

LOCAL NEWS

# \$4.5 million business hub, backed by Sonoma Clean Power, aims to be launchpad for minority entrepreneurs



Luis Flores retextures the walls as part of the renovation of the new BOSS (Business One Stop Shop) offices at 350 E St. in Santa Rosa Thursday, Jan. 8, 2026. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)



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Fueled by up to \$4.5 million from Sonoma County's public power agency, a new nonprofit is preparing to launch an ambitious initiative to streamline permitting for small business owners from minority and underserved communities.

The business assistance hub is a first-of-its-kind project for [Sonoma Clean Power](#), the public agency that purchases electricity to supply most residential and commercial customers across Sonoma and Mendocino counties.

Dubbed the Business One Stop Shop, or BOSS, the nonprofit is setting up shop in a newly purchased three-story building in downtown Santa Rosa, where coworking offices and services will be available for those who struggle shepherding their businesses through local bureaucracy.

The initiative is being spearheaded by Hector Velazquez, a local media and advertising executive who last year landed a combined \$4 million loan and \$500,000 grant from Sonoma Clean Power.

Velazquez, who is also executive director of the Sonoma County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said the multimillion-dollar project will help those who struggle navigating the government system when applying for a business license.

"Many organizations that help them do not follow up," he said. "But BOSS will use a customer-relationship-manager program to follow each case. There will be a record of what that person has done to avoid repeating steps."

For Sonoma Clean Power, the project marks its debut as a community lender, an offshoot of its core mission — local electricity supply geared to driving growth of cleaner, more renewable power production, and energy conservation.

Agency officials said revenue from interest on the BOSS loan will be used to subsidize customer rates.

The loan funds have already been put into action. Last November, Velazquez said he purchased the building at 350 E Street for \$3.2 million and spent an additional roughly \$500,000 on renovations using the Sonoma Clean Power funds. The loan was capped at \$4 million, with an interest rate of 5%.

The 19,346-square-foot space will offer room for other local nonprofits and companies providing services to new and underrepresented business owners. He said the first floor will receive clients and host workshops in common work areas, while the second floor will lease at least 15 office spaces.



Hector Velazquez, who leads the project Business One Stop Shop (BOSS), shows the recently finished offices on the second floor of the BOSS building on 350 E Street, in Santa Rosa, on March 25, 2026. (Raquel Issenberg/La Prensa Sonoma)

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Velazquez said BOSS will initially make interest-only payments — about \$15,000 a month through the end of the year. He said the former property owner is currently renting space on the third floor for an amount that equals about 40% of his monthly mortgage.

“This helps us a little,” Velazquez said.

He said his monthly payments will climb to \$22,000 in January 2027, when he’s expected to pay higher payments that include mortgage principal.

Geof Syphers, Sonoma Clean Power's chief executive officer, said the loan is part of a board-approved initiative to reach new customers by investing in local entrepreneurship. He said the loan is for 25 years, with a large lump-sum balloon payment due in 10 years.

While this is the first time the agency has functioned as a lender for a community project, such lending is not expected to become a core part of its mission, Syphers said, at least for now.

"When such an opportunity comes along," he said, "where lending has the potential to help customers lower their energy costs and also helps lower rates for everyone, the board of directors might consider doing it a second time."

The revenue from interest payments from BOSS will be used to bolster SCP's reserve funds, which can be tapped to subsidize ratepayer electricity costs.

"This interest rate is slightly higher than what we can earn by investing in treasuries," Syphers said.

The agency, which launched in 2014, serves approximately 235,000 customers across Sonoma and Mendocino counties, including 203,000 residential and 32,000 business accounts, equating to about 87% of electricity customers in the region.

Velazquez said that BOSS aims to help the power agency more effectively expand its customer base among Latino, Black and Asian entrepreneurs.

## **From marketing to business hub**

Velazquez said he first started talking to Syphers about his plans for a business hub in 2024. The power agency has been contracting Velazquez for multimedia and marketing services through his company Nexo Media Inc. for three years.

"In a commercial setting, as customers, (we considered) what more we could do for the community," Velazquez said.

Syphers said the \$4 million loan comes from SCP's Local Project Investment Fund, which supports renewable energy projects and energy-related initiatives. But in March 2025, the governing terms for that fund were modified and expanded by the board to allow investments that advance the reach of local small businesses.

Soon after, [SCP's 11-member board](#), made up of local elected officials from county and city governments, formed an advisory committee to review the BOSS investment. On Oct. 2, the board approved the \$4 million loan, along with the \$500,000 grant, voting 9-0 with two board members absent, according to SCP minutes.

The agency concluded the funding and the loan were consistent with its underlying joint powers agreement, essentially its constitution, defining the agency's goals and mission: reducing greenhouse gas emissions and providing competitively priced electricity and related energy conservation and efficiency incentives.

Syphers said the BOSS project is intended to connect the agency with niche small business owners who are typically difficult to reach, allowing for better promotion of Sonoma Clean Power's educational resources and financial incentives. He said the initiative also is designed to improve outreach to Spanish-speaking communities and other multilingual groups, ensuring that key program information is accessible to a broader, more diverse audience.

Cotati Mayor Sylvia Lemus, a SCP board member, was part of the committee formed to monitor Velazquez's project. She said BOSS can be used to promote more sustainable practices among small startups.

"We can train businesses," she said. "Make available information to them... about using alternative ways to save energy instead of using gas all the time."

The agency said it is actively working with BOSS to help it develop a client engagement plan.

Lemus also noted that many "mom and pop" businesses are closing because they lack the marketing tools to promote themselves, something they could possibly learn at a BOSS workshop.



Asian American Pacific Islander Coalition of North Bay vice president Grace Cheung-Schulman, left, and CEO of North Bay Black Chamber of Commerce Nancy Rogers tour the second floor of offices under construction at BOSS in Santa Rosa on Wednesday, January 14, 2026. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat)

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## Searching for tenants

As ever, the success of the new venture depends on whether Velazquez will be able to attract enough tenants to keep up with payments on his mortgage.

Velazquez said workshops on media and marketing, or commercial insurance law, will be offered by the companies that will occupy the second floor, intended to meet the needs of both established and new entrepreneurs.

Trejo Insurance Services, a Santa Rosa-based company has moved into a BOSS office while construction on the downtown space advances. Owner Antonio Trejo said general liability, commercial auto, and workers' compensation are the essential coverages new entrepreneurs frequently overlook.

"What would happen if workers get hurt during a shift?" he said. "Or if a client gets food poisoning and wants to sue the owner of the food truck?"

Aside from the third-floor tenant's contribution and Trejo Insurance, the BOSS building has secured three other tenants: the immigration services firm Tu Brújula Legal; Soluna Outreach Solutions, a bilingual environmental consulting firm owned by BOSS co-founder Hugo Mata; and Velazquez's own Nexo Media, Inc.

Velazquez hopes local chambers of commerce will maintain some type of presence on the first-floor space.

Earlier this year, Velazquez held an open house event at the site for potential tenants. During the event, Velazquez and Mata discussed the layout, services, and potential rent with representatives of the North Bay Black Chamber and the Asian American Pacific Islander Coalition of North Bay.

“This project is like a baby for the county, the community and different agencies,” Mata said. “We are going to get there at one point.”

He also noted that while the business hub can provide clients with resources needed to open a business, they’ll still have to go to county or city offices to file their paperwork and secure their permits.

“We don’t want people to think I’m going to BOSS and I’m going to come out with a business,” he said. “No. There is a lot of work to do.”

By Feb. 26, the offices on the second floor were nearly completed. Velazquez said rents for these unfurnished spaces range from \$250 to \$750 a month and will include basic services, internet, housekeeping, and tenants can use common areas and a meeting room.

“To have a desk, it starts at \$250 a month,” he said.

Velazquez said the first floor will offer four offices and a conference room, but specific details of the final layout were still being worked out.

He said BOSS will occupy one of those ground-floor offices. They plan to rent cubicles hourly, which includes a PO Box, limited access to a print copier, and full access to common areas. The tenants, he added, will have access to a podcast room with microphones, video, and recording devices, a media room with a photo and video camera, and a green room.

The building does not have on-site parking, but Velazquez said the city parking garage at 735 5th St. is available. The rates are \$1 per hour or \$60 per month per space.

## **Looking for support**

During the Oct. 2 Sonoma Clean Power board meeting, the North Bay Black Chamber and the AAPIC North Bay expressed support for the project during public comment.

Velazquez said he invited both chambers to become tenants in the new building and be part of the new BOSS board of directors.

“We aim to build a strategic coalition of chambers,” he said. That way “we are a perfect place for donors to invest.”

In early March, AAPIC North Bay’s President Laurie Fong said the coalition was still considering whether to become a tenant and hadn’t yet discussed whether it would be part of the new board.

Nancy Rogers, CEO of the North Bay Black Chamber, said in March they will have a desk at the site. She said the chamber is still discussing who will represent them on BOSS’ board.

“(The chamber) looks forward to being part of the collaborative environment the space is designed to create,” said Rogers.

Velazquez said he needs at least a dozen tenants to make the BOSS project work.

The building is essentially the collateral for the loan. If the mortgage payments fail, Velazquez said Sonoma Clean Power will take ownership of the property to recover its investment.

He said he’s reaching out to other local chambers of commerce and appealing to the community to get involved.

“We need a strong team right here in this building,” he said. “Individuals who can contribute to growth and stimulate the economy by supporting those who wish to launch their businesses, or those who are looking to expand.”

Syphers said the project is a search by Sonoma Clean Power over the past four years for opportunities to support local organizations that serve the community.

“The BOSS service center aims to do both,” he said. “To provide a long-term set of services to small businesses and also lower administrative costs for a number of like-minded nonprofits.”

Velazquez said he had to hold back tears when the project was approved for SCP funding. Having shared this vision with Trejo and Mata since its inception, he now feels a profound sense of duty in managing a multimillion-dollar public investment and endeavor.

"The project itself validates the risk involved," he said. "A responsibility I do not take lightly."

*Staff Writer Martin Espinoza contributed to this story.*

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