

The following Op-Ed was printed in the Norwich Bulletin on Wednesday, February 1, 2006.

## State Must Rally To Assist Small Businesses

By Susan Bysiewicz



Right now in the city of Norwich, there is a hope for the re-emergence of the Rose City by the people who live and work there. This is an exciting time for Norwich, exemplified by the launching of the city's recent "Norwich Now!" campaign. There is energy and optimism about the burgeoning tourism and entertainment industry, about revitalizing downtown, and of that Eastern Connecticut spirit that still pervades the business communities and neighborhoods.

Last week at Norwich City Hall, I met with Mayor Lathrop, city officials, and a number of small business owners at our latest "Small Business Roundtable." This was the fifth in our series of roundtable discussions around Connecticut, at which we hear directly from the small business owners about what's on their minds, what their concerns are, and what state government can do to help.

Sally Wiese-Kropp, the owner of a local environmental cleanup company, talks about being a small business owner in a field that often has to compete with much larger companies. She raises issues about the affordability and fairness of liability insurance rates. She wants to succeed, expand, and maintain a good work environment for her 20 employees, but she needs to know that the state has a true commitment to small businesses and not just the large ones.

Shawn Magliano, owner of the City Perk coffee shop in downtown Norwich, wants to see unity among small business owners downtown, as well as collaboration between community groups that are often working toward the same goal.

Raymond Geer is the owner of Sun Turtle, a small Native American furniture company. Ray's wish is a very simple one – an easier registration process for companies

that wish to get onto state contracting lists, rather than the confusing one that exists now. “It seems like there’s more than 600 sites where you have to register,” he tells us.

State Representative Melissa Olson of Norwich joined me on this very productive visit, and I am pleased that she will offer us support in the State Legislature this session. House Speaker Jim Amann and members of the Commerce Committee will be partners with us this year in our small business initiative, a top legislative priority for my office. We will work closely with the legislature to craft a bill that makes it easier for small businesses – including minority-and-women-owned businesses – to thrive and succeed in 2006 and beyond.

Small businesses represent the backbone of Connecticut’s economy. Since 1996, small businesses with fewer than 50 employees have been responsible for more than 95 percent of the state’s economic growth.

So why then do our small, local businesses like the ones mentioned above – and the many others who were represented at the Norwich roundtable – feel so left out of the process.

Because for the past several years, they have been largely left out.

During the same time that small businesses were contributing so much to Connecticut’s economy, the state doled out public money to private corporations and then watched as the economy sputtered and lagged behind most of the country. The previous administration had a fascination with big corporations, and to truly turn our economy around, we need to direct our resources to our small businesses, the ones that actually drive Connecticut’s economy. In particular, this requires the enhancement of women and minority-owned businesses.

The roundtables are certainly one way we can help at the state level, as are our CT Small & Minority Business Showcases, established by our office six years ago. These showcases provides one-stop shopping opportunities to help small and minority businesses navigate the complex process of starting a business in Connecticut, as well as display their products and services to further develop their business, and more than 5,000 businesses have been helped by these events over the past six years alone. Sally Wiesse-Kropp is a perfect example of how these showcases can benefit individual owners. She came to one of them, met officials from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the contact she made with them has resulted in contracts valued at more than \$50,000 to her company.

Our next business showcase is scheduled in this part of the state, at the Port and Starboard in New London on April 6, and I would encourage as many small and minority business owners as possible to contact my office about attending. Harland Henry, the Director of Community Outreach and Business Development for our office, can be reached at (860) 509-6258.

As the state's chief business registrar, growing our small business climate is essential to me. That means hearing directly from those who are fighting to succeed in it. People want advice in the procurement process and how to successfully enter it. They have ideas on what it takes to revitalize neighborhoods, how to deal with traffic congestion, and what it means to struggle within an outdated and burdensome property tax system. They, too, are the ones who have to navigate the intricacies of the state's oft-confusing licensing and permitting process.

We need to streamline state assistance for small businesses. There is no need to have multiple agencies performing the same task – it wastes taxpayer dollars and causes confusion and delay for business owners. And once this streamlining happens, the state must let business owners know whom, by name, they can contact for assistance. Access to information is an invaluable commodity.

But people like Sally Riese-Kropp, Shawn Magliano, and Raymond Geer cannot do it alone. They need the support of the community around them, and just as important, they need the support of the state. If we can help the economy and business climate of Norwich and the surrounding towns, our whole state will be better for it.

*Susan Bysiewicz is Secretary of the State of Connecticut.*