

# Legislators take tour to learn how constituents think

**By Cara Bayles**

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PEMBROKE — During a tour of Duxbury and Pembroke last week, state legislators learned how to make croissants, breed oysters, and replace a broken windshield.

The field trip of the Joint Committee on Community Development and Small Businesses was part of a larger listening tour that has also included Quincy and Hyannis. State Representative Josh Cutler, a Duxbury Democrat, played host Friday, showing his fellow legislators three constituent businesses, then leading an afternoon discussion on small-business concerns.

At Island Creek Oysters, founder and owner Skip Bennett took the lawmakers on a tour of his hatchery, where he breeds different strains of algae — “oyster baby food” — in bubbling carboys. He also spawns millions of oysters there, keeping them until they’re large enough to grow on their own in Duxbury Bay, then harvests them to sell at restaurants from Boston to Hong Kong.

Oysters are considered sustainable aquaculture — not only does Bennett do a booming business, oysters also filter the water they live in, eating excessive algae blooms and nitrate runoff from fertilizers.

“I had no idea that oysters were so complex,” said Representative Tackey Chan of Quincy, who cochairs the community development committee.

Until Bennett started buying oyster seed from Maine more than a decade ago, oysters weren’t native to the South Shore. Now, he said, there are about 30 growers raising oysters on 75 acres in Duxbury Bay. Bennett estimated that it was a \$6 million industry in Duxbury.

“And all the money that we make here stays here. We’re a local company, and the money we make is invested back into the community,” he said, adding that he spends plenty of his income down the street at French Memories Café, another stop on the legislators’ tour.

There, owner Debbie Odier took the politicians on a tour of her kitchen, where chefs make pastries for her two newer locations in Boston and Chestnut Hill in Newton.

Odier said her biggest challenge has been finding employees for the restaurant's 25-year-old location.

"People in Duxbury don't need to work in a bakery," she said of her town, where the median income in 2011 was \$103,864 a year. "The problem with this community is the kids here, we love them, but we have to teach them how to sweep."

In the more middle-class community of Pembroke, where the median income was \$79,832 in 2011, the issues were different, but the basic challenge of finding competent labor was the same. Peter Brown, vice president of Tiny & Sons Auto Glass, said even young workers who went to local vocational high schools needed to be brought up to date on newer technology in automotive maintenance. "The body shops need to be updated. It's not the schools' fault — it's money, it's funding. We try to pick up the slack," he said as he watched an employee fill a crack in a Subaru's windshield with polymer. "At bigger companies, they'll use a 90-day training program. But that's not the way my father taught us." He said it can take two years of training before a technician is ready to replace window glass on his own.

Cutler said he was accustomed to hearing similar concerns from the economically disparate towns in his district, which includes Duxbury and Pembroke, as well as Hanson.

"They're not as different as you might think," he said. "There are socioeconomic differences, but I hear the same concerns from both towns about schools and quality-of-life issues."

After visiting the three businesses, legislators convened at the Pembroke Library for a roundtable discussion. Peter Forman, president of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, said he was concerned that many businesses in the region have stopped growing intentionally.

"I'm seeing it more now than when I joined the chamber nine years ago. It's a business survival model. They don't want a certain number of employees, because it's too expensive to cross that threshold, because the overhead is too much. The marginal extra income isn't worth it," Forman said. "That's a dangerous situation for people in the area who are looking for jobs."

Vicky Carvalho, owner of Duxbury Fitness Studio, said that trying to move from a rented location to a space she owns has been a hassle due to the local permitting hurdles involved.

"Every week, I have a meeting with someone else. I had to make 22 copies of my site plan for one board, then 12 for another," she said. "The town doesn't make it very inviting. You're afraid to say what your future plans might be, because they just see dollar signs. You have to pay an application fee just to sit before them."

The group discussed ways the state could help streamline permitting applications, the prohibitive cost of filing as a limited liability corporation with the state, and the difficulty of drawing in private investors to hear business proposals outside of Boston.

In interviews after the meeting, both Chan and Cutler said that workforce development and closing the skill gap would be an important priority, and they planned to look into how the Legislature can help with updating the curriculum at vocational high schools and community colleges. But they both said the purpose of the day was to gather information about what challenges local employers face, and added it was too early to say how that might inform future legislation.

“It’s helpful to us as legislators to learn what’s working and what isn’t,” Cutler said. “Business owners don’t necessarily come to the State House, so it’s good to come to them to hear what they’re saying.”

Chan agreed.

“I’m a touch it, feel it, kind of guy,” he said. “I learned a lot today. Especially about oysters.”

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