

**EAST PALO ALTO  
SMALL BUSINESS NEEDS AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT**

Prepared by  
RENAISSANCE/START UP  
1848 Bay Road  
East Palo Alto, CA 94303  
(650) 321-2193

For  
The City of East Palo Alto

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 2008, the City of East Palo Alto contracted with Renaissance/Start Up to conduct a Small Business Needs and Capacity Assessment. The purpose of the study was to:

- Determine how many and which of the businesses that participated in the 1999 Study remain actively in business in East Palo Alto;
- Evaluate changes in perception of the health of the business climate based on current responses to questions fundamentally similar to those that informed the prior Study; and
- Identify current needs and factors affecting the ability of locally operated businesses to succeed and thrive in East Palo Alto.

Renaissance/Start Up surveyed 20 small business owners currently operating in East Palo Alto. The types and sizes of the businesses surveyed were broad, ranging from single-person operations to those with more than 25 employees.

Renaissance/Start Up, in collaboration with the City, convened three public meetings to present preliminary findings from the study and to solicit additional input from small business owners. These were held on November 25, December 11, 2008, and February 26, 2009.

### **Summary of Findings**

Only 30 of the 48 businesses surveyed in the 1999 study were still open and operating in East Palo Alto last year.

Respondents offered a variety of reasons for locating their businesses in East Palo Alto, the most common one being that they reside here. Most of the businesses surveyed employ five or fewer people. We found that while a majority of small businesses surveyed rent or lease the space they occupy, a significant percentage (35%) of these business owners also own the real estate.

Over half (53%) of small businesses surveyed reported that their gross annual revenues were under \$80,000, with 80% of those reporting gross revenues under \$40,000. A high percentage of owners interviewed also reported operating their businesses at a loss (42%) as opposed to breaking even (26%) and profitable (32%) in 2007.

Most of the business owners interviewed identified as the most significant issues affecting small businesses in East Palo Alto:

- Availability of suitable commercial or retail space
- Safety concerns
- Image of the city
- Cost of rent
- Availability of suitable parking
- Availability of qualified employees

Overall, respondents expressed a desire for more assistance and support for their small businesses. Many were unaware of additional resources available to them and could certainly benefit from increased access to such information.

The survey respondents identified a range of issues that pose challenges for small businesses, many of which are related to a need for greater support, access to work space (whether commercial, industrial, or retail), and improved communication between the City and small business owners. Many expressed a perception that the City neglects and undervalues small businesses, and that some City policies and procedures have the effect of actively discouraging small business activity.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

We recommend that the City of East Palo Alto prioritize addressing the following three key issues:

1. Small businesses need support if they are to not only survive, but grow and thrive
2. Local development needs to include appropriately sized and priced commercial space for neighborhood-serving small businesses
3. City agencies need to communicate more proactively and transparently to local business owners and residents to improve public perception and understanding of the goals, purposes, and motives behind local policies

## **BACKGROUND**

During the last quarter of 2007, the City of East Palo Alto (EPA) was selected as a recipient of a Pacific Gas and Electric Company Local Economic Development Grant of \$5,000. The funds were intended to defray the costs of updating a Small Business Needs and Capacity Assessment conducted in 1999.

The 1999 study, conducted by Paul Terry and Associates, targeted 90 local businesses, asking them to complete a 50-question survey that requested information about the businesses' structure and characteristics and elicited opinions from the owners about factors affecting the local business climate in East Palo Alto. There were 48 respondents to that survey. In late 2008, Renaissance/Start Up conducted a follow-up study to assess changes in those businesses and determine the current opinions of these same Study participants about factors affecting the local business climate.

The purpose of this follow-up assessment was to:

- Determine how many and which of the businesses that participated in the 1999 Study remain actively in business in East Palo Alto;
- Evaluate changes in perception of the health of the business climate based on current responses to questions fundamentally similar to those that informed the prior Study; and
- Identify current needs and factors affecting the ability of locally operated businesses to succeed and thrive in East Palo Alto.

## **APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

The Economic Development/Redevelopment Agency of the City of East Palo Alto approached Renaissance/Start Up early in 2008 to conduct a follow-up Small Business Needs and Capacity Assessment of local small businesses. Renaissance/Start Up accepted the project, proposing to complete one round of surveys and then convene an Economic Development Forum to present the preliminary findings, discuss local economic conditions and work with area stakeholders to brainstorm solutions and next steps.

