

Want to Get Something Done in Government? Start a Business

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Posted: 3-24-2010

Filed Under: [Business Ideas](#), [Small Business](#), [Starting a Business](#)

If you've ever been in a public space downtown, like a park or a riverfront, and thought, "Wow, what a beautiful place. The city really has its act together," chances are, someone like Dan Biederman was involved.



John Goodman

Biederman's New York City-based company, [Biederman Redevelopment Ventures](#), works with governments around the country and businesses -- he's a mediator, of sorts -- bringing them together to improve parks and downtown areas. Put another way, if Leslie Knope, the lead character in NBC's *Parks and Recreation*, met someone like Biederman, maybe she'd finally get her playground built.

Biederman, 56, has created a for-profit business in a field often associated with nonprofits, the government and the murky world of red tape. "As early as age 21, I decided I only wanted to work on public matters, and that I would likely be bored if I went into industry," says Biederman. He then had a few summer jobs with the federal government and New York City, and also quickly decided that he would be bored with a government job.



And yet, he was drawn to both worlds. He left business school thinking he'd try to carve out a career between the two sectors.



Somehow, he did. Throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s, he was a consultant, with his first big project and success being Bryant Park. As anyone who lived in New York City in the 1970s likely recalls, Bryant Park back then was a place you took your kids only if you wanted a drug dealer as their playmate.

But Biederman co-founded, with Andrew Heiskell, the chairman of Time Inc., and the New York Public Library, the [Bryant Park Corporation](#), a nonprofit, private company solely devoted to cleaning up and maintaining the park. It's self-funded, in part from events they hold at the park. Now it's one of the city's gems.

In 1998, Biederman started his own company, a five-person operation, spread out across the Northeast. "When we work on a city, we bring in others," says Biederman. "You need somebody on the ground who knows the players to get you off to a good start."

So what exactly does his company do? When a community approaches BRV, often it's because they don't have the budget to maintain the park or revamp the neighborhood, so Biederman's company raises the money to do just that via private funding, sponsorships, licensing arrangements, events and concessions, and then goes to task and fixes and restores neighborhoods and parks -- and sometimes even takes the lead in building parks.

You've seen some of his work if you've ever been to Woodruff Park in Atlanta, Schenley Plaza in Pittsburgh or War Memorial Plaza in Baltimore, just a handful of the many parks, plazas, and neighborhoods his company has been a consultant for. Yet another project: Woodall Rogers Park, which is scheduled to open in 2012 in Dallas. When Woodall opens, there will be a performance pavilion, restaurant, walking trails, dog park and children's discovery garden and playground.

Biederman has also been asked to consult on parks and neighborhoods in nations as diverse as Finland, Israel, England, Canada and Singapore.

The marriage of business and government is a trend that will likely continue, certainly while the economy is on the rocks. For instance, last year, Arizona cut parks funding by 61%. New York's budget this year will likely shut down 41 parks and 14 historic sites. California planned to close 220 of their 278 parks, but the ire from the public scuttled that plan.

So that's where Biederman has come in, and as it turns out, involving a business can make these government projects move faster.

"We've had major corporations like Bank of America, HSBC, Southwest Airlines, and Microsoft take major roles in getting us cash quickly, and that's a big advantage over the government. There are often fewer procedures they have to clear," says Biederman, a guy who favors simplicity when he can find it.

Much of what BRV does is setting up business improvement districts (BIDs), which, in the wrong hands, could be a deadly mix of bureaucracy. Companies in these BIDs, for starters, pay extra in fees or taxes to fund the new amenities the area provides -- which, according to Biederman, is a pretty easy sell to businesses.

"They know that they're going to have security patrolling the streets, that they'll be running a business in a district free of graffiti, with low crime and good lighting, and that the park will be run exquisitely," says Biederman.

Of course, it's easy to see why businesses and governments want to improve parks or create business improvement districts. The spending by consumers attracted to refurbished neighborhoods benefits the businesses, which allows them to pay more taxes, which helps the government. And for the major corporations that may not have a brick-and-mortar establishment in the city, it can nevertheless be very good business to be seen as promoting the community.

But starting a company to help corporations and mom-and-pop operations work with the city government? If Biederman's any example, that's a smart business move as well.