

# NORTH ADAMS SMALL- AND MID-SIZE BUSINESS FORUM

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and the City of North Adams co-hosted a feedback session for local businesses on September 12. This event was specifically targeted to the owners or managers of small- to mid-size businesses (up to 50 employees) within North Adams. Businesses were issued direct invitations from Develop North Adams, North Adams Tourism Bureau, and the City. The morning meeting was held in North Adams, at Gallery 51 with 20 area businesses participating.

The one-hour focus group was designed to receive comments from each person in attendance on each topic. Nine topic areas were introduced as relate to starting and operating a successful business. Participants were provided with post-it notes to write the issues or suggestions they had for fostering a more business-friendly environment in the city. Participants were given two minutes per topic to write down all ideas or suggestions in each of the following areas:

1. **Business planning:** What are your business planning needs for starting or expanding your business?
2. **Access to capital:** Do you have access to the loan products or other sources of capital needed to start and run your business?
3. **Space:** Are the commercial and industrial spaces in the region set up to meet your needs or are there gaps in the supply? Other issues with finding and occupying the space you need for your business?
4. **Legal compliance:** What legal needs have you encountered that state, regional or municipal entities could better assist with? This could include understanding and complying with labor laws, legally establishing your business, tax issues or questions, etc.
5. **Permits and compliance:** What issues or ideas do you have for improving state and local permitting or compliance processes as they impact your business? This could include your interactions with planning and zoning boards, boards of health, building inspectors, etc.
6. **Workforce:** What workforce needs do local businesses grapple with? What are the issues and needs in terms of finding and retaining qualified, high-quality employees?
7. **Marketing:** What marketing needs or ideas do you have to improve your business performance and that of the larger region?

8. **Customers/community:** How is your customer base, or how do community conditions near your business impact your business or the business district in which you are located? This could include crime, code violations, etc.
9. **Anything else?** Do you have issues or ideas you have not yet had the opportunity to share in one of the other categories? Please add them here!

As each topic was completed, staff collected comments and placed them on sheets along the walls of the gallery. After all comments on each of the nine topics were gathered, participants were provided eight sticky dots and invited to review the collective comments of the group and place a dot next to the ideas they thought were the most important. The following summary lists the suggestions by topic. Where there were commonalities in the comments received, individual notes were grouped by the general theme. The numbers next to specific comments (#) show the number of dots that particular idea received. The “group score” shows the number of votes by the larger theme.

**The Top Three:**

1. **Make the Downtown more lively, distinctive and customer-friendly (6)**
2. **Build on community pride to help move city forward – buy local! (5)**
3. **Finding space or creating the space you need (5)**

This forum was hosted as a joint initiative of BRPC and North Adams to help inform the economic policies to be included in the city’s new Comprehensive Plan. A public workshop will be held during the fall of 2012 to broaden the dialogue on long-range economic policy and needs for the city.

## BUSINESS PLANNING

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Business planning 101 and new business mentorship</b></p> <p>Total group score: 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating mentorship: partnering seasoned business owners with new business owners.</li> <li>• Strengthening existing resources (banks and small business organizations) with mentorships, allowing new businesses to be ‘mentored’ by those that have done something similar in the city to expand their business etc. (1)</li> <li>• Offer start-up mentoring for new businesses.</li> <li>• Facilitate relationships between mentors or experienced business owners to work with new businesses—to identify types of issues that could affect new businesses.</li> <li>• Offer small business advising: somebody who could review business plan and make suggestions for success.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Streamlined information &amp; process</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote clear and concise guidelines with assistance from city and chamber like organizations.</li> <li>• Streamline process for business start-up or expansion.</li> <li>• Offer clearer guidance in city hall for business compliance, like a standardized checklist.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Better understanding of existing services offered through municipalities and other economic development groups</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing and hosting ‘one-stop’ for business relevant information.</li> <li>• Organized, online information about city resources for businesses/ organizations.</li> <li>• Assistance in navigating city/ state planning process.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Events that offer continuing education and networking to business owners in the region</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular forums for new business ideas might be helpful.</li> </ul>

## ACCESS TO CAPITAL

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Flexible money – grants, non-bank loans or low-risk venture capital</b></p> <p>Total group score: 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage non-bank funding opportunities: address lack of local angel/venture capital network.</li> <li>• Consider a local revolving loan fund (such as past CDC revolving loan fund). (1)</li> <li>• Enhance opportunities for start-up business seed money, including micro-loans (3)</li> <li>• (Startup) Money should be attached to business training and support.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Better access to capital through local banks</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage support for small businesses via local bank loans.</li> <li>• Work with local banks and business community to identify gaps and facilitate understanding of needs, criteria, current products, additional products that may be needed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Guide to business funding</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a workshop or presentation by financial institution to let us know what is available and what restrictions are... etc.</li> <li>• One place where financial institutions have hand outs of what financial help they have.</li> <li>• Flyer listing funding options.</li> </ul>

## SPACE

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Finding space or creating the space you need</b></p> <p>Total group score: 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting an inventory of sites, and posting results in a publicly accessible place (on-line). (4)</li> <li>• There is plenty of available space, but people do not know what is available and at what cost – need better promotion of available space (1)</li> <li>• Create public clearinghouse for available spaces by category (i.e. artist, industrial, retail).</li> <li>• Space is limited for certain business sectors and costs of retrofitting are high. Some zoning barriers to using/adapting existing spaces (especially industrial zoned space).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Keeping costs down</b></p> <p>Total group score: 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote available space, address affordability of centrally located spaces.</li> <li>• Maintenance is a big issue due to historic buildings, and construction is also another issue due to not getting any quotes from outside the city. North Adams construction companies are expensive.</li> <li>• Investigate locations that hinder easy access (where are they, what type of modifications would enhance their viability).</li> <li>• Address maintenance and renovation costs for historic buildings: local, state, federal grants.</li> </ul>

<b>Incubator space</b> Total group score: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote landlord diversity; enhance visibility of real estate well-suited for small/ micro, business incubation, space-shared, office/ conference facility.</li> </ul>
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## LEGAL COMPLIANCE

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<b>Training and Support</b> Total group score: 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer opportunities for business owners to meet with a person who is familiar with issues that might affect ‘your type’ of business. (1)</li> <li>Would be nice to have mentor pairings with old and new businesses on labor</li> </ul>
<b>Legal support for startups and small businesses</b> Total group score: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address cost of legal advice and resources for small or start-up businesses: cost to small business can be expensive.</li> <li>Consider offering city resources providing legal assistance.</li> <li>Offer access to legal help (pro-bono possibly) that helps businesses navigate issues that will affect their ‘type’ of business.</li> <li>Offer business legal assistance at city hall from state and federal agency for legal questions pamphlet / brochures (501(c)3, real estate issues, etc.)</li> </ul>

## PERMITS AND COMPLIANCE

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<b>Streamline fees and payments</b> Total group score: 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formulate clear event permitting and planning process. (2)</li> <li>Promote municipal process to simplify the process for registering a new business, especially a home business.</li> </ul>
<b>Make municipal permitting faster and easier to navigate</b> Total group score: 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate clear event permitting and planning process.</li> <li>Create pamphlet checklist of basic permits related to business types.(1)</li> <li>Reduce length of time to obtain permits is too long.</li> <li>Facilitate access by web... allow businesses to search necessary permits that you will need; simple descriptions.</li> <li>Facilitate one-stop shopping: single person or office in city to assist in all ALL permitting &amp; compliance issues. Formulate clear written rules &amp; laws that are easily accessible.</li> <li>Make more easily navigates – steps may be clear to City staff but that does not necessarily mean well-understood within the business community.</li> <li>At the municipal level, there should be one person to evaluate ALL permitting with a view to simplify the processes for compliance on the part of a small business owner. (1)</li> </ul>
<b>Zoning review and revision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider a review of zoning ordinance to identify challenges for small businesses.</li> <li>Consider zoning ordinance to identify available space limitations.</li> </ul>

## WORKFORCE

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Labor recruitment and retention</b></p> <p>Total group score: 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify recruitment tools to retain MCLA graduates. (1)</li> <li>• Create a location/ office/ person that with information on workers available: placement office/ temp. office, job listings, jobs wanted, maybe a website. (1)</li> <li>• Need a list of people looking for work by skill sets so easier to find people with appropriate skills and an unemployment agency to facilitate job placement</li> <li>• A location/office/person that has information on workers available – job listings, jobs wanted – maybe a website. (1)</li> <li>• Continue conversation concerning affordable health insurance for employees. Current costs seem prohibitive to small business owners.</li> <li>• A permanent workforce needs a permanent solution to health care costs.</li> <li>• Tech companies or businesses who need tech savvy employees find it difficult to attract or retain employees. (1)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Quality employees/work ethic/reliability</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issue of chronically unemployed – many applicants apply just to fulfill the requirement so they can continue receiving unemployment benefits. Difficult to find reliable employees.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Workforce development programs and needs</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to promote regional training opportunities: MCLA/ BCC/ McCann. These were identified as helpful resources.</li> <li>• Promote workforce better trained around technology.</li> <li>• Enhance education and training programs for potential tech company employees: there is a need for a computer savvy workforce.</li> <li>• Address skilled workforce internet/ tech, sales. Unskilled workforce needs basic skills training, how to dress, communication skills written/ speaking, showing up on time—identify needs, create business training programs, and work to connect workforce</li> <li>• Offer greater opportunity to build workforce skills, such as augmenting high school or college internships: address challenge in filling higher skill positions.</li> </ul>

## CUSTOMERS/COMMUNITY

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Make the Downtown more lively, distinctive and customer-friendly</b></p> <p>Total group score: 6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers/ community/ local businesses of all types-need local support! Too many assume that going out of town means better selection or service quality. (1)</li> <li>• Traffic/ Parking do not seem to be impediments. No real “natural” connection between the college/MoCA/state park etc. to downtown.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to market area to not only customers, but to residents. An attendee noted a small ‘critical mass’ regarding population...most problems would be solved if we had 50% more people in the area.’</li> <li>• Promote customer service training to better meet customer need and demand. (1)</li> <li>• Business networking so each aware of the other and can refer customers over appropriately if asked.</li> <li>• Promote all-hours activity, including evening hours and evening activities. Would love to see a 6-10 pm scene. North Adams needs a night life! (2)</li> <li>• Attract more tourists and second home owners for shopping.</li> <li>• Coordinate and publicize business hours, so customers know when they can come in and shop.</li> <li>• Coordinate and publicize weekly schedule—including special hours or Sunday hours to maintain momentum. (1)</li> <li>• Local business hours esp. restaurants are sporadic and unpredictable greater consistency would help everyone.</li> <li>• Traffic needs to be directed from Route 2 to Main street – emphatic signage would be a start</li> <li>• Transportation of customers from venue-venue e.g. trolley or bus</li> <li>• Designate a downtown arts district for shopping and events</li> <li>• Make downtown bike-friendly.</li> <li>• Re-introduce shopping as a pleasurable pastime. (1)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build on community pride to help move city forward – buy local!</b></p> <p>Total group score: 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refine event scheduling to avoid attendance conflicts, yet still create ‘clustering’. One attendee mentioned that ‘great events...tend to fall all on the same day/ time making it hard to get good numbers of people coming to these events.’</li> <li>• Continue to promote city pride</li> <li>• Build a shared sense of community via city projects or other engagement opportunities.</li> <li>• Continue to promote and enhance the role of community support.</li> <li>• Promote local shopping: one suggestion included re-introducing the concept of “shopping” as a pleasurable past-time. Promote downtown shopping days.</li> <li>• Enhance local knowledge about local businesses and the impacts of buying local. (1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WalMart/Dollar Store vs. Persnickety/Peebles</li> <li>• Internet vs. Local Shopping</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## MARKETING

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Market to “in city”, “in region” and “out of region”, perhaps with different messages and methods</b></p> <p>Total group score: 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work to market what IS here, not what is NOT here. (1)</li> <li>• Marketing opportunities for different types of customers “Local” vs. “Tourists.” (1)</li> <li>• Expand regional marketing efforts to metro regions such as New York City or Boston.</li> <li>• Better marketing outside of the area doing joint marketing as a city to push tourism.</li> <li>• Expand event marketing to internet: website, social media and to traditional outlets: television (public access), radio, press. (1)</li> <li>• Consider North Adams specific marketing.</li> <li>• Continue to build on the branding (re-branding) of North Adams as a cultural have to live and to visit. Tie in much closer to BVB North Adams as part of the Berkshires better marketing from the BVB and the Chamber.</li> <li>• Can be better! DownStreet Art is great, printed materials make a difference. City needs more printed or web-based marketing materials.</li> <li>• Marketing city businesses and employers, not just those in downtown (1)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collaborative marketing approach/campaign(s)</b></p> <p>Total group score: 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create online inventory of city-wide businesses.</li> <li>• Continue promoting DownStreet Art.</li> <li>• Enhance web-based and print marketing materials.</li> <li>• Promote New Chamber of Commerce &amp; North Adams tourism office and support them working to build more cooperative/collaborative marketing of area businesses and services. (1)</li> <li>• Create co-op and collaborative advertising and marketing opportunities. (1)</li> <li>• Collaborate to do more with limited marketing resources (\$ and time).</li> <li>• How to get businesses/organizations to invest in city marketing in addition to marketing their individual businesses. This has been difficult.</li> <li>• Collaborative marketing approach so that all businesses/entities communicate in a compatible way in terms of message about the city</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build the brand and isolate/hit our market</b></p> <p>Total group score: 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance way-faring signage, website, reach further out of traditional market.</li> <li>• Market to colleges possible workforce, green space, schools, space availability, loop ads.</li> <li>• Fun, funky, central place to post, like e-blast that does exist?</li> <li>• North Adams needs to (re)brand itself in a single, easy to understand way and while Sprague has left, that brand should include (high-tech) manufacturing (1)</li> </ul>



<p><b>Build local marketing capacity of individual businesses</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer free or subsidized marketing workshops for small, local businesses.</li> <li>• Offer creative enrichment opportunities for resource limited businesses.</li> </ul>
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**ANYTHING ELSE?**

Need	Suggested Strategies (# votes as “priority”)
<p><b>Networking/Continued community dialogue</b></p> <p>Total group score: 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to offer venues for economic development and small business oriented dialogue and networking, engaging community as well as business stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transportation</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider alternative transportation options for customers from venue to venue (example: trolley or bus).</li> <li>• Promote bike friendly services or amenities.</li> <li>• Address space between MCLA/MoCA to enhance connectivity to downtown.</li> <li>• Consider local way-finding: emphatic signage to direct traffic from Route 2 to Main Street is one example mentioned by workshop attendees.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Green initiatives</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage eco-friendly businesses and business practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Leadership</b></p> <p>Total group score: 0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with municipal officials and stakeholders to identify cohesive themes and goals: one attendee remarked that ‘North Adams needs a sense of unity, something/ someone to bring businesses together.’</li> </ul>