

Jesse Blitzstein Testimony
Philadelphia City Council
Commercial Corridor Hearing
December 9, 2020

Good afternoon, my name is Jesse Blitzstein and I am the Director of Community Development at The Enterprise Center, where I help lead our revitalization work on the 52nd Street commercial corridor.

First I'd like to say thank you for listening to me speak and for your support during the dual crises of the pandemic and the civil unrest. And special thanks to Councilmember Jamie Gauthier and her staff for all that you have done.

I'm sorry that Della Clark could not join us this afternoon, but I think you all know the sense of urgency and action she brings to a crisis, and that she would implore you to do the same and to seize the moment to muster new resources in response to the present challenges we face.

As you all know, 52nd Street has been in the news a lot because of the civil unrest events in summer and fall. While these events, combined with the pandemic, have posed tremendous challenges for our corridor and community, I'm not here to ring alarms, but to share with you the tremendous resiliency of our small businesses, the hard work of our staff, and the need for continued support from the City of Philadelphia.

Despite the challenges faced in 2020, most of our small businesses are hanging on in the face of adversity. Of the small businesses that were looted or damaged, the vast majority re-opened quickly, or in the case of those hit hardest, plan to re-open after rebuilding. We are tremendously impressed by the resiliency of these businesses, as well as the support of community members in the form of volunteerism, donations, and business patronage.

Our staff has been amazing as well. To date, we have helped connect 47 different business owners and street vendors on 52nd to more than \$650,000 in various relief funds. We have opened a satellite office near 52nd and Market to offer limited in-person services to businesses and community members. We have supported local artists in doing public art projects to convey hope and beauty during these challenging times. And we have returned to and expanded upon our corridor cleaning efforts.

This work would not be possible without city funding for corridor management, corridor cleaning, and the CDC tax credit. We thank you for that support and implore you to see that it remains in the upcoming annual budgets. For several years now, these sources have served as integral backbone funds for our community work, that we then leverage to raise additional federal, state, and philanthropic dollars for project planning and implementation.

As an organization that has a larger focus on minority entrepreneurship and access to capital, we have been uniquely positioned to help our corridor businesses and provide feedback on relief efforts. The pandemic economy has highlighted the historic gaps in access to capital for minority-owned businesses and lower income communities.

Our neighborhood-based microenterprises have largely struggled to connect to relief funding such as PPP or even the first round of city grantmaking early in the pandemic. Where we've seen the most success is when application processes have been kept simple, our relationships with business owners and funders have been leveraged, and very hands-on support to business owners has been provided.

The best examples of this have been the state grant program, for which we were also a CDFI intermediary, and the City-backed civil unrest relief managed by The Merchants Fund. If future rounds of small business relief funding are to come through the city, we strongly encourage use of a similar model. While our microenterprises are resilient, many have struggled with the capacity, business sophistication, and technology skills needed to apply for relief funds. The more that relief funding can be simple and flexible, and the more that trusted intermediaries like us can be involved in the process, the more funds can be accessed by these businesses.

While most of our small businesses have been quick to reopen because their livelihood is at stake, the same has not been true for some of our regional and national chain retailers who have been hit hard by the civil unrest. While these businesses are not a primary focus for organizations like us, they are important to our corridors as employers, as drivers of foot traffic, and as tenants of larger spaces. I would implore both City Council and the Chamber of Commerce to think through how you might be able to help connect with

these chain retailers and work towards successful reopening as well as improved corporate social responsibility.

In conclusion, 2020 has been tremendously challenging, and we are concerned that some businesses will not be able to hang on much longer as we head into 2021. But we are also encouraged by the newfound spotlight on social justice and equity. At The Enterprise Center and on 52nd Street, we see opportunity and innovation amassing in response to the challenges and strife. We ask that City Council think big in the face of these challenges and help us seize the moment to change the dynamics of access to capital and neighborhood redevelopment in Philadelphia. Thank you so much for your time. Stay safe and happy holidays.