



Open Call for Grant Proposals - The Sustainable Business Innovation Cohort

Summary of the Opportunity

The Fred and Barbara Erb Family Foundation seeks to support nonprofit organizations that provide technical assistance and/or financial support to small businesses so they can become more prosperous while also caring for their communities, employees, and the environment.

For additional information about this opportunity, please go to www.erbff.org/sb.

Applications open May 1st and close June 18th. We will not accept late proposals.

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Purpose and Background

We know that to keep their doors open and lights on, small business owners are constantly adapting and responding to complex and uncertain economic forces. We also know that many of these business owners are not solely motivated by maximizing their profits — they also want to create good jobs, provide goods and services that help people or solve problems, and incorporate their personal values in how they run their business.

Entrepreneurs wear many hats and running a profitable and resilient business that reflects their values isn't always easy or straightforward. Business-serving organizations can provide expertise, support, and flexible capital that helps these business owners thrive.

The goal of this grant opportunity is to support the nonprofit business-serving organizations who are supporting small business owners. We plan to make grants to organizations that provide small businesses with technical assistance and/or flexible capital. At the end of the three-year grants, we hope there will be a more connected, adaptable, and resilient small business ecosystem in Southeast Michigan that knows how to support entrepreneurs who are building value by living their values.

Three principles serve as the foundation for our approach:

Experimentation

In the spirit of our Foundation's value of "embracing possibility," we hope to provide organizations with resources to be innovative. This could mean trying a new, but mission-aligned innovation, or iterating on existing work. You could try offering a new type of service, serving a new type of clientele, or collaborating with a new partner.

Learning

Another Foundation value is to "work and learn in partnership." We believe that learning is most helpful when it is real-time, applied, and shared with others.

Relationships

Southeast Michigan has a robust ecosystem of organizations that support small business owners. We hope to build on and add to this network of people and organizations. In particular, we hope to strengthen the relationships between organizations who are helping small business owners run their business in ways that are good for people and the planet.

The Erb Family Foundation Commitment

Multi- year funding

Up to \$125,000 per year for three years.

Of the up to \$125,000 that is available per year, each grant will include \$25,000 per year in general operating funding. This is intended to cover the expenses for staff participation in the nine cohort meetings and the work with the learning coach. Up to

\$100,000 per year is available to cover expenses directly related to the proposed project. This is an opportunity to try something new that builds on what you are already doing. Projects may be up to three years in length. It is required that you participate in the cohort meetings for three years.

Learning Coaching

1:1 and group coaching to develop and implement a learning plan.

We are all more successful when we approach our important work with the interest, skills, and tools to listen to those we are serving, respond to what is happening, and improve what we are doing.

Each grant partner will work with a learning coach who will help the organization develop, implement, and refine the processes and tools that equip the team working on the grant-supported project to be more impactful. We hope this strengthens programs and helps grant partners articulate their impact to other funders and partners who can champion this work after the Foundation funding ends.

The learning coach will work with grant partners one-on-one and as a cohort over the three years. This is because we believe learning is most useful when applied in real time and shared with others.

Cohort of Peers

A group of peer organizations who are also working with small businesses and believe that businesses can care about people, planet, and prosperity.

The Foundation heard from several nonprofits and mission-driven organizations that their leaders and staff value relationships and collaboration, but the reality is that people are busy and it is hard to find time to invest in relationships and figure out if and how to work with each other.

All organizations that participate in this opportunity will be required to attend nine meetings over three years (three per year). The purpose of these meetings is intentionally undefined. We want the organizations who are participating to decide together how they want to use the time together. An external facilitator will conduct the convenings. The Foundation will coordinate with the facilitator, but everything that is said in the meetings will be confidential. We hope that this will be a space where you can get to know each other, as well as learn from and with each other.

The Grant Partner Commitment

In addition to running the program that you describe in your proposal, we are asking that all grant partners agree to the following three commitments:

- ✓ **Show up** — Attend three in-person cohort meetings per year during the three years of the grant.
- ✓ **Learn** — Approach the work with a learning mindset and be open to adapting in response to what you learn.
- ✓ **Share** — Be open with what you are learning so that others can learn with and from you.

