



2013 VACo Achievement Award Nomination – Loudoun County Business Assistance Team

Program Overview

In order to advance commercial and industrial development in Loudoun County, the Board of Supervisors established a process to review impediments to economic development with the goal of making the expansion or start-up of a commercial or industrial enterprise more business friendly. As a result of the review, stakeholders who took part in the process recommended the creation of an ombudsman role to aid and guide businesses unfamiliar with the county's regulations through the county's development process. With over 7,300 companies in the county employing 20 or fewer employees, and understanding that most small business owners only go through the permitting process once or twice during their business lives, the county decided to focus on assisting small businesses. To fulfill the role of ombudsman, the Board of Supervisors created the Business Assistance Team (BAT). The primary goal of the Business Assistance Team is to provide the services needed by small business customers who are going through the county's permitting processes no matter where they enter the county. The keys to the county's approach are 1) cross-training of front counter staffs, 2) designating specific contacts or "ombudsmen" in each department, 3) providing clear, easy-to-read directional signage to each department or agency involved in the permitting process, 4) offering an easy-to-access web connection to needed resources through the BAT web pages, and 5) reaching out to partners outside of County government such as the incorporated Towns, the Loudoun Small Business Development Center, the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, and Dulles Area Association of Realtors, among others.

Category: Community/Economic Development

The Challenge

On February 14, 2012, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) approved a work plan to review the Revised 1993 Loudoun County Zoning Ordinance for the purpose of developing a zoning ordinance amendment to advance commercial and industrial development throughout the county. The review included aspects of the Zoning Ordinance identified as impediments to economic development with the goal of making the process of expansion or start-up of a commercial or industrial enterprise more business friendly.

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Creation of the Business Assistance Team (BAT)

On October 12, 2012, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors created the Business Assistance Team based upon recommendations from the stakeholders. The Business Assistance Team is composed of representatives from several departments who specialize in a particular area of the commercial development process, such as permitting, licensing, mapping, zoning and more. BAT members are drawn from the following Loudoun County agencies: Building and Development, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Commissioner of the Revenue, Health Department, Mapping and Geographic Information, Economic Development, Office of the County Administrator and Planning. The BAT group also maintains a close relationship with Loudoun County's seven incorporated towns and their economic development offices, the Small Business Development Center, and Mason Enterprise Center.

The primary goal of the Business Assistance Team is to provide the services needed by small business customers no matter which department the customer contacts first. Because many potential or existing small business owners are not sure of the county's process, they may come into one county department, such as the Commissioner of Revenue Office, because they know they need a business license but they're not sure where to go next. With the BAT group in place, the

county is able to provide a seamless and coordinated experience for business customers so that they're always in the right place.

The first step the BAT group took was to provide cross-training for all front counter staffs. In addition to making sure the front counter employees understood where to direct customers who needed to complete the steps through the county's permitting process, the training boosted the confidence and ability of those on the front counter to assist these new entrepreneurs through the process. At the same time, the Business Assistance Team designated ombudsmen in each department/division to ensure that customers would have an expert to help guide them through each step of the process.

The county established two informational kiosks in the heavily-trafficked lobby on the first floor of the Loudoun County Government Center in Leesburg. The kiosks include easy-to-read directional information for small business owners and they also display Business Assistance Team cards that provide contact information for specific contacts in each of the county departments involved in the permitting process. The cards also include the www.loudoun.gov/bat address as well as a QR code so that people can scan the code with their smartphone and immediately connect with the website. These cards have proved very popular and have been instrumental in getting entrepreneurs connected to the services they need.

Another very important step the Business Assistance Team has taken is to add BAT web pages to the Loudoun County website, www.loudoun.gov/bat, to easily direct small business owners to the resources they need. The new BAT pages brought together information and resources that were already on the website, but that were scattered in different locations and not always easy for the public to navigate. The BAT webpages have links to the departments and resources needed for small businesses, providing quick and easy navigation to get people where they need to go. The webpage has been up since January 16th of 2013 and received 249 visits with 661 page views during the four months that followed.

Although each department represented on the Business Assistance Team has a contact listed on the website, the team leader's name and contact information are prominently featured on each BAT page. Based on the telephone calls

and e-mails received by the team leader through the website, it's clear that people are finding the BAT webpages and finding the information they need to help them navigate the commercial development process.

The BAT group is also reaching out and coordinating with partners outside of the Loudoun County Government, including the Towns, Loudoun Small Business Development Center, Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, and the Dulles Area Association of Realtors, to be sure that everyone is aware of the services available.

The launch of the Business Assistance Team received a good deal of media coverage. The county's news release on January 16, 2013, announcing the launch of the BAT was sent to the local media, large homeowners associations, 15,000 subscribers of the county's Alert Loudoun system, and was posted on the county's Facebook and Twitter sites. The news release was picked up by several news organizations, including the Ashburn Patch, Leesburg Today, the Loudoun Times-Mirror, Modern DC Business, the Washington Business Journal, and The Washington Post.

The Loudoun County Business Assistance Team provides a model that can be reproduced in other jurisdictions. Other than the minimal cost of printing the Business Assistance Team cards with contact information and the posters for the lobby of the Loudoun County Government Center, there was no additional cost to the county for implementing the BAT. The keys to Loudoun County's approach are 1) cross-training of front counter staffs, 2) designating specific contacts in each department to provide immediate and professional service, 3) making it easy for customers to locate departments and agencies with directional signs, 4) providing an easy to access web connection to needed resources, and 5) reaching out to partners outside of the Loudoun County government.

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