the move within the necessary timeline," Bauknight said. "As we have expanded the business, we have continued to have cooperation from the city. One thing that you cannot afford as you are growing a business is any delays in products or services. The city has added value to our growth by keeping up with required timelines on permitting, etc."

In addition to being one of the owners of the restaurant, Bauknight is president of a real estate investment firm, Longleaf Holdings, LLC. He has invested in buildings, renovations of businesses and multifamily residences in downtown Spartanburg

Bauknight said that beautification efforts and city-sponsored events downtown also help his businesses. Festivals such as Music on Main and Art Walk attract people downtown and draw them into his restaurant.

Small businesses make up the majority of all businesses in the United States, and it's no different in Spartanburg, Bauknight said. It's important for small business owners to be involved in the community and to voice opinions to local officials so they are informed as to what the needs are, he added.

"Longleaf worked closely with the city on our Magnolia Lofts Apartments. There was—and still is—a dire need for more folks living downtown. Through much discussion, the city not only loaned money for the project but they also

became an equity partner on top of the loan. Why? Because we communicated with one another on needs," he said.

Brad Mallett and his wife, Jacki, opened Coastal Coffee Roasters in downtown Summerville in November 2010. In addition to the coffee roasting business, they operate a cafe and rent out space for an entrepreneurial kitchen. Mallett and other partners are also about to open a new establishment, Oak Road Brewery.

Last year, Mallett served on Summerville's Business License Review Commission. He had been involved before with politics and economic development efforts in New York, where he lived previously. As a small business owner, he realizes the importance of staying involved, of knowing what is going on in local government and how it affects his business.

Mallett recognizes that building codes are needed for safe buildings but thinks some codes could make it difficult for small business owners to operate out of older or historic buildings, especially in the Lowcountry. Mallett wants to see a cooperative relationship between the city and small business owners, and to make sure the costs of doing business in Summerville are comparable to neighboring communities to encourage growth.

Mallett said Summerville's mayor and director of economic planning are doing a great job attracting growth to the city. Going forward, he noted, more assistance and incentives for start-ups, and continued improvements on infrastructure would be great.

Gianpaolo Bonaca is co-owner of The Mill House and Good Times Brewing in Greenwood. Bonaca has been self-employed or operating a business with a partner for 12 years. He actively

participates, provides feedback, and shares information with local government officials and planning agencies.

Bonaca said local government has directly impacted his business in a number of ways, including recent ordinances allowing alcohol to be served on Sundays and to be consumed on government property at organized events. These changes have made it viable to open his restaurant on Sundays and have cleared the way for more sanctioned events on public properties to draw people downtown. City officials also erected crosswalk and road safety signs, improving the safety of pedestrians walking downtown.

Revitalization efforts and city-sponsored community events improve the area's quality of life and make Greenwood a destination for visitors, he said. This, in turn, creates a larger consumer market that encourages economic growth in the community, Bonaca said.

Attorney Brian Martin opened his law office in downtown Greer 10 years ago. He purchased a building on Trade Street, moving his offices into the downstairs and renovating the second floor to create two large loft apartments for rent. Martin also is deeply involved in the community, serving as a member of the Planning Commission, past chairman of the board of the Greer Chamber and current chair of the Partnership for Tomorrow.

Martin said about 70 percent of his business is real estate related, both

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residential and commercial. In both aspects, local government is involved in some way. The City Planning and Zoning Department must approve any new surveys of property within the city limits before they can be recorded. New developers coming into the area typically meet city staff early in their site selection process.

City services benefit his business in a variety of ways, Martin continued.

He noted that a clean downtown is certainly more appealing to the clients coming to his office. Plus the commercial transactions typically can't happen without rezoning, and the construction loans don't go very far without the permitting.

"But the best benefit for me is the personal interest of the city employees that care greatly about this town and the people in it," Martin said. "If I have any

issue, regardless of whether it is personal or business related, whether my issue or a client's issue, I know the people at our city will respond to my call, will care about the situation and do what they can to resolve it. That's the biggest value to me of all because it allows me to be able to help my clients better and more efficiently than if the city's focus was elsewhere."

Quality-of-life aspects also are a critical component to development and successful businesses in any community, Martin added. Greer civic leaders recognized this 15 years ago when they formed the Partnership for Tomorrow to help create and fund festivals in downtown, he said.

"The Partnership involves both public and private entities to work together for the betterment of our community on economic development and quality of life issues," Martin said. "It's absolutely awesome. Quality of life efforts benefit small businesses by bringing people into the downtown to see what we have and making them want to come back again."

Businesses cannot operate in a vacuum, and business owners need to be involved and aware of what goes on in their community.

"If you aren't involved, then your business is at a disadvantage," Martin said. "I also think it is important to be involved to establish relationships with those that work in the local government to better understand how they can assist your business when you need it. That has definitely allowed me to be surer of what I can or can't do to help a client when they walk in the door."

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