With the goal of capturing timely and accurate information on their business needs and capacities from participants, the following strategies were implemented:

1. Letters were sent to the business owners interviewed in the original study to request their participation in the follow-up assessment.
2. Recipients were contacted by phone to schedule appointments for in-person or phone interviews.
3. The original survey instrument was updated to reflect current conditions and goals of the follow-up assessment.
4. To enable the maximum participation from community residents and business owners, three Economic Development Forums were convened in November and December 2008, and February 2009, with support from the Economic Development/Redevelopment Agency.

Of the 48 businesses surveyed in the 1999 study, only 30 were still open and operating in East Palo Alto last year and four of these declined outright to participate due to a lack of interest or time. Many others, despite numerous attempts to contact them, proved unavailable or unresponsive. Therefore, to expand the sample, Renaissance/Start Up and the City agreed to include in the assessment additional businesses currently operating in East Palo Alto who had not participated in the original survey to bring the total number of businesses targeted to 40. With a response rate of 50%, 20 business owners were surveyed.

The types and sizes of the businesses surveyed were broad, ranging from single-person operations to those with more than 25 employees. The business owners were also diverse. Most operate out of a single location, but a few had more than one. Below is a break-down of the business types.

**Figure 1: Types of Business Surveyed in 2008**

<b>Business Type</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Retail: Grocery and bakery	10%
Retail: Restaurant and fast food	5%
Retail: Other	20%
Personal services	25%
Professional services	30%
Other	5%

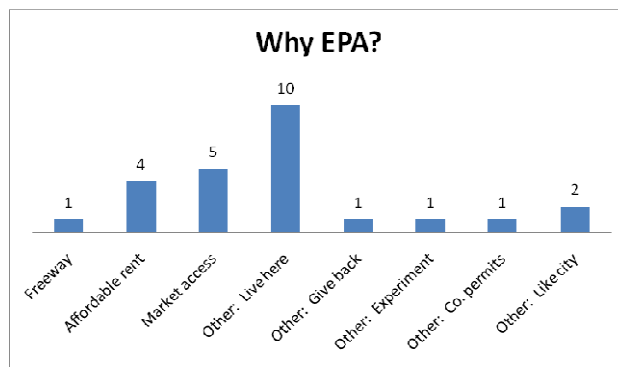
## SURVEY FINDINGS

Only 30 of the 48 businesses surveyed in the 1999 study were still open and operating in East Palo Alto last year.

### b. Locating in East Palo Alto

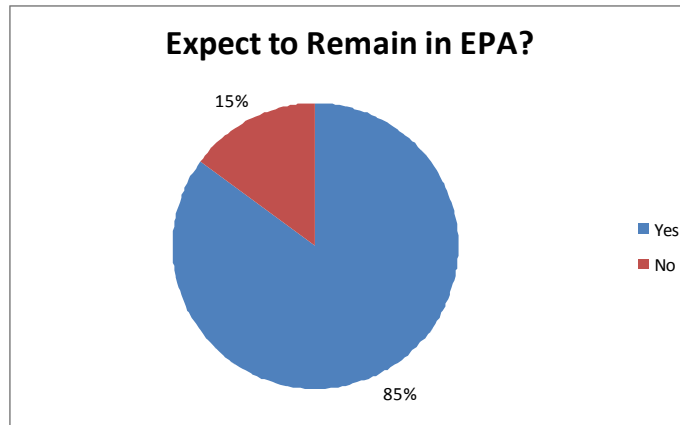
Respondents offered a variety of reasons for locating their businesses in East Palo Alto, the most common one being that they reside here. In contrast, the 1999 study found that 70% of surveyed businesses listed freeway access as a reason for locating in East Palo Alto, and in 2008 freeway access was cited by just one respondent. It appears that for many of the businesses surveyed in 2008, their choice to locate in East Palo Alto was made for reasons beyond business considerations like access to markets, freeways, etc.

**Figure 2: Reasons for Locating Business in East Palo Alto**



A significant percentage (15%) indicated that they do not expect to remain in business here. Reasons for leaving included selling the business, lack of adequate parking, and difficulty working with the City government. Two of the three who said they do not expect to remain in EPA are not residents of the City.

