

New state grants for small firms

BY JAMES T. MADORE

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The owners of Station Plaza Coffee Shop & Diner in Mineola plan to investigate the state's new \$800 million COVID-19 relief grant program for small businesses after failing to secure a Nassau County restaurant grant.

Co-owner Peter Vatakis said Monday that he and George Arniotis didn't qualify for county help because they haven't owned the diner long enough. They purchased it in 2019 after working as cooks there.

"A grant will help keep us alive," Vatakis said, referring to the COVID-19 Pandemic Small Business Recovery Grant Program. "We don't qualify for a lot of the grants out there because we only purchased this place eight months before the pandemic."

The diner, across from the Long Island Rail Road station, hosted a news conference where state Sen. Anna Kaplan, chairwoman of the Senate Small Business Committee, outlined the grant program in the 2021-22 state budget that was



Diner co-owner Peter Vatakis, left, at a news conference in Mineola on Monday. "A grant will help keep us alive," he says.

adopted this month.

To be eligible for a grant, she said businesses must have 100 or fewer employees and be able to show a revenue loss last year compared with 2019. Priority will be given to businesses with

10 or fewer employees and those owned by women, veterans or members of minority groups or are in poor neighborhoods.

Details being worked out

"The state will be taking un-

precedented steps to ensure that these grants get into the hands of small businesses who need them the most," said Kaplan (D-Great Neck), adding that some local entrepreneurs didn't qualify for the federal Paycheck Protection Program loan and Economic Injury Disaster Loan or didn't apply because they worried about not being able to repay the loans.

She said Empire State Development, the state's business-aid agency, is drafting regulations for the small business recovery grant program, which it will oversee.

ESD spokeswoman Kristin Devoe, speaking from Albany, said the agency "is working as quickly as possible to put together a program that will fit the needs of highly impacted small businesses so they can build back better from the COVID-19 crisis. As soon as we have details to share, we will release them to the public immediately," she said.

Outside the Mineola diner, the senator was joined by her colleague, Sen. Kevin Thomas (D-Levittown), Nassau County Exec-

utive Laura Curran, Mineola Mayor Scott P. Strauss and leaders of chambers of commerce from throughout the county.

Raising program awareness

Valerie Anderson Campbell, Nassau director of the Long Island African American Chamber of Commerce, and Eric Alexander, founder of the downtowns' group Long Island Main Street Alliance, both said raising awareness about the grant program will determine its impact. Up to 4% of the state funding will go to groups that help small businesses to submit grant applications.

Julie Marchesella, a leader of the Elmont Chamber of Commerce and owner of a women's formalwear store in Merrick, urged state officials to make it easy to apply, particularly for business owners who may not speak much English.

"Please make these forms available in languages that they can understand," she said as an LIRR train departed the station. "Please simplify the process so that there are fewer forms to fill out to receive this necessary economic funding."

Banquet halls now eligible for Nassau funding

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Small banquet halls are now eligible for COVID-19 relief grants from Nassau County, officials said.

The county has expanded its \$2.3 million Restaurant Recovery Grant Program, begun in November, because \$530,000 remains to be distributed.

Banquet halls with catering staff of 50 or fewer people are eligible for the Nassau grants, which are \$5,000 or \$10,000 — depending on the size of the work force. Meeting halls run by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and other charitable or religious organizations may apply if they offer catered events.

All banquet facilities must have a valid permit from the county's Department of Health.

"We'll continue to be nimble — adapting our programs with the changing needs of businesses," Nassau County Executive Laura Curran said. "We must do everything we

can to ensure our once-vibrant restaurant scene comes back strong" from the pandemic.

The inclusion of banquet halls owned by veteran and fraternal organizations comes as "things are so dire for some [that] they might be forced to sell their buildings due to the loss in revenues they have suffered," the county legislature's Republican majority wrote in a letter last week. "While some of the [COVID] restrictions are beginning to ease, these establishments are nowhere near pre-pandemic levels and there's no indication that will happen any time soon."

The grant program has awarded \$1.7 million to 238 restaurants in Nassau so far. Each has 50 or fewer employees, said Curran spokeswoman Justine DiGiglio-Cifarelli, adding the funds are from the federal Community Block Grant program.

Nassau reopened the restaurant grants program in Febru-



Some VFW and American Legion halls in Nassau County will be eligible to apply for grants. Above, a facility in Franklin Square.

ary after previous applicants didn't meet the eligibility requirements or didn't respond to follow-up questions from the county and grants administrator National Development Council in Manhattan.

Owners of small banquet halls and restaurants may apply at nassaucountyny.gov/restaurantrecovery. More information is available by sending an email to nassaurestaurants@ndconline.org or by calling 646-825-9617.

Kyle Strober, executive di-

rector of the developers' group Association for a Better Long Island, said the Nassau grant program can serve as a lifeline for struggling restaurants as they wait for the U.S. Small Business Administration to launch a funding program for the food-and-drink sector.

A Nassau grant "may provide the critical bridge that enables owners to maintain their staff and pay their bills," said Strober, a member of Curran's COVID economic advisory council.

More federal funds

On Saturday, SBA announced a slow rollout of its \$28.6 billion Restaurant Revitalization Fund, or RRF, with eligible businesses that already have Paycheck Protection Program loans being selected for a weeklong test.

Test participants must be located in a poor neighborhood or be owned by a woman, veteran or member of a minority group.

The national test will take place "over the next two weeks" but no money will be distributed until the RRF application portal opens, which will probably be next month, the agency said. Once that happens, SBA will initially only process applications from women, minorities, veterans and those with operations in poor communities for 21 days.

RRF funding is up to \$10 million per applicant and up to \$5 million per location. The money doesn't have to be repaid if it's spent by March 11, 2023.

More information is available at nwsdy.li/RestRevFund.