

Seven barriers to owning a successful business in Downtown New Bedford

Downtown New Bedford is one of the most beautiful downtown business districts you'll ever visit. **Belgium Setts** (more commonly known as **cobblestones**), amazing architecture, a historic park, museums, amazing restaurants, tons of annual events, and some of the hardest working business owners in America. Downtown has a lot going for it, but there are some major barriers for many businesses to thrive.

The turnover downtown is high. Who remembers Ginger Grille, 767 Exchange, Braza, Pizan's Pizza, Celtic Coffee or The Candleworks Restaurant? All closed or sold with many having very recent ribbon cutting ceremonies. Who remembers some of the older businesses like Krickets, Slices, Burke's Militaria or a host of other businesses that have disappeared from downtown and their empty storefront sit decaying?

Most recently, Laney Baby was sold and many mergers have occurred like Artworks and the New Bedford Art Museum, or the **Ocean Explorium working to merge with the Zoo**. While some business closings may be due to incompetence or poor planning, there are several factors that make it difficult to thrive or even survive in downtown New Bedford.

1. Reduced Parking

Downtown New Bedford has two parking garages and lots of street parking, but much of the more convenient parking has disappeared. **The parking lot at Custom House Square was replaced by an urban park**. Whether you think the park is a good or bad thing is irrelevant. The point is approximately 60+ convenient parking spots disappeared in the heart of the city. Additionally, **16 parking spots were removed and replaced**

with **Belgium Setts and a wider sidewalk**, a killer for places like Pier 37, Slainte Irish Pub and other businesses near lower Union Street.

While there are two large parking garages, they are not convenient or the safest places to park at night. Once the attendees go home the garages are rarely monitored. Break ins and vandalism are not uncommon and the garages become shelters for some of the homeless in the area.

2. Aggressive Parking Supervisors



There is no denying that since 2006 the meter maids have become aggressive. Parking ticket and meter fee revenue went from \$276,380 in 2006 to \$685,092 in 2010 and broke a million in 2011. **It's been at or above \$1 million ever since.** Lately, they've been enforcing even more rules like 2-hour limits, parking too close/far from the curb and entering residential neighborhoods. The parking supervisors are also very timely and seem to have a spider-sense when it comes to sniffing out expired meters within seconds.

The increase from \$275k to well over a million dollars in 5 years time is great for the City's coffers, but it's likely having a major negative affect on the bottom line of downtown businesses. When people have a choice of visiting downtown New Bedford for lunch or dinner, there is a percentage of people that will simply go elsewhere.

3. Crime

In the 4 years that I lived downtown, I had my car broken into twice and vandalized once. The "smash and grab" technique, peering into windows and smashing those with valuables in them, has become a very common occurrence downtown. Typically, the window repair bill is much hire than the valuables the crooks steal. Also, it's pretty common for unlocked cars to be pillaged. If you forget to lock your door and leave anything of value in plain sight it is a certainty that your items will be gone when you return.

Downtown New Bedford is also a very active panhandling and beggar area. Getting asked for change for a \$20 or change for a taxi is very common. It's part of most cities, but it seems very common downtown especially on Purchase Street and near the bus station.

4. Lack of Liquor licenses

When I last talked to Mayor Mitchell about the closing of the Urban Grill, he was quick to point out that one of the major factors of the restaurant's closure was the lack of a full liquor license. Alcohol sales account for much of a restaurant's profit and a BYOB license simply doesn't cut it when it comes to a large restaurant. Even though New Bedford is already above their quota, mayor Mitchell has requested 25 more.

5. Litter

The littering downtown is relentless. Common trash items are especially heavy on Mondays as people come downtown on the weekends. Especially troubling are the needle and drug paraphernalia. Finding groups of used needles, crack pipes and empty alcohol bottles is not only disgusting, they are health hazards for four us, especially our children and pets.



6. Absentee landlords

New Bedford must have one of the the largest absentee landlord problems in Massachusetts. I recently shot a video called “**The Block of Sorrows**” to spotlight the empty buildings decaying right in front of our eyes. For some reason people inside and outside the city buy up buildings and allow them to sit empty. Some started a business, failed and then vacated the building. Regardless of why the buildings sit empty, it’s obvious that there aren’t enough incentives or punitive measures in place to get them filled with businesses that provide jobs.

7. Politics

Politicians can decide if a business survives, thrives or never even gets started. First, earmarks and grant money goes

to the very few and usually well connected. The faucet of money flows to the same non-profits year after year with most being left to fend for themselves. Second, if a government official doesn't like you or your business idea they can outright stop you or delay long enough so you never get started. There is a lot of local and state red tape to navigate and having a politician on your side (or against you) can make all the difference.

What barriers do you see for businesses downtown? What are the solutions?