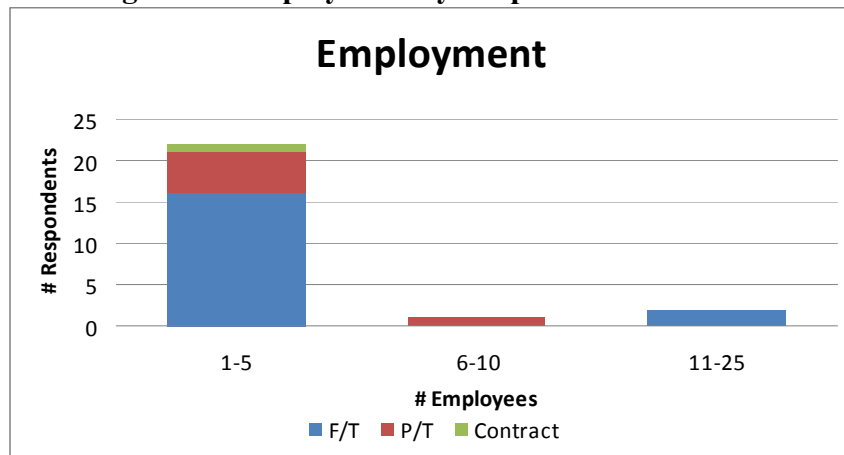
**Figure 3: Do You Expect to Remain in Business in East Palo Alto?**



**c. Employment**

Micro-enterprises, those employing between one and five people, make up the vast majority of all businesses in the country and state. The same appears to hold true for East Palo Alto. As the graph below depicts, most of the businesses surveyed employ five or fewer people.

**Figure 4: Employment by Respondent Businesses**

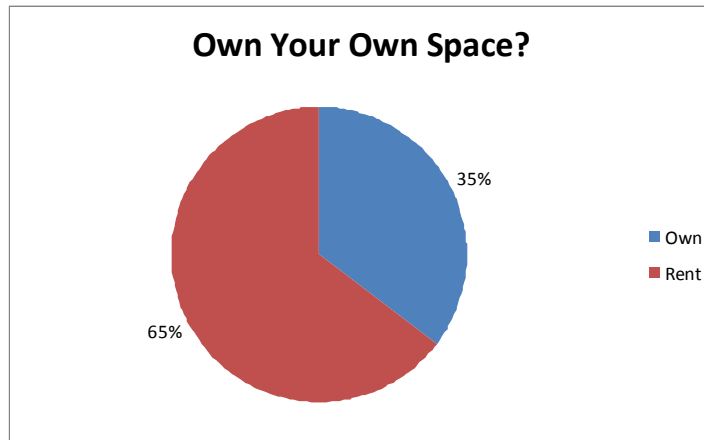


Based on a review of businesses currently licensed by the City of East Palo Alto, the majority of them are home-based businesses (and home-based businesses are almost always micro-enterprises). While the Needs Assessment conducted in Fall 2008 excluded home-based businesses, as they were not included in the original 1999 survey, our findings indicate that micro-enterprises are well represented also among those businesses that operate out of commercial office and retail locations.

We found that while a majority of small businesses surveyed rent or lease the space they occupy, a significant percentage (35%) of these business owners also own the real estate. Among

those who rent, the average price per square foot was \$2.54, though it ranged from \$1.33 to \$4.50 for spaces ranging in size from 100 to 1,400 square feet.

**Figure 5: Ownership of Working Space**



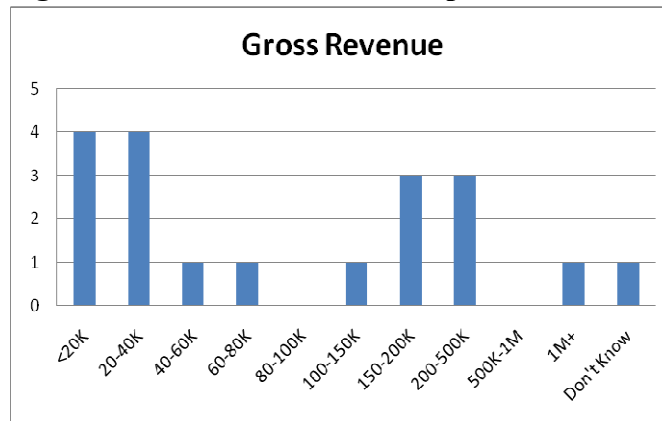
**d. Residence**

The majority (60%) of small business owners surveyed reside in the City.

**e. Business Income/Profitability**

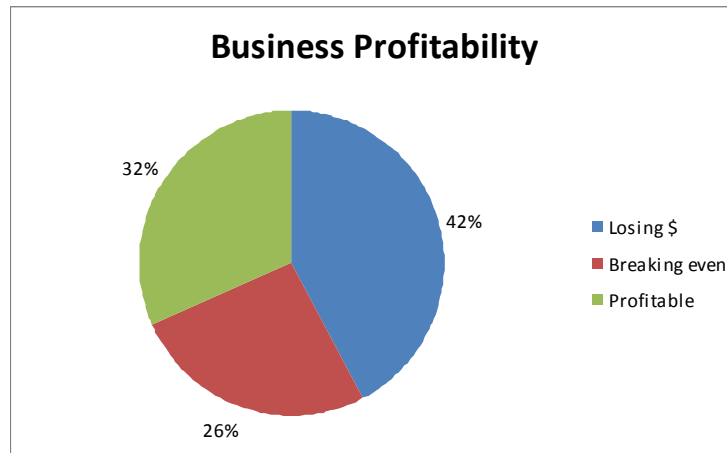
Over half (53%) of small businesses surveyed reported that their gross annual revenues were under \$80,000, with 80% of those reporting gross revenues under \$40,000. Forty-two percent grossed more than \$100,000 and one did not know how much revenue the business earned in 2007.

**Figure 6: Gross Revenue of Respondents in 2007**



Given that so many of the companies surveyed reported earning revenues below \$40,000 it is perhaps not surprising that a high percentage of owners interviewed also reported operating their businesses at a loss (42%) as opposed to breaking even (26%) and profitable (32%) in 2007. Unfortunately, the vast majority reported that 2008 was about the same or in most cases worse.

**Figure 7: Business Profitability of Respondents in 2007**

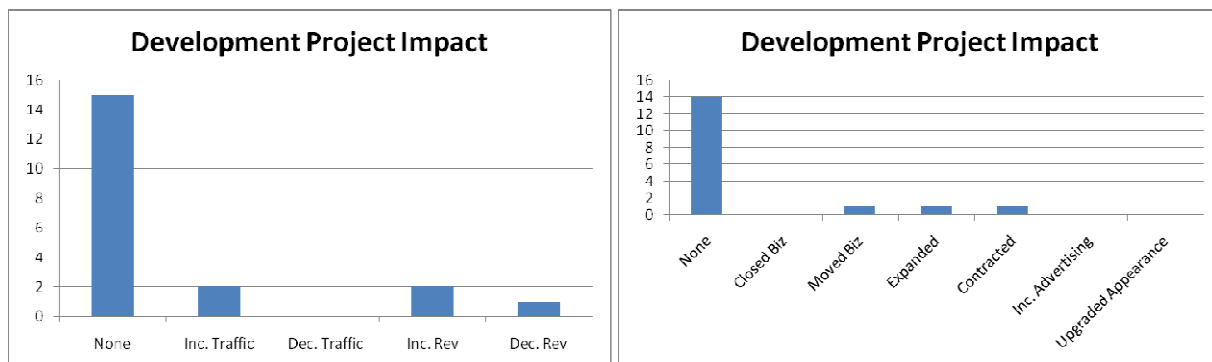


Taken together, these results indicate that sustainability is a significant challenge for the small businesses surveyed. Low revenue leads to low profitability and this contributes to instability for many respondents. Unless a business is able to generate sufficient revenue to cover operating and overhead costs as well as provide a profit, it is at risk of failing. Further study would be required to determine to what extent this risk of failure might be shared among the larger community of businesses in the City, yet the prevalence of the problem within the survey sample is cause for some concern. Half of the businesses that reported operating at a loss are owned by East Palo Alto residents, and most employ other people as well.

**f. Impact of Development Projects**

Back in 1999, roughly a third of respondents expected an increase in traffic and/or revenue from new development projects then in the pipeline. Most interviewed recently, however, felt that The Four Seasons, University Circle, IKEA/Ravenswood, Cummings Park, University Plaza, Nugent Square, the Courtyard at Bay Road had very little impact on their operations or revenue. A few did mention slight increases or decreases in traffic and/or sales; however, most dismissed the impact of the developments. With regard to future developments, few of the respondents were aware of them.

**Figures 8 and 9: Impact of Development Projects**



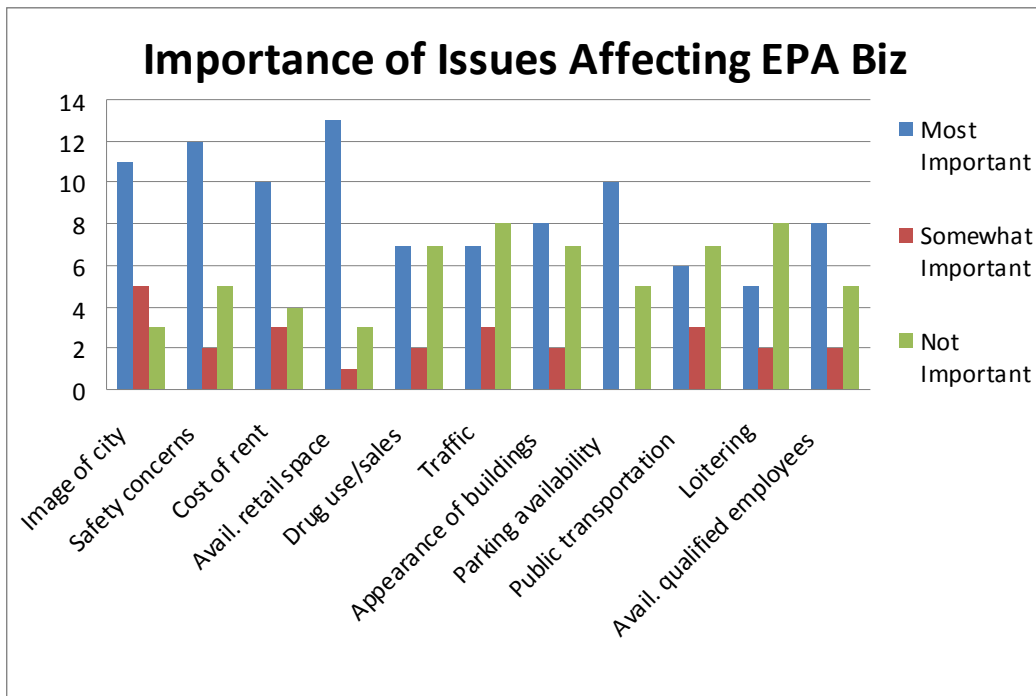
**g. Issues affecting EPA businesses**

Most of the business owners interviewed identified as the most significant issues affecting small businesses in East Palo Alto:

- Availability of suitable commercial or retail space
- Safety concerns
- Image of the city
- Cost of rent
- Availability of suitable parking
- Availability of qualified employees

Issues most frequently seen as “not important” included: traffic congestion, loitering, appearance of buildings, accessibility of public transportation, and drug use and sales.

**Figure 10: Importance of Issues Affecting East Palo Alto Small Businesses**



As the graph above clearly depicts, there was a range of opinion about the relative importance of various issues affecting businesses in the City. While we would expect the significance of particular issues to vary depending on the specific location and nature of any given business, it appears that fewer than might be expected are troubled by drugs and loitering, while more intractable challenges like scarcity and cost of retail space and perceptions of the City’s image and safety remain significant for most respondents.

Addressing these issues effectively may be difficult, but the long-term health of the local economy may be jeopardized if they are neglected. During interviews and the public forums, many participants expressed skepticism about whether any improvements would result from the Needs Assessment and their participation in it, and though not definite it is certainly possible that such skepticism may have motivated at least in part the reluctance to participate among those

who declined. Regardless, it will be difficult for the City to thrive and prosper without a healthy, vibrant business community, and it will be difficult to sustain strong, profitable small businesses if entrepreneurs perceive that the disadvantages to doing business in East Palo Alto outweigh the benefits.

#### **h. Helpfulness of services for EPA businesses**

The majority of respondents placed more importance on service issues such as police, permits and parking than on technical assistance like accounting, financial, marketing and legal help.

Most interviewed or 67% opined that technology/information system assistance would be very or somewhat helpful and 55% felt the same about license/permit assistance. Legal assistance, accounting/bookkeeping and employee/financial management were cited by 50% of respondents as very or somewhat helpful services. Forty-six percent of respondents thought assistance with business loans would be very or somewhat helpful and 40% thought marketing assistance would be similarly helpful.

A full 62% of business owners said adequate policing would help their business, while 58% felt the same about sanitation services. It is worth noting that nearly 73% expressed an interest in a visual improvement/façade project.

Overall, respondents expressed a desire for more assistance and support for their small businesses. Many were unaware of additional resources available to them and could certainly benefit from increased access to such information.

#### **Open-ended Responses**

While this study was planned to be essentially an update of the 1999 assessment, Renaissance/Start Up did add some open-ended questions with the goal of a more comprehensive analysis of the state of small business economic development in EPA.

The question, “What, if any, changes to the local economy over the past 10 years have had the greatest positive impact on your business?” was answered by 7 respondents. Their answers were:

- Reduction in overall crime (2 mentions)
- More affordable housing (2 mentions)
- New transit lines
- Opening of Ravenswood Clinic

We also asked, “Which have had the greatest negative impact?” These responses were much more plentiful, with 14 respondents answering. Each of the following was mentioned twice by different business owners:

- Relocation (due to redevelopment)

- Changes to University Avenue (loss of parking and higher speeds)
- Lack of support from the local government
- Loss of light industry (use permits not being renewed)

The answers below were each mentioned once:

- The bad economy
- Lack of available credit
- Image of the city
- Loss of local businesses
- Slow process of economic development
- Imbalance in residential and commercial development
- Drugs
- Parolees
- Poor schools

Of the 15 respondents answering the question, “Do you think there is enough square footage available to small businesses in the City for retail activity?” 100% said “No.” To the follow-up question, “What do you think about the location of currently available retail space – is it sufficiently accessible, supported with adequate parking, etc.?” 3 of the 15 (20%) said “Yes” while the rest said that the City needs more space, more public parking and one noted that more smaller sized spaces are needed.

Another open-ended question, “What do you see as the greatest obstacles or challenges facing small businesses in EPA today?” elicited 15 responses, including:

- The City itself (4 responses)
- Not enough help for small businesses (3 responses)
- License/permit issues (3 responses)
- Not enough small, local serving businesses (2 responses)
- The poor economy/lack of economic growth (2 responses)
- Lack of funding
- Lack of media coverage
- Poverty in the city
- Lack of organization among businesses
- Security
- Gentrification
- Not enough space for businesses

Finally, the survey asked, “How can the overall business climate of EPA be improved?” Seven responses were obtained, including:

- Better facilities – buildings, parking, roads, sidewalks, etc. (2 responses)
- More support for local business (2 responses)
- Better education
- Subsidized rent

- More small businesses
- An active Chamber of Commerce
- Better security
- More communication and cooperation between the City and small businesses

The survey respondents identified a range of issues that pose challenges for small businesses, many of which are related to a need for greater support, access to work space (whether commercial, industrial, or retail), and improved communication between the City and small business owners. Many expressed a perception that the City neglects and undervalues small businesses, and that some City policies and procedures have the effect of actively discouraging small business activity.

### **Anecdotes from interviews**

The business owners who agreed to participate in the study were generally forthcoming with their responses. A number of them had strong opinions about the challenges of doing business in East Palo Alto and what they perceive as inadequate support from the City for small business. While the comments below are not necessarily representative of the opinions of all or even most of those surveyed, they provide an illustration of the general findings overall.

- “The business community doesn’t want a hand-out (from the City), just a hand.”
- “This town is the worst to do business in the United States.”
- “The City needs to find a better balance between housing and commercial developments.”
- “We need to sustain the flavor of East Palo Alto.”
- “Anybody that wants to start a business in EPA gets bogged down in red tape.”

## **RESULTS – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FORUMS**

Renaissance/Start Up, in collaboration with the City, convened three public meetings to present preliminary findings from the study and to solicit additional input from small business owners. These were held on November 25, December 11, 2008, and February 26, 2009. Each session included an overview of survey results, question and answer sessions, and facilitated discussions. These conversations were somewhat wide-ranging and touched on the state of the local economy, the challenges and constraints of additional economic development, how the City can better support small business and how to create a vibrant, prosperous community while maintaining East Palo Alto’s diversity and uniqueness. The goals of these events included identifying key obstacles to economic growth and possible strategies for overcoming them as well as an expanded understanding and shared vision of local economic development. All participants engaged each other honestly and in the spirit of collaboration, in an attempt to prioritize the business needs of the entire community.

Many of the challenges facing East Palo Alto-based businesses appear to stem from resource constraints at the city level, with small business owners expressing frustration about difficulties working with some City agencies. Budget limitations, for example, mean that key City agencies are understaffed and this causes long delays and frequently unclear procedures for obtaining necessary permits. Other concerns voiced included the lack of suitable, affordable space for business operations, whether retail, office, or light manufacturing. Several small business owners spoke about the lack of access to capital for business operations as an obstacle to

business success, and some cited the need for flexible zoning to help grow home-based businesses out of the home.

Participants offered constructive ideas and recommendations for actions that could significantly improve the local business climate. Some of these are:

- For the City and nonprofits to collaborate in seeking funding for capacity building (work space, parking, neighborhood-serving retail space, roads, etc.)
- For the City to provide land and zoning for a local business district (such as a downtown or similar retail cluster that could attract consumers)
- For local agencies to teach specific trades to youth to facilitate their ability to obtain employment, especially in small businesses
- For the City to support the development of vacant space into commercial space
- For the City to streamline permit processes and provide clearer direction about the steps required to obtain permits
- More education about benefits of shopping locally, and the importance of supporting local merchants
- Create a revolving loan fund to provide entrepreneurs with greater access to capital
- Encourage and support “destination businesses” that can attract consumers from outside the community

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Among the more striking findings of the current assessment is that small businesses face significant challenges with sustainability, as evidenced by the high percentage of companies operating at a loss or just breaking even and earning annual gross revenues under \$40,000 (2008 San Mateo County Income Limits define as “very low” income at or below \$39,600 for a single-person household). Considered in conjunction with the finding that 35% of survey participants in 1999 either closed their businesses or moved out of the city, it is apparent that the city’s economic base of small businesses has weakened.

At the same time, the city has clearly succeeded in attracting new businesses into the community through redevelopment efforts resulting in the addition of national retailers like Home Depot, IKEA, and most recently Sports Authority and Nordstrom Rack at Ravenswood 101, as well as The Four Seasons Hotel and many respected legal and other professional services firms at University Circle. There is no doubt that these companies are an important source of jobs and tax revenues for the local community.

Two unfortunate and likely unintended consequences of this development are illuminated by the current assessment: 1) a decline in availability of affordable office and retail space suitable for small businesses; and 2) a perception among small business owners that the city government is at worst hostile and at best indifferent toward their needs and interests.

Accordingly, we recommend that the City of East Palo Alto prioritize addressing the following three key issues:

1. Small businesses need support if they are to not only survive, but grow and thrive
2. Local development needs to include appropriately sized and priced commercial space for neighborhood-serving small businesses

3. City agencies need to communicate more proactively and transparently to local business owners and residents to improve public perception and understanding of the goals, purposes, and motives behind local policies

### **Recommended Priority 1: Small businesses need support**

Local conditions create challenges:

- Needs such as police, sanitation and permits are still seen by most small business owners as more critical than business technical assistance (financial, marketing, legal)
- Image of the city and safety remain issues of great concern to most small business owners along with cost of rent, availability of retail space and parking, and availability of qualified employees
- New development projects have had little to no impact on most interviewed; yet everyone knows a small business that has been displaced (and not replaced)

In what ways can the City increase its support for small businesses? Recognizing the resource constraints the city faces, we recommend a combination of more immediate and longer term approaches to solving this problem. Some possible courses of action that could be taken relatively quickly and inexpensively might include:

- Issue a proclamation recognizing the importance of local businesses and encouraging city residents to shop locally
- Provide funding and sponsorship for local events and initiatives that highlight small businesses and their positive impacts on the community
- Publish and distribute written materials describing the rights and responsibilities of small businesses as well as the resources available to them locally
- Create or work collaboratively with nongovernmental agencies to create and distribute a local business directory and/or map of small businesses
- Allocate a portion of local sales tax or other tax revenues to promote small businesses
- Provide financial support for local nonprofit organizations that assist local entrepreneurs in developing and promoting their businesses (such as the Chamber of Commerce – hiring one full-time staff member could go a long way toward revitalizing this organization)

Taking a longer-term view, small businesses could certainly also benefit from:

- Community improvements in terms of better lighting, improved sidewalks, creation of a local downtown, etc.
- Incentives for small businesses such as tax breaks or rebates for hiring local residents, undertaking façade improvement projects, etc.
- Incentives to encourage the formation and establishment of locally-owned companies in specific industries deemed of particular importance to city residents (for example, light manufacturing, which creates blue-collar, high-paying jobs for residents, or the emerging “green” sector)

## **Recommended Priority 2: Develop commercial space for neighborhood-serving small businesses**

Small businesses face an increasing shortage of commercial space that is appropriately sized and affordably priced for retail, office, and light industrial use. The majority of real estate development in the past decade has focused on housing needs and the transformation of low-cost retail space into Class A office and retail space. In particular, many businesses that were displaced due to the University Circle and University Plaza developments have simply disappeared from East Palo Alto along with the low-cost spaces they inhabited.

Also gone from East Palo Alto with the redevelopment of “Whiskey Gulch” is a local commercial corridor or “downtown” that can attract consumers and residents to businesses that serve the local community. Instead, there are some “clusters” of small retail businesses in disjointed areas of the city, many of which have inadequate parking, unattractive storefronts or other impediments to luring shoppers. Even with these disadvantages, however, these spaces are “attractive” to small businesses due to the lack of viable alternatives available at prices that can be sustained by companies serving our community’s lower income residents.

There was only one question on the survey that elicited a unanimous response: all respondents said that there is not enough square footage available to small businesses in the city for retail activity.

To be sure, addressing this challenge is no easy matter given that very little of the land in East Palo Alto is owned by the City. The issue is a critical one, however, and will probably require a creative approach if it is to be overcome. Some possibilities to consider could include:

- Implementing flexible zoning and code regulations that would allow for multiple uses of existing space
- Providing incentives such as tax breaks or rebates to encourage owners of existing retail space to undertake façade improvements, reconfigure large warehouse-like spaces to better suit small businesses, expand existing buildings to increase commercial density, etc.
- Creating a fund to support business incubation activities, particularly by temporarily subsidizing commercial rents in conjunction with training and assistance to help business owners to adapt their business models and operational practices to increase revenues and profits to a level that would allow them to sustain market rental rates
- Facilitating and supporting “grassroots retail” by permitting sidewalk sales, inclusion of artisan crafts and prepared food vendors at the local farmers’ market, use of private or public facilities for swap meets or similar community markets, etc.

## **Recommended Priority 3: Increase transparent and proactive communication**

City support and policies favorable to small businesses are essential, yet many business owners expressed frustration at what they perceive as slow and inefficient processes for complying with local regulations and a general sense that city policies fail to adequately support small business.

- Majority agree a stronger sense of community and more support from City government is needed
- Many perceive inefficiencies and lack of transparency in the City government and/or the permitting process as an obstacle to a successful business

Unfortunately, about a quarter of the survey respondents identified “the city itself” as an obstacle to small business development. This perception is significant because it affects not only the long-term success of efforts to establish and retain local businesses in the community, but also the willingness of business owners to engage constructively and collaboratively with others in these efforts to strengthen the local economy. During interviews and the forums, a number of participants expressed skepticism and doubts about whether anything would change as a result of this assessment, and many business owners refused at the outset to participate at all.

We recommend that the City proactively address this perception by:

- Simplifying and streamlining the process to obtain a business license
- Simplifying or at least clarifying the process to obtain building and other permits needed to operate a business in the city, in particular by outlining and describing in writing the requirements of applicants as well as the steps and time required to complete the process
- Emulate the City of San Jose’s Small Business Ambassador program, to assist small business owners through the review and permitting process, and refer them to other City services that cater to small businesses. The program appoints a single point of contact within the City to assist those not familiar with the project review and inspection processes. For more information, see <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/building/SBAlinks.asp>.
- Adopting and publicly promoting as many recommendations contained herein as are feasible
- Create a Small Business Task Force comprised of city government representatives, local business leaders and supportive agencies like the Chamber of Commerce and Renaissance Start Up to look more closely at ways the city and business owners can work together to improve conditions for local business and encourage consumers from both within and outside of East Palo Alto to shop here