

‘You need to govern from the streets.’ What small-business owners on one block want to see from Boston’s next mayor

After 19 months of struggle, small businesses in Hyde Park are hoping City Hall’s next administration can make life a little easier

By [Janelle Nanos](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 18, 2021, 5:20 p.m.



Clockwise, from top left: Pedro Pinales, Yolanda Sealy, Baron Langston and Karla Yearwood. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

For Pedro Pinales, help from City Hall might come in the form of a building inspector

who speaks Spanish, to talk through renovations for his Dominican restaurant in Hyde Park's Cleary Square.

Just down the street from Pinales, Yolanda Sealy could really use help finding a seamstress to hire for her West African dress boutique.

And Baron Langston and Nikia Londy say it would be a lifesaver if City Hall helped them figure out how to buy the building their wig shop has occupied for seven years, so the landlord doesn't sell it out from under them.

Small-business owners are the backbone of Boston's economy, and 19 months into the pandemic, many are hanging on for dear life, grappling with back rent, labor and supply shortages, and an economy still deeply altered by life under COVID-19.

So as Boston prepares to elect a new mayor in a historic election, many say now, more than ever, they want a leader in City Hall who will do more than lend a sympathetic ear.

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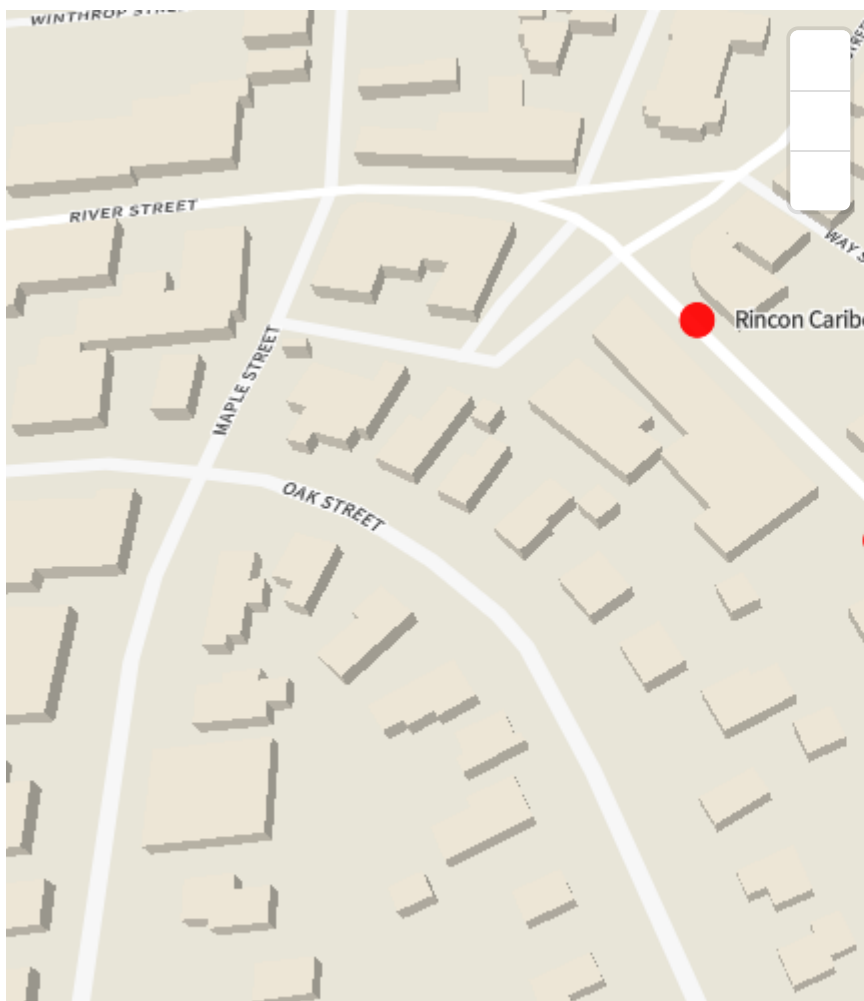
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"I think there is still this perception, and it's well-earned, that it's just a hassle" to do business in Boston, said Nia Evans, the executive director of Boston Ujima Project, which offers assistance to business owners of color. "It's inaccessible to deal with the city."

Unlike their predecessors, the two mayoral finalists actually have personal experience running a small business: City Councilor Annissa Essaibi George owns a knitting shop in Dorchester, while fellow Councilor Michelle Wu owned a tea shop in her hometown of Chicago. Both have leaned into those roots and made small business a key platform of their campaign. And some hope that foretells a much-needed shift in perspective from City Hall.

“We need boots on the ground, that’s very important,” says Langston. “You can’t govern from an office. You need to govern from the streets.”

In Langston’s case, that street is Fairmount Avenue in Cleary Square, a commercial hub near a rail station that has suffered without its stream of daily commuters traveling downtown. But even in better days, opening and running a business in Boston is something of a struggle.



Karla Yearwood settled on opening her juice bar here, energized by its friendly vibe. But when she found a space on Fairmount in 2019, zoning issues waylaid her buildout at every turn. Then COVID hit, and her ambitions were stalled anew. Finally, Fair Nutrition opened in October 2020.



"There's a lot of hoops and loops. If you get stuck in one you could literally just be going in a circle for so long," said Karla Yearwood, owner of Fair Nutrition, speaking on the thicket of information concerning zoning issues in the city. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

It was a tough start. There were few commuters walking by to drop in. Her landlord told her she could get a break on rent, but ended up taking her to court. She worked out a payment program but is barely breaking even and works an overnight warehouse shift to pay bills.

