

## City Pre-Lease Program Paying Dividends

By Nicholas Shannon Kulmac

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Submit an application and wait. Play phone-tag. Alter and adjust your plans. Resubmit your application and wait some more. It's an all too familiar act for business owners who have bought or leased a pre-existing building in the past.

With more of an emphasis on economic development, the city of Vancouver wants the business community to know this: the process doesn't have to be so frustrating.

"There's a lot of talk about being open for business and being business friendly," said Chad Eiken, community and economic development director for the city of Vancouver, "and a lot of cities promote that, which is a great thing. But this is really one way we can show that we mean it – that we're here and we want to help businesses succeed."

Eiken is referring to the city's three-year-old pre-lease program, which is running with renewed momentum in 2013 thanks to a few new resources, such as Johnnie Hildreth, the city's business assistance coordinator who is now spearheading it.

The program involves arranging a complementary walk-through with several city department contacts for businesses thinking of buying or leasing space in downtown Vancouver. Participating departments include:

- Land use planning – to address zoning and parking requirements
- Building – an official or supervisor with knowledge of exiting and structural issues
- Fire – fire marshal or deputy fire marshal reviews smoke alarms, detectors
- Permit center – representative with permit application paperwork
- Engineering – to address system development charges (e.g., a restaurant moving into a space that wasn't previously a restaurant)
- Police – a neighborhood police officer introducing him or herself (on occasion)
- Health – to address the sale of food (when appropriate)
- Liquor control – to address the sale of alcohol (when appropriate)

Such an expansive list of contacts allows businesses the opportunity to identify significant building code or other permitting requirements on the spot, to help them decide whether that space is right for them. Additionally, the process can save prospects and permitting officials time and money.

"I think it's a great idea," said Jim West, a Vancouver realtor with Coldwell Banker Commercial who has participated in a handful of walk-throughs with various clients. "For tenants that are small and looking at new buildings, we know there isn't much to deal with. However, when it comes to some of the more complex or older buildings where there's going to be some build-out, it can be three or four weeks [into the application process] before we realize that we can't do it."

So far this year, the city has held half a dozen or so walk-throughs, and some of them have already resulted in new tenants, noted Eiken.

According to city of Vancouver Economic Development Division Manager Alisa Pyszka, another reason the pre-lease program has been successful (to the point where the city of Battle Ground is now looking to adopt it) is because prospective tenants experience first-hand the lengths that the city is willing to go to support them.

Pyszka used Dirty Hands Brewing, a new brewpub planning to open downtown as early as June, as an example.

"They were amazed," she said. "Two-and-a-half hours of thoroughly walking through the process really convinced him to locate here."

The city's most recent walk-through appears to have had a similar effect, according to West. Earlier this month, two of his clients interested in sharing space inside downtown Vancouver's 19,000-square-foot Wolf Building (301 W 11th St.) went through the pre-lease program and emerged feeling quite hopeful.

"I've had continued discussions with both of the prospects and I think we're going to move into the letter of intent phase and hopefully getting to the lease phase soon," said West.

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