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CONSENT CALENDAR
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To: Honorable Members of the City Council
From: Councilmember Sophie Hahn
Subject: Small Business Listening Sessions

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the City Council's Land Use, Housing & Economic Development policy committee to establish regular Small Business/Enterprise Listening Sessions.

BACKGROUND

Berkeley has over 40 community Boards and Commissions, but none dedicated to addressing the needs of small businesses, not for profits and other small and local enterprises. At the same time, these entities are regulated and taxed by the City and depend on the Office of Economic Development (OED) and the Planning Department, among others, for technical assistance and support.

The recent establishment of City Council-level policy committees, including the Land Use, Housing & Economic Development (LUHED) committee, provides a new and welcome opportunity for Berkeley's small enterprises to connect with the City, to share their perspectives, and to comment on policies and programs affecting small businesses. This item formalizes that opportunity by establishing regular Small Business/Enterprise Listening Sessions at the Council's LUHED committee.

Berkeley's unique character is owed in large part to the presence of small businesses and not for profits (including arts organizations). These enterprises contribute significantly to our economic and cultural vitality, but face significant challenges due to increasing costs, space constraints and, in the case of small businesses, growing competition from online stores and chain retailers.

The OED, Chamber of Commerce, and other business organizations in Berkeley host well-attended networking events, seminars and listening sessions for small businesses and not for profits, and work with them one-on-one. Through participation at these events, conversations with the Director of Economic Development and Chamber and Business Improvement District leaders, and following email and online conversations, it is clear that Berkeley's small enterprises are eager to communicate with the Council and Mayor on a wide variety of topics.

This item requests that the LUHED committee establish a recurring agenda item, approximately once per quarter, to give small business owners and not for profits a focused opportunity to address and engage with the Council. Listening sessions could be focused on one or several topics, with additional time allocated for general comments. Committee members, the OED, business associations, business/not for profit leaders and members of the public could recommend topics, which might include exploring the costs of doing business, challenges in finding affordable and appropriate space, and permitting challenges. Timing, frequency and topics of listening sessions should be determined by the LUHED committee, but it is recommended that sessions and topics be announced as far in advance as possible, to allow staff and community partners to undertake broad outreach.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

This item supports the Berkeley General Plan goal to protect local and regional environmental quality, as small, local businesses help to sustain vibrant, compact, walkable town centers, which in turn are essential to reducing sprawl, automobile use, habitat loss, and air and water pollution.

FISCAL IMPACTS

Supporting small and local businesses/enterprises in Berkeley provides significant community and economic benefits. Committee meetings are already noticed, organized and staffed by the City. The only possible additional cost of implementing this item is minimal time for Economic Development staff to do outreach.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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