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Directions

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Open to Business:
program aims to help small businesses

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Open to Business...

Partnership between Cities and MCCD offers assistance and loans to area businesses

With seventeen years of success in running a frisbee golf supply operation under his belt, Golden Valley-based Gotta Go Gotta Throw owner Charlie Hutchinson was sharing his frustration over credit-access issues with his wife earlier this year when she saw an opportunity for her husband in the City of Minnetonka newsletter. There was a digest of a program being offered through the City called "Open to Business." The article reported that the City (where Hutchinson is a resident) had partnered with the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers (MCCD) to provide business advice, entrepreneur development, and micro loans. Hutchinson contacted Open to Business program enterprise facilitator Rob Smolund, and not too many weeks later had the help he needed to keep his retail and wholesale business catering to frisbee golf enthusiasts on a continued path of growth.

Open to Business formerly started in early 2010, following the success of elements of the program piloted in Brooklyn Park. With the confidence that the program worked for businesses and would appeal to municipalities, MCCD's Smolund approached the City of Minnetonka about signing a contract for Open to Business services. Minnetonka leadership embraced

the idea of the one-stop shop for business services the City had historically struggled to provide entrepreneurs. "In the first nine months of 2011, the Open to Business program has attracted a lot of interest," according to Minnetonka community development supervisor, Elise Durbin. "In fact, the program has provided 120 hours of one-on-one consulting to businesses in the first three quarters of this year."

The Open to Business model is fairly straightforward and it starts with this premise: Promoting entrepreneurialism makes communities stronger. According to Smolund, by helping small business owners gain access to business assistance and micro-financing, communities encourage and support the kind of growth that ultimately creates local jobs, increases vitality, and grows the tax base.

"The Open to Business model allows cities to act on the recognition that it is important to grow and support small businesses," according to St. Louis Park's economic development coordinator, Greg Hunt.



Hunt says the program helps his city provide a one-stop shop for business services that it could not provide on its own. In addition, Hunt says the program helps shepherd all the resources available in the community that small businesses need, including SCORE, the chamber of commerce, and

The Open to Business model allows cities to act on the recognition that it is important to grow and support small businesses.—Greg Hunt, City of St. Louis Park

more. On top of that, St. Louis Park has been working with MCCD for years on other programs, so the relationship is based on a trust that already existed.

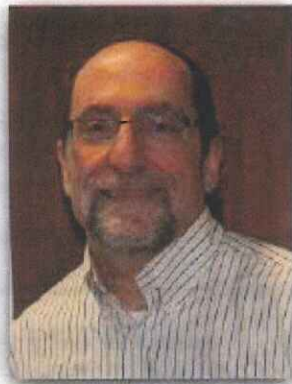
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...Open to Business...

Open to Business provides one-on-one business assistance

The face most often associated with Open to Business is that of Smolund. Smolund came up with the idea of packaging small business services in to a suite under the Open to Business name a couple years ago when Hennepin County reduced funding for MCCD small business assistance programs. Smolund decided MCCD services, mainly the business advice and micro loan programs, worked so well and had such positive results on their own that they would only be stronger together when marketed locally by municipalities. Hennepin County liked the idea of municipal involvement and now provides matching grants to Open to Business cities.

Commonly, Smolund spends a half day a month in each city where the program is



operated with official Open to Business office hours. "We spend a lot of time with entrepreneurs helping them determine business feasibility, creating cash flow projection processes, talking about the markets for their products, and putting together strategies and business plans. Most of our work is with startups or very small businesses", says Smolund, adding "but for existing businesses we can help business owners identify obstacles to growth and create strategies for accessing capital. We also draw on our long-standing partnerships with area banks to help businesses obtain loans and revolving lines of credit."

Smolund reports that in addition to Minnetonka and St. Louis Park,

Brooklyn Park businesses have kept program staff busy. "We have had some great success stories helping get four Brooklyn Park businesses loan-ready, in addition to a few micro loans delivered by MCCD and the Brooklyn Park Economic Development Corporation. In several cases the business owners have English as their second language and we have worked to bridge

some of the gaps resulting from that," says Smolund.

Brooklyn Park was the first to adopt the program in 2010 before it had the formal name of Open to Business, and Minnetonka's participation enters its second year. St. Louis Park started the program in early 2011 while other TwinWest cities are preparing to offer Open to Business beginning in 2012. With the help of Hennepin County grants, other cities signing on are Brooklyn Center, Golden Valley, Hopkins, and New Hope. Golden Valley and New Hope intend to operate as one offering according to New Hope community development assistant Eric Weiss. "There is good synergy between the New Hope and Golden Valley business communities which makes offering Open to Business together make sense," says Weiss. "we will begin the process of planning our program roll out together in December." The City of Hopkins has also elected to join the program toward the end of the first quarter of 2012, in partnership with the Hopkins Business and Civic Association. According to Smolund, the program aims to fill the gaps throughout the first and second rings of Hennepin County as it continues to grow.

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...Open to Business

Open to Business program available at no cost to residents and business owners

"I see Open to Business as a great opportunity to specifically serve our retail community needs and some of our commercial corridors," reports Brooklyn Center business and development director Gary Eitel. "While Shingle Creek Crossing will likely generate its own momentum, Open to Business will serve sectors of the city that will need additional resources. I expect the program to offer one-on-one evening consultations at City Hall and maybe some daytime options at the Hennepin County library," says Eitel.

As Gotta Go Gotta Throw owner Charlie Hutchinson navigates the retail, online, and wholesale world of disc golf and accessories this holiday season, he is thankful for the role Open to Business plays. "In all my years, from my first location in Brooklyn Park, then my move to Minneapolis, and eventually my 4,000 square feet in Golden Valley, no one has stepped up to help the way Open to Business has."

For more information on Open to Business, contact MCCD's Rob Smolund at 612.789.7337, or rsmolund@mccdminn.org.

Link | [Open to Business](#)

What is MCCD?

The Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers (MCCD) is an association of 45 non-profit community development agencies that work to improve housing and economic opportunity throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

During this past year, their team of business development specialists has provided access to more than \$1 million in business capital for clients and technical assistance services for more than 200 area businesses.

MCCD operates Open to Business in conjunction with city sponsors.

Current Open to Business Schedule at TwinWest Cities:

Brooklyn Park—3rd Tuesday of the month, 9:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., Brooklyn Park City Hall

Minnetonka—2nd Monday of the month, 9:00 - 11:00 a.m., Minnetonka City Hall

St. Louis Park—4th Monday of the month, 9:00 - 11:00 a.m., St. Louis Park City Hall

Open to Business City Partners:

- Brooklyn Center
- Brooklyn Park
- Eden Prairie
- Edina
- Golden Valley
- Hopkins
- Maple Plain
- Medina
- Minnetonka
- New Hope
- Osseo
- Robbinsdale
- St. Louis Park