

COORDINATION

Assisting small businesses remains a challenge for communities across the nation, including Silver Spring, Takoma-Langley Crossroads, and Wheaton. Diverse retailers mentioned limited time, financing/funding, and language skills as barriers to receiving the support needed for business success. To address these and other challenges conflicting with the preservation and strength of the clusters that serve minority-owned and -serving businesses, consider the following goals:

- Identification and monitoring of diverse retailers to better inform policy decisions
- Increased sharing of resources and communications among diverse retailers, the county, and other parties
- Consideration of diverse retailers' needs in policy and funding decisions
- Clearly articulated commercial tenant rights and responsibilities

DIVERSE RETAIL LIAISON

Geography Assigned: Silver Spring, Takoma-Langley Crossroads, Wheaton

Across Silver Spring, Takoma-Langley Crossroads, and Wheaton, various organizations are working to promote each retail district's success, none of which has a singular focus on diverse retailers' success. Staff dedicated to the three study areas' diverse retailers could serve as key players in the preservation, attraction, and growth of the clusters.

Diverse Retail Liaisons (previously referred to as Neighborhood Equity Coordinators in *A Long Life for Long Branch: Tools to Preserve Independent Retailers*) are responsible for coordinating efforts by existing organizations, providing direct connections between independent businesses and the county, and linking targeted retailers to financial, technical, and organizational resources. Their primary role is to be brokers of resources and advocates rather than technical experts. This position differs from, but could potentially sit within, a place management strategy. The Diverse Retail Liaisons are directly assigned to support ethnic and racial minority business owners in each cluster, underscoring this cohort's importance in the county's approach.

Currently, the Montgomery County Office of the County Executive Small Business Navigator serves nearly 70,000 businesses in the county with a staff of two. Diverse Retail Liaisons can support the Small Business Navigator and other overextended entities by providing additional capacity to understand and address the needs through direct relationships with the business owners.

“The [limited] availability of funding and lack of training on how to deal with customers and how to maintain business are challenges when discussing how to achieve goals.”

- WINE SHOP OWNER, WHEATON

Recommendation 1: Identify a non-profit organization to host Diverse Retail Liaisons

Partnering with a single non-profit organization might be the most appropriate way to achieve equity for the diverse retail clusters, since devoting a municipal staff resource to a specific population might be politically challenging. All taxpayers might not agree to an approach to allocating dollars to fund the three roles in targeted geographies that support a subset of the population instead of creating a role in each Council district. The county has examples of similar roles that are allocated to each district in the county or a countywide role where the entire county is served by a staff member. This may instill a false sense of equity by serving large geographies that hamper the effectiveness of the proposed effort that's meant to be targeted to diverse retail businesses.

The county should provide an annual contract to a single non-profit organization with the required technical assistance skills and an aligned mission to support diverse small business owners. This organization can help the county achieve accountability with a dedicated resource that increases capacity and expands its operations. Oftentimes, limited funding causes non-profits to use a patchwork of funding that creates competing priorities, limiting the effectiveness of the intended role. A dedicated funding stream could help organizations overcome this challenge.

AmeriCorps programs provide for a cost-effective, federally subsidized program to increase staff capacity. However, AmeriCorps fellows will likely not have refined small business support skills to serve diverse retailers' technical assistance needs. Requiring a bachelor's degree in business administration, accounting, marketing, or other business-related disciplines should help to recruit more qualified candidates in the recruitment process. However, the federal funding levels and policy priorities for this program are unknown at the time.

Other funding sources to consider include corporate partners, philanthropy, special assessments, or business license fees in each cluster.

Recommendation 2: Assign one coordinator per cluster

Providing direct support is a time-intensive role, especially considering the myriad of diverse retailer needs. By limiting each Diverse Retail Liaison's service area to an individual cluster, they will be able to adequately provide continued outreach to build trust and shared resources and advocate to escalate issues to appropriate parties. One of the lessons learned by effective Main Street programs is ensuring service areas are not too large for one staff person.

Recommendation 3: Expand the capacity of Diverse Retail Liaisons

Although serving a smaller business population, the Diverse Retail Liaison will still be limited in time and expertise, especially if the person chosen is a low-cost hire. To increase their capacity, pair their responsibilities with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to partner with organizations and county departments skilled in technical assistance (e.g., D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center). The Diverse Retail Liaisons can benefit from basic training through the Main Street Center, Maryland's SBDC, and other training organizations.

Recommendation 4: Utilize the Diverse Retail Liaisons to inform other programs

To help the Diverse Retail Liaisons maximize their value with the business owners they serve, leverage business designation and bill of rights programs (below) as introductory and follow-up resources. Utilizing and updating the centralized Legacy and Minority Business Designation database can support the continued refinement of each program under this tool. The county should utilize the Diverse Retail Liaisons in the programs' initial design and continued improvement.