

# COMMUNITY OUTREACH DATA

## Introduction

Throughout this study, we have conducted over 100 meetings with 1,500 people. The input of these individuals, organizations and the citizens they represent helped guide the process of this study and provided invaluable first-hand experiences and resources. While the influence of the community involvement, expert insight, and personal experiences has impacted the whole of this study, there are several specific suggestions and narratives common throughout this process to the extent that they merited direct note and researched suggestions. Most of the comments and feedback fell primarily into three categories: Communication & Responsiveness, Licensing & Permits, and Supports & Services. It should be noted that much of the feedback can fall into multiple categories and the following is only a sampling of the input received.

## Communication & Responsiveness

- A member of the West County Chamber of Commerce noted that their municipality assigns a police officer to work with businesses in the community. The officer helps monitor the area for suspicious activity and advises business owners/operators on ways to reduce theft in their stores. The community has grown to view this officer as a welcome liaison between the city and their businesses. (March 18, 2014)
- A participant at a sponsored discussion in the Old North neighborhood of St. Louis City commented on the convenience of the Citizens' Service Bureau and the ability to report any problems to the city government and track the progress of their issue online. (April 9, 2014)
- A member of the Young Asian American Professionals Association commented that he has moved his business from one municipality to another because of the difficulty in dealing with a larger city. The new home to his business had the city's treasurer walk him through the process of permitting and licensing his business and he regularly received check-ins from the mayor or other city officials. This was described as a welcome change. (March 12, 2014)
- A participant in the sponsored discussion at Afro World described an experience of trying to start a business and not receiving any assistance from an alderperson to whom she had reached out. Communication was lacking and others also noted the frustration with simply receiving follow up when reaching out to elected officials. The experience encouraged one participant to end pursuing a business in that municipality and to seek a friendlier environment in the area. (April 8, 2014)
- When canvassing immigrant-owned businesses with an interpreter, it was noted that health inspection of restaurants was often frustrating. Restaurant owners described inspectors coming to the business, looking around and "slapping a sticker on the window" without any explanation of how to comply better with the regulations. (April 22, 2014)
- Another non-native English-speaking business owner spoke of his frustration with the lack of effort to communicate with individuals for whom English was a second language.

The individual felt as though he was trying to contribute positively to his community but was not valued by the government of his city enough to get beyond language barriers. (April 22, 2014)

### **Licensing & Permits**

- An officer of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce described an instance in which one of its members submitted plans to a municipality in the county for approval and waited nearly two months before hearing back. The potential business owner only heard back after calling the city permitting office and discovered the plans had been reviewed and were sitting in wait without notice to the business owner. The chamber officer also noted that the city in question was generally lacking in its responsiveness to requests of business owners. (February 20, 2014)
- A startup business owner expressed frustration with the lack of options for acceptable forms of payment when it came to paying fees for licensing, taxing, and permitting. The city he lives in only accepts cash or money orders and he wanted to see that expanded to checks and electronic payments. (March 27, 2014)
- A staff member at the International Institute of St. Louis indicated sometimes their clients are frustrated by receiving incorrect advice and information from municipal employees regarding compliance with regulations. She spoke of at least one instance in which business owners were told one thing by an onsite inspector then advised differently by either another inspector or an employee in the city's office. (April 17, 2014)
- Another employee of the International Institute noted the cost of doing business in the area was sometimes prohibitively high. This was particularly challenging for many of their clients because of their desire to start business in the area and limited resources. Further, he noted that often the presence of multiple taxing districts made it difficult to fully understand whether a business was in compliance with local regulations. This was especially difficult in areas where there were multiple layers of government such as community or neighborhood improvement districts. (April 17, 2014)
- A business owner on Cherokee Street noted the difficulty in complying with regulations and standards around street signage. In addition to having to navigate somewhat complex rules, the process was costly and left the owner frustrated. (January 24, 2014)
- Multiple business owners and entrepreneurs at the Fortune Teller Bar sponsored discussion on Cherokee Street noted frustration with having to visit multiple offices at city hall to even understand the process of licensing a business. They were further frustrated by inconsistent information from office to office and at times a perceived lack of knowledge and communication between the various offices. (April 2, 2014)
- A business owner in the Soulard neighborhood spoke of wanting to expand his business to another community in the region but was so overwhelmed by the prospect of learning a new set of rules and navigating an entirely new system of government that he decided against it altogether. (April 17, 2014)
- A developer from the Chesterfield Chamber of Commerce noted his frustration with the permitting process in some cities in the county. The offices were not always responsive

or receptive to anticipated new development and it was often tiresome and untimely trying to get approval, even for seasoned veterans. (May 6, 2014)

### **Supports & Services**

- An employee at MOKAN expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of workforce utilization standards in parts of the region and the difficulty that presented in developing a diverse and representative workforce for the future. (April 14, 2014)
- Individuals at sponsored discussions on Cherokee Street, in Old North, and at the West County Chamber of Commerce all noted police protection as the most important service their cities provide them. They also mentioned adequate snow removal and general street maintenance as top priorities to their businesses.
- Individuals at the Mosaic Project, the Cherokee Street sponsored discussion, the West County Chamber of Commerce, and the Old North sponsored discussion all mentioned a desire for a more accessible way to understand the business licensing procedures across the region. Suggestions included a central website for guidance in each of the communities and having designated staff members whose job it is to guide new business owners through the process.
- Community members at sponsored discussions in Old North, on Cherokee Street, at the West County Chamber, and in several other community forums expressed a strong desire to see many of the aforementioned processes explained in a centralized website. In addition to wanting information online, business owners at the Fortune Teller Bar discussion indicated their hope to be able to apply for licenses and permits online in the future.

### **Conclusion**

While the above represents only a portion of the feedback provided to Better Together, there are some overarching themes that ultimately helped guide the research and findings. The cities that received consistently positive feedback were the ones whose leadership had prioritized relations with the business community. Often this meant dedicated staff members to work with business owners or clearly stated processes in city communications. Likewise, the frustrations of individuals, regardless of location, typically stemmed from poor communication and lack of consistency. There was a strong desire from emerging and young business owners to move many of these systems online and to use local governments' websites to streamline the business licensing processes. The overwhelming message received by Better Together was that simplification of processes across jurisdictions and responsiveness to the everyday needs could go a long way to creating a friendlier environment for current and future small- to medium-sized business owners in the region.