

City's Neighborhood 360 Program Aims to Help Bronx Small Businesses Thrive

By Erin Clarke
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Mom-and-pop shops are an often-overlooked piece of the city's economy. But now the city is distributing millions of dollars in grants to help the commercial corridors where many of these businesses are located. As Bronx reporter Erin Clarke explains, a Bronx neighborhood in flux is one the city is focusing on.

Business is good at Eddie's Place African Market in the Bronx.

A diverse mix of customers stops in the store daily for imported goods and foods that are hard to find anywhere else.

However, Stephanie Afum, whose father opened the market 25 years ago, says basic improvements to the commercial area near Jerome Avenue could bring even more customers into the area.

"Around the holidays, they get to decorate and put little signs up 'Merry Christmas,'" she says.

The city's department of Small Business Services agrees. It has launched Neighborhood 360.

The program will award up to a half-million dollars a year to community organizations for projects to revitalize commercial corridors.

The goal is to boost business by making these areas more inviting.

"A local community-based organization can apply for grants," says Gregg Bishop, Commissioner of Small Business Services. "Come up with a new design that would increase street scaping, add benches, adding more lighting."

As part of the program, paid staffers already have been placed at community organizations to help them navigate city resources and complete their projects.

"She becomes an expert on SBS's programs and then she comes to us and she can make recommendations," says Alix Fellman, senior program manager at WHEDco. "Having that inside access has been really critical."

And the Neighborhood 360 program seems to address some of the concerns of business owners here in an area facing rezoning by the city.

That's the plan the de Blasio administration has for a 73-block area along and around Jerome Avenue.

The city's Small Business commissioner says his agency is working closely with businesses fearful of being displaced, like local collision and body shops, and other automotive merchants.

"One of the things that could be funded is actually helping the auto part stores become more compliant with government regulations," Bishop says.

Helping small businesses adapt to change, whatever that may be, so they can stay continue to be a vital part of the city's economy.

For more information about the program, go to nyc.gov/neighborhood360.

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