

Woonsocket hosts inaugural Economic Development Summit

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WOONSOCKET – Over 100 people registered for Woonsocket’s first Economic Development Summit, a Planning Department event to support current and potential businesses owners in the city.

Two recent additions to the Planning Department, John Ahumada, business growth and recovery administrator, and Emily Haining-Sheehan, small business outreach coordinator, spearheaded the sold-out event.

Haining-Sheehan said. “I want our businesses to succeed. We’re told many times we’re the forgotten city and the fact that 45 new businesses have opened in the last year and a half – it says a lot. It says a lot for what we have to offer.”

With almost the entire City Council, the Mayor and most of the Planning Board in attendance, the event was advertised as an opportunity for new business owners or people interested in opening a business to ask questions and network with property

“I want us to succeed,”

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Summit

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owners and local partners like the Social Enterprise Greenhouse and the Rhode Island Black Business Association.

"Businesses really appreciate someone holding their hand," City Council mem-

ber Garrett Mancieri said. Elisabeth Gessie Borno, co-founder and CEO of Bom-O Uniforms, which opened its first brick and mortar location in Woonsocket this year, said she's noticed a shift in the city recently. "This was never a business-friendly city," she said. "I'm happy to have a busi-

ness in Woonsocket now. We just need to keep that momentum going." Kristina Contreras-Fox, director of policy at the Rhode Island Black Business Association, moved to Woonsocket in January and said everyone's been telling her "Woonsocket's having a moment." "The entrepreneurial

spirit of the city is growing," she said. "When you invest in entrepreneurship, it changes things on a generational scale." Mayor Christopher Beauchamp also leaned into a shift toward business growth and praised the turnout.

"For too long, we said we can't afford it, we can't do it, we made excuses," he said, acknowledging he may have played some part in that in his time on the City Council. "But no more. If we all do this together, this is what we can accomplish."

As part of their effort to support local businesses, Ahumada unveiled the Economic Development team's recent projects in a presentation to summit attendees.

Among those projects are the launch of new Woonsocket City Hall Facebook and LinkedIn pages, meant to dispense any and all official information, and a tourism video produced by David Lawlor of Run of the Mill production company. Ahumada also said the team is close to hiring someone to build out the "visit Woonsocket" website, and introduced photographer Hillary Thilarong, a graduate of Woonsocket Area Career and Technical Center, who will be taking high-quality images at 40 locations around the city for use in the tourism campaign.

"This is all about controlling our narrative," Ahumada said.



City officials cut the ribbon on Mito Japanese Steakhouse, a new business on Front Street where the first Woonsocket Economic Development Summit was hosted. From left: Emily Haining-Sheehan, small business outreach coordinator; Mayor Christopher Beauchamp; Mito's owners Kim Phuong and Kien V. Le; Planning Director Michael Debroisse; John Ahumada, business growth and recovery administrator.

Ahumada also shared the Theater District Proposed Action Plan, which covers everything within a 10-minute walk of Stadium Theater. The City Council passed a resolution earlier this month directing the Planning Board to propose a zoning amendment that would establish the physical boundaries of the district, which will need to come back before the council before it's adopted.

The plan includes some targeted facade upgrades, "wayfinding" signage and beautification efforts, and Ahumada said the Planning Department is also looking to hire a lighting architect. The crowd broke into a round of applause at his

suggestion of adding string lights criss-crossing the street near Chan's restaurant.

"This is not just to enhance security for the area but also to create that playful atmosphere," he said.

The Economic Development Summit was always intended to become an annual event, Planning Director Michael Debroisse said, but the show of attendance at the first one sealed the deal.

"If we would've had a bigger venue, we would've had even more people," he said.

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City Planning Department staff celebrated the first ever Woonsocket Economic Development Summit, an event to support local businesses, which will become an annual event.