

## The wait is over

By Megan Shannon



Dogs rule at University of Doglando. An old ranch home along East Colonial Drive was renovated to become a doggy day care, boarding, grooming and training facility. Dog beds and covered sofas line the living room and a few bedrooms to create a home away from home for pets.

The house opens to an expansive three-acre backyard with a beach area and a long, grassy track perfect for running laps. “We do not use kennels because we don’t want to stress the dogs out,” said owner Teena Patel.

“We use things that are familiar to their own home — couches, photos on the walls, windows. Patel’s dream was to own a place like Doglando. After six years of looking for the perfect spot, she stumbled upon the property that was tucked away from traffic, yet close to her Avalon Park home. In April 2005 she applied for a permit and planned to open before the end of the year.

Her doors did not officially open until last weekend — more than three years later. Many people, like Patel (who earned her Master’s of Business Administration at the University of Central Florida), try to open their small business without professional help. What they do not count on is how complicated the process is.

With nine different county departments to deal with and books upon books of county code to learn and follow, most small-business owners end up hiring professionals or they go under before ever opening their doors. Patel came close to folding many times. First, personal issues set her back.

Then, just before her grand opening in May 2006, county inspectors found she had not adhered to several codes. After that, she found herself in a constant battle with the county. Each time she returned from Orange County offices without an occupational license she had to consider the time and the hundreds of thousands of dollars it was taking her to open Doglando. When the number of empty-handed trips neared double digits she was very close to giving up her dream.

Orange County District 4 Commissioner Linda Stewart said Patel’s misfortune was partly due to her not hiring a professional liaison—the rest of the blame is on the county’s overwhelming, costly and sometimes downright confusing permitting process. “I think we can improve the system and the customer can improve by being more responsible for their part in it,” Stewart said. “We get a lot of complaints about the process, mostly that it takes too long.

But for such a big county I think two to three weeks is reasonable.” The building department recently hired a coordinator to help citizens navigate the process. Bob Olin, Orange County building

manager, agreed that hiring a professional is necessary. “If the auto transmission of your car broke, would you try to fix it yourself or would you take it to a professional?” he asked. “In 19 years I have never encountered any business taking three years to open.

We cannot change the rules for people and we do not create road blocks. We want business to come into the county.” More than 80,000 building permits are issued by Orange County each year, but Philly Soft Pretzel owner Debbie Seitz said that number would likely be higher if the permit process was less complicated. Seitz and her husband, Dean, moved from Cape May, N.J., 15 years ago.

The couple missed certain Garden State staples like cheesesteaks, pretzels and Taste Cakes, but never dreamed there was anything they could do about it until they saw the first Philly Soft Pretzel franchise open during a trip home. They bought a franchise in 2006 — the first one purchased in the South — and a storefront in the Waterford Towers.

Seitz assumed that opening a franchise in an established plaza would be relatively painless, but it ended up taking over a year to open and costing an additional \$100,000 due to code regulations. One problem: they hired a franchise architect who was not familiar with Orange County’s code. “It is not anybody’s fault.

There are sad stories to opening a business because it is like learning how to walk — you are going to get some scrapes and bruises,” Seitz said. “We kept going because we believed in the product and because a lot of Northerners are looking for a piece of home. We get people from Philly running through the store doing a happy dance.” Orange County and Orlando have seen plenty of entrepreneurial success over the years.

Nearly 25,000 companies opened in 2006 alone. According to Julie Matthews, Disney Entrepreneurial Center assistant director, an abundance of local and state resources available to entrepreneurs makes this possible.

The Florida Small Business Development Center Network, the U.S. Small Business Administration, SCORE — “Counselors to America’s Small Business,” and the UCF Small Business Development Center are all able to assist small-business owners. “Starting a business without help can be very challenging and frustrating, but people do it and they are successful. It just takes more time and effort,” she said.

“I have not heard a lot of complaints about starting a business in Orange County. Overall it is a relatively easy process.” But Olin said there is room for improvement. The county began researching a more streamlined permitting process for sustainable projects as an incentive for green business, but recently decided to open that up to all projects.

The study will take several months to complete. “We are analyzing the entire development review process to see how we can do things faster, simpler and easier,” he said.