

Business Voices Matter

Oakland Businesses “Speak Up” in Chamber Citywide Business Census

OAKLAND – In recent years, the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce has emerged as a regional research and data leader on a host of issues pertinent to government operations, business and industry sector analysis, workforce trends as well as priorities of local voters. The Chamber engages in these projects so that its members, elected leaders and the community at large can make informed policy and business decisions that support both city and regional economic and workforce development efforts.

As part of its ongoing research, the Chamber recently concluded its 2017 Oakland Business Census and Outlook to obtain quantifiable data regarding how Oakland businesses perceive the economy, realities of doing businesses in Oakland, an evaluation and ranking of the most pressing issues facing employers today, as well as how city leaders can support business development going forward.

The 2017 Oakland Business Census asked questions about general business conditions and emerging trends. Over 540 businesses citywide responded to the request, providing a statistically relevant 95 percent confidence level and 4.1 percent margin of error. The census was distributed to all Oakland businesses with an active and/or verified email address via an online survey tool, and respondents/businesses/non-profits were only able to answer once. The survey was available in English only.

Census respondents included brand new businesses, to legacy businesses that have called Oakland home for many decades. Results represent all sizes of local businesses, with 65 percent of those polled employing 1-15 full-time employees, a number consistent with the Chamber’s annual economic reporting, which provides a high degree of confidence responses are reflective of Oakland’s current business ecosystem. Respondents were also well distributed among Oakland’s business, nonprofit and service sectors, with 51 percent indicating they were a minority or women owned enterprise either in full or in part.

The census found the most pressing issues facing businesses today is the overall cost of living, and more specifically, the availability and cost of commercial space, a strong indicator the city needs to increase supply. When asked what the biggest obstacles are for business expansion, respondents listed crime as the number one reason for their reluctance to expand their businesses, followed by the city’s growing homeless population, as significant obstacles for growing locally.

However, the outlook is not entirely grim, and most businesses are positive about their future, as well as Oakland’s. As noted in the accompanying set of graphs, poll respondents are cautiously optimistic on economic growth, with 48 percent believing the economy will improve slightly to significantly over the next year, and 35 percent believing the economy will weaken either slightly or substantially.

Respondents have a greater sense of optimism regarding their own business, with 73 percent of those polled indicating their businesses are doing the same or better than a year ago. Given those numbers, it is no surprise that when asked about their employment plans going forward, most respondents plan on maintaining or growing their workforce, with only 5 percent considering layoffs over the next year.

There was clear agreement amongst respondents in all categories that they chose Oakland for its location and quality of life, closely followed by its transportation infrastructure and diversity as key reasons to locate here.

When asked about their business's interaction with the City of Oakland, responses were decidedly mixed, with 36 percent of those polled saying they found the city helpful, and about 27 percent saying their experience was less than adequate.

When asked what city government could do to support local businesses, open-ended responses were varied, and as evidenced by the word cloud below, comments suggest some important themes for consideration. Top of mind for the city to tackle include: the need to streamline planning and building services for business (particularly small businesses); addressing issues of homeless encampments and trash; focusing efforts locally, resisting the temptation to take positions on state and federal issues not relevant to local needs, and ensuring availability of housing and commercial space allows businesses to stay local.