Many of these headaches could have been avoided, she said, if the city's Inspectional Services department had been more organized. What resources the city does offer to help businesses open should be better marketed. If she had known sooner about Hyde Park

Main Streets, which works as an advocate for neighborhoods businesses, Yearwood said, she might have avoided her zoning woes.

“There’s a lot of hoops and loops,” Yearwood said. “If you get stuck in one, you could literally just be going in a circle for so long.”

Pinales had help from Hyde Park Main Streets, but he, too, came up short. He grew up poor in Dominican Republic and came to the United States in 2005 with a fourth-grade education. Over four years ago, Pinales built his restaurant, Rincon Caribeno, into a hub for mofongo and karaoke. He says it’s a dream, realized.



“There’s not enough help for someone who wants to do good, who has a business who follows all the rules,” said Pedro Pinales, owner of Rincon Caribeno restaurant. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

But renovating the restaurant during COVID was a nightmare. A native Spanish speaker, Pinales found it impossible to connect with Inspectional Services for help with permits, even with the aid of an interpreter from Hyde Park Main Streets.

“Sometimes we would go weeks without hearing back from anyone,” he said through his translator, Matzaris Del Valle, a Hyde Park Main Streets board member.

An Inspectional Services spokeswoman said the agency has assigned a Spanish-speaking inspector to help. But both Pinales and Del Valle say if that were the case, they never knew it.

“I never spoke to anyone in Spanish,” Del Valle said.

Pinales received \$2,000 from the city’s Reopen Boston Fund to get through the pandemic but wasn’t eligible for larger amounts of aid from the federal government because he isn’t a US citizen. Debt piled up, and today he’s repaying \$18,000 in back rent, bit by bit. His electricity and gas were shut off for a time when he fell behind on payments. He also lost his home after falling behind on rent. He and his wife found a new apartment after several months, he said, visibly shaken. But he still has contractors to pay, and his kids as well are now deep in credit card debt.

“At times he’s faced with a decision. Do I buy food? Or do I pay a bill or the rent?” said Del Valle.

Now, he arrives at the restaurant at 5 a.m. and works until 1 a.m., doing all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning because it’s so hard to hire help. He naps on a cot in the basement.

Sometimes, Pinales said, he wants to give up. But mostly he just wants some help. He’s supporting Essaibi George, he said. But whoever wins needs to look out for immigrant business owners.

“There’s not enough help for someone who wants to do good, who has a business who follows all the rules,” he said.

Like Pinales, Sealy is looking to the city for help wherever she can find it.

For most of her working life, Sealy was an accountant who wanted to be a dressmaker. In 2014, she became one, opening her boutique — Dress With Confidence — on Fairmount,

selling gowns and skirts made from fabrics from West Africa. COVID nearly wiped her out.

“All the proms and graduations and weddings,” she said, “For the last two years, I have not done any of them.”



“We need somebody to help us get to the next day,” said Yolanda Sealy, the owner of Dress With Confidence. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Sealy’s friends and family helped with rent, but she didn’t know other tenants in her building were renegotiating their leases. She spent over \$30,000 to keep her doors open; that was her retirement savings.

“It took all my money,” she said.

Sealy has tapped city resources to stay solvent, including help from Boston Main Streets to build a new website and to acquire a new point-of-sale system.

More help like that would be valuable, she said. So would workforce training programs.

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city's housing crisis plays a role, she noted, as workers have difficulty affording a place to live. So she's been intrigued by Wu, and her focus on rent control.

More than anything, Sealy wants the city to step up for business owners.

"We need somebody to help us get to the next day," she said.

Langston and Londy agree. They're also thinking about the long term.

The couple have been selling hair extensions and wigs on Fairmount Ave. since 2015, two years after first launching their business, Intriguing Hair, online. They serve women experiencing hair loss because of medical issues, and, as one of the few such stores that can bill insurance companies, built a thriving business with customers well beyond Hyde Park.



Intriguing Hair at 82 Fairmount Ave., next to Dress With Confidence. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

COVID hit. Sales dropped by 70 percent. And then their store was broken into following George Floyd protests in June of 2020, when vandals took advantage of the lack of police presence in Hyde Park, miles from the action downtown, to steal \$20,000 in products.

“They smashed and grabbed whatever they could,” Langston said.

The couple paid for the repairs instead of tapping insurance, to keep their premiums from spiking. They received city and state grants and secured a \$15,000 federal loan. But they’re still deep in debt.

“We’re pulling money out of the air to make all this come back to life,” he said. “A lot of Black businesses and Black people, we’re born with debt. We live through debt. This is what we know our lives to be.”

Then in June came a curveball: A real estate agent stopped by with a client looking to buy their building. The couple had no idea it was even for sale. Langston scrambled to pull together an offer, and after significant wrangling as well as support from local politicians, the couple say they’re in the final stages of purchasing it themselves. But Langston is frustrated he didn’t know about the sale in the first place, [a challenge that many small-business owners of color face.](#)

“We’re trying to build something to leave for our son,” he said. “Both of us know how it felt to be born with no assets.”

They hope the next mayor prioritizes “Black and brown economic development,” said Londy. And they want to see that mayor engage with small businesses one on one, cutting through the red tape that entangles far too many entrepreneurs.

“If you’re in local government, you need to see what your people and constituents are going through,” Langston said. “They need to see your face.”

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