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A New Order for Restaurant Permitting

Streamlined Approval Process Aims to Shave Opening Times in Half

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Steve Springer, general manager at First and Hope, said enrolling in the city's new, streamlined permitting process helped the Bunker Hill eatery open sooner than expected.
Photo by Gary Leonard.

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Hundreds if not thousands of entrepreneurs have opened, or tried to open, restaurants or bars in Los Angeles in recent years. While those venues range from chic nightclubs to old-fashioned diner-style eateries, each of them has one thing in common: Horror stories from the permitting process.

Mitchell Frank, a partner in the Silver Lake Mexican restaurant Malo, has been working on a new Downtown outpost, [Muy Malo](#), since January of 2009. He's got a list of head-scratchers, including the several times he said his architect made an appointment with a city inspector three weeks in advance, only to be stood up.

"In a bad economy, the city should have been doing back flips for us to open this," Frank said of the eatery slated to occupy the original Clifton's Cafeteria space on Seventh Street near Grand Avenue. "Instead, we met resistance."

Frank is so fed up with the approval process — [Muy Malo](#) is the seventh bar, restaurant or nightclub he has ushered through the city's Byzantine process — that he has resolved to take his next project to a separate municipality such as Culver City or Glendale in hopes that it will be less of a headache and less expensive to open.

City leaders and business officials have heard similar complaints many times. They're what ultimately prompted Carol Schatz, president and CEO of the Central City Association, to lead a charge late last month to re-evaluate Los Angeles' permitting and approvals process for restaurants and bars. This month, the effort bore fruit.

Schatz, who stresses the ability of restaurants and bars to be tax revenue drivers and jobs generators — bars and restaurants Downtown have resulted in approximately 9,000 construction positions and 8,000 operational jobs since about 2000, according to CCA and city figures — pulled together a group of city and other officials in December. The meeting, which included representatives of the Los Angeles Fire Department and the County Health Department, led to a trial period for the [Restaurant and Hospitality Express](#) program, which was launched citywide on June 3.

The lynchpin in the new process is a more hands-on approach by agency case workers who oversee projects from beginning to end. Officials hope it will cut the current estimated opening time of 12-18 months in half. They also hope it will end the stories of permit applicants who tell of having to ferry their plans from department to department and visit different inspectors at different counters. Many applicants describe conflicting directions from various agencies, a process which sometimes puts them in the red long before they serve their first customer.

First and Hoping It Sticks

Under the new program, case managers are expected to be proactive in contacting businesses as they build out their spaces in order to meet targeted opening dates.

Steve Springer, general manager of the Bunker Hill restaurant [First and Hope](#), site of the June 3 press conference, is already singing the praises of the program. Springer was in the midst of ushering his supper club through the city's permitting maze when it entered Restaurant and Hospitality Express.

Springer noted that, for months, he had dealt with a bureaucracy known mostly for its excruciatingly long and difficult approval process. But he realized everything had changed when he received a call from a city inspector. The official simply wanted to see if Springer needed any help.

"I was like, 'What? Really?'" Springer said. "Yes!"

Since getting that call, Springer has been all smiles, and was able to open First and Hope in the spring. By doing so, he says he created 125 full-time jobs.

City officials recognize they have a problem. Under the system long in place, "almost no restaurant could open on time or on budget," said Ray Chan, executive officer of the city Dept. of Building and Safety.

Since January, about 25 bars and restaurants, along with 12 grocery stores, have enrolled in the Restaurant and Hospitality Express trial program. Five are now open.

Jeanmarie Dumouchel, project manager for Las Perlas, a mescal and tequila bar opened by 213 Inc. in March, said the business was enrolled in the pilot program after starting planning and construction in late 2009. Dumouchel said the system sped up the opening process immediately.

"Without it, it would have been another six to eight months or so before we would have opened," Dumouchel said.

If the program sticks and proves successful in shaving opening times and lowering costs, it will no doubt please a major industry in Los Angeles. Yet it also raises a question for many in the food and beverage business: Considering it was such a notable problem for so many years, why did it take so long to effect change?

"It's a good question, and it's not the first time I've been asked that question," said First Deputy Mayor Austin Beutner, the city's chief executive for economic and business policy. "I think you have to just look forward and say there are a bunch of things in the city that have languished for decades. This is a great example.

"It takes collaboration... and it takes the support of the mayor to say it's got to stop, we've got to do things differently."

The CCA said that the program's trial participants have all reported positive experiences. But not everyone in the industry is convinced that change is really afoot.

"I don't believe the hype of it," said Frank, who hopes to open Muy Malo by early September. "The system is broken and I doubt very much this is going to fix it."

The success of Restaurant and Hospitality Express may depend not only on cutting through the red tape, but also on convincing business owners like Frank that things really will change.

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