Process Overview and Important Dates

May 1st Application opens

Submit applications in our grants portal (AkoyaGo) via the link on the www.erbff.org/sb page.

We expect that many of the organizations submitting proposals will be new partners to the Erb Family Foundation. If you've never received a grant from the Erb Family Foundation but you meet the eligibility criteria and have an idea, we hope you submit a proposal!

May 4th Informational webinar

The webinar will be recorded. The registration information and link to the recording will be available at www.erbff.org/sb.

May 8th Office hours

May 21st

June 2nd

June 15th

In-person and virtual “office hours” to ask the Erb Family Foundation team questions will be held throughout the application window. The times and locations will be posted on www.erbff.org/sb.

June 18th Applications are closed. **We will NOT accept late applications.**

We will be preparing the applications for a panel of reviewers who are external to the Foundation, and we want to give them enough time to read your answers to the application questions.

June 18th Proposal review

to

August 12th

The Erb Family Foundation Board approves all the Foundation's grants. A panel of people not on our staff will be reviewing the proposals and making recommendations for Erb Family Foundation staff to bring to the Board. The panel consists of people who have varied first-hand experiences, expertise, and perspectives — for example small business owners or start-up investors.

August 12th Decisions announced

Applicants will be notified by email about whether their proposal has or has not been selected.

Eligibility Criteria

Do you think your organization might want to submit a proposal? Make sure you meet all the eligibility criteria listed below.

- ✓ **501(c)3 nonprofit** — We are open to joint applications from more than one organization; however, the main applicant must be a 501(c)3 of the IRS code and not a private foundation. We are also open to applicants that use a fiscal sponsor. We encourage applicants to consider how you might partner or collaborate with other organizations to better serve more businesses.
- ✓ **Serves small businesses** — We'll be curious to hear more about how your existing work with the local small businesses has informed your application.
- ✓ **Based in Southeast Michigan** — Applicants must already work in Southeast Michigan or apply jointly with an organization that is based in the region. Counties include: Livingston, Oakland, Wayne, St. Clair, Macomb, Washtenaw, Monroe.
- ✓ **Helps businesses be better for people or the planet** — We are open to applicants who might be new to triple-bottom-line (i.e. people, planet, profit) work but can show how it fits with their existing work with small businesses.
- ✓ **Operating Budget over \$100,000** — Have total revenue of at least \$100,000 in the previous year.
- ✓ **Anti-discrimination practice** — In policy and practice do not discriminate based on age, race, creed, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation and/or ethnicity.
- ✓ **Financial reports** — Has financial reports required by Michigan Attorney General:
 - Organizations with annual contributions under \$250,000: Form 990, 990-PF, or other 990-series return for the preceding tax year is required.
 - Organizations with annual contributions between \$250,000 and \$500,000: a financial statement reviewed by an independent certified public accountant is required.
 - Organizations with annual contributions of more than \$500,000: financial statement audited by an independent certified public accountant is required.

Application Questions

The application will be available from May 1st through June 18th. All applications will be submitted via our grant portal (Akoya Go). The link to the application will be available on May 1st at www.erff.org/sb.

Please be prepared to answer the following questions. We will also require an Audited Financial Statement, Financial Review, or Form 990; list of your board members; project budget; and an organizational budget.

1. Project description. *We intend for this to be a high-level snapshot of the project you are proposing. It is okay if you learn, improve, and adapt over the duration of the grant. Please do not exceed 250 words.*
2. Tell us about the type of small businesses you will be working with and why this work matters to them right now. *Please do not exceed 250 words.*
3. Tell us about the specific activities that you will do as part of this project that will help businesses become more profitable or resilient by implementing practices that are better for people (e.g. employees, neighbors, etc.) or the planet. *Please do not exceed 250 words.*
3. How does this project fit with the other work at your organization(s)? *Please do not exceed 200 words.*
4. How will you know if this project was a success at the end of year one of the grant? How will you know if it is successful at the end of year three? (Consider changes in beliefs, behavior, attitudes, knowledge, or conditions when thinking about success.) *Grants will be awarded by September 2026 and conclude by October 2029. Intended outcomes can be both qualitative and quantitative. Please do not exceed 200 words.*
5. What will it take to make this project successful? *This could include funding, partnerships, policies, or other factors. If you are applying with a partner organization, please describe how you plan to work together. Please do not exceed 200 words.*
6. What challenges might you encounter in trying to do this work? *Think about what you have learned in similar situations. Optional – tell us how you might address the challenges. Please do not exceed 200 words.*
7. How will participating in a cohort be helpful to your work? *The content and structure of the three annual cohort meetings will be informed by participating grant partners. We expect that it will include a mix of networking, workshops, and group discussions. Please do not exceed 250 words.*
8. Who from your organization(s) will attend these meetings and what are their roles in the proposed project? *We ask that two people from your team be available to participate. Ideally, one person will be in a leadership role and one person is involved in the day-to-day*

of your organization's programs. If this doesn't work for your organization, please share more! List each attendee's name, organizational role, email address, and role in the project.

9. Can the two people identified above commit to attending a full day in-person meeting in Metro Detroit for a to-be-determined day during these weeks? If you cannot commit, please explain why. October 5-9, 2026; February 1-5, 2027; June 21-25, 2027. *Please indicate availability for the entire week. A specific date during each week will be identified and shared when grants are announced. Dates for Year 2 and Year 3 meetings will be determined at a later time.*
10. Think of one project you have currently. How does your organization currently determine what is working and what isn't working for that project? *For example, do you collect surveys, talk to people, measure revenues, etc. How has that information turned into actionable changes? Please do not exceed 250 words.*
11. Over the three years of the grant, can you commit to working with a coach who can support your team on how you are learning from your work and communicating the impacts of your work to external partners and audiences? If you cannot commit, please explain why. *The Foundation has hired a learning coach who is available to work with grant partners on a one-on-one basis and as a group with other grant partners in the cohort. We expect that in addition to the three cohort meetings referenced above, the one-on-one meetings with the learning coach will total between 5 and 20 hours in Year 1, depending on the needs and interest of the grant partners.*
12. Optional - What remaining questions do you have about this grant opportunity?
13. Optional - What additional information do you want to share as part of your application?

Where To Get More Information

Keep checking www.erbff.org/sb for all the latest information. We will update that page with a live FAQ, the webinar recording, and other opportunities to ask Erb Family Foundation staff questions. You can also follow us on LinkedIn or Facebook.

Still have questions? Reach out to sbcohort@erbff.org.

The Erb Family Foundation

The Fred and Barbara Erb Family Foundation continues the legacy of two lifelong Southeast Michigan residents who were deeply committed to their community. Since 2008, the Foundation has awarded over \$200 million to initiatives Fred and Barbara cared about most—the health of the Great Lakes, arts and cultural organizations and jazz education in metro Detroit, the advancement of Alzheimer's research, and sustainable business practices.

In 2022, the Foundation made the strategic decision to spend down all its assets by 2034 in order to make bold investments in projects that address pressing needs and drive lasting change. It remains

dedicated to working closely with its partners, fostering collaboration, and continuing its commitment to improving the health of communities. During its final years, the Foundation seeks to also make grants that directly reflect the personal passions and interests of Fred and Barbara Erb, as well as support work that promotes fair election administration, voter engagement, and access to the ballot in Southeast Michigan—particularly for those who have been historically targeted by voter suppression.

Sustainable Business at The Erb Family Foundation

At the Fred and Barbara Erb Family Foundation, we believe that doing good for people and the planet is not just a feel-good philosophy or a marketing trend, but a proven approach to creating resilient businesses. We support nonprofits that work to advance sustainable business, which we define as businesses that prioritize people, the planet, and profitability — also known as a triple-bottom-line approach. The Foundation looks to grow the sustainable business sector by:

- Growing sustainable practices among small businesses in Southeast Michigan and strengthening the connections and collaboration among entities that support them.
- Increasing the capital available to entrepreneurs to implement triple-bottom-line practices and grow their businesses, in partnership with intermediