



Richard Sennott, Star Tribune

Brooklyn Park is offering a program that Provide free one on one intensive, confidential counseling to entrepreneurs who are thinking of opening a business or expanding one. Rod Smolund is the counselor who call himself a "Business Therapist" and works with the entrepreneurs. Rod Smolund talked with Lynn Huynh in a conference room in City Hall, she wants to expand and move her restaurant.

A business counselor is on hand every third Tuesday in Brooklyn Park to help people navigate the entrepreneurial waters -- and it doesn't cost them anything.

By **MARIA ELENA BACA** mbaca@startribune.com

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Take notice, Brooklyn Park: The "Business Therapist" is ready to hear your money-making ideas.

Last Tuesday, adviser Rob Smolund met with Lynn Huynh, manager of her brother's restaurant, Kim Anh Pastry and Deli, on Edinburgh Center Drive. The siblings are contemplating a move and expansion to a former Dunn Brothers coffee shop across the street, and were looking for help to secure financing to take the step.

In a half-hour meeting at City Hall, Smolund went through the restaurant's financials, listened enthusiastically to the details of the new location, and gave Huynh a handful of resources to check out for private financing, as well as a to-do list to check off before their next meeting.

Smolund, an enterprise facilitator with the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers, is available for consultation the third Tuesday of each month at City Hall as part of a program made possible by the Brooklyn Park Development Corp., a nonprofit funded by the city's Economic Development Authority. Users are business owners seeking to expand operations in Brooklyn Park, or entrepreneurs with a great idea and the drive to make it happen. The city has a deal with Smolund's organization, to pay his \$50 hourly fee, up to \$5,000. Participants pay nothing for his services.

Smolund does a similar service in Minnetonka and North St. Paul. Other cities are in the pipeline.

Brooklyn Park's business developer, Amy Baldwin, praised the way Smolund follows clients through the process, possibly strengthening and expanding the city's small business core.

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"We don't have the capacity to do what he does," she said. "If they run into a hiccup along the road, they have an ally to help them through."

After about six months in operation, the program has been popular enough that the city has expanded Smolund's hours. He starts most of his Brooklyn Park days with several half-hour appointments; his free time often is filled by drop-ins. Smolund has seen one of his early protégées, Lara Babalola, to the point of opening her business, Diva's Ave. Boutique, at the Shops at Village Creek, with loans from the city development corporation, WomenVenture and the consortium. He or a colleague has spent more than 50 hours counseling with 19 residents.

In last Tuesday's session, Smolund warned Huynh about potential damage a move could do to the restaurant's brand; she countered that the new space was within sight of the old one. Plus, it has space for a large roaster, a drive-through window, better curb appeal and favorable lease conditions, she said.

He encouraged her to get all the details in writing, and promised that with more information he'd help her make financial projections three years out, as part of an eventual loan application.

Huynh is an unusually savvy entrepreneur, Smolund said. He called attention to the "Business Therapist" line on his business card. Sometimes, his work is just a matter of helping people streamline their ideas and fill out applications. Sometimes, he helps them to create a multi-year plan. Sometimes, he encourages

them to concentrate their efforts elsewhere.

Bad ideas can succeed

"I can't predict winners or losers," he said, adding that he's seen what he considers great ideas fail, and crummy ideas succeed, based on smart execution.

What he does is help people identify their strengths and weaknesses, and when necessary encourages them to find partners to make their dreams reality.

The city has microloans available for people who can't get access to commercial bank loans, but Smolund said entrepreneurs should be able to put at least 10 percent into a deal.

He said he believes that the recent popularity of the program is a reflection of both people's renewed confidence in the recovering economy and of the desperation of people who are looking for any revenue source.

"It's a long process, and I help them with that," he said. "I take a very holistic approach. If I don't feel their business has legs, I still help them. I tell them, look out a year."

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