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By Sharon McLoone

Business Leader To Call for 'Super SBA'

A leading advocate for small businesses plans to detail for the nation's mayors this morning a radical proposal intended to cultivate a better environment for the small business community.

American Management Services Chairman and CEO George Cloutier in a speech accepting an award at the U.S. Conference of Mayors' winter meeting this week in Washington will call for a five-fold increase in the budget for the Small Business Administration, a consolidation of small business programs across some 40 agencies and the creation of something akin to a small business Peace Corps.

Cloutier is also chairman of Partner America, a small business growth program founded in 2000 in partnership with the mayors' group that offers management advice, technical assistance and education and government procurement opportunities. "The big picture is that the government doesn't devote enough resources to small business," said Cloutier in an interview at washingtonpost.com offices on Wednesday. He also is calling for \$50 billion of loan guarantees for small firms to be included in President Bush's recently announced stimulus package. "A lot of lawmakers and others are focused on helping big businesses on Wall Street like the Merrill Lynchs in an economic growth package and nowhere is there expansion across the board being considered for small businesses."

Cloutier said more than 40 agencies offer some type of small business loans or other programs, but often small business owners "have no idea that this government help exists or they don't know how to apply. Most of the applicants for these programs are within 60 miles of Washington...These programs aren't marketed well...despite gorgeous brochures that are made, but don't go anywhere."

His vision to create a "super SBA" includes offering a single phone number that would house information on all of these agency programs by calling a number such as 1-800-SBA-HELP and a general Web site. An independent panel comprised of members of the business community and lawmakers would offer ideas on how to consolidate the business programs, he said. It would take about two years to create a consolidated, super SBA, according to Cloutier.

Cloutier, who lectures at his alma mater Harvard Business School, criticized the Clinton and Bush administrations for their lack of focus on small businesses: "Both administrations short-sheeted small businesses" through lack of funding and cohesive, efficient programs. "Soon there will be a new administration and new heads of agencies and that's why we're starting to make noise about this plan now," he said. "People are asking for concrete ideas for change and I'm offering some."

Small Business Blog readers - what do you think of this plan to consolidate small business programs across all agencies into one 'Super SBA' or the idea of a Small Business Peace Corps that would place knowledgeable students at small businesses for a year or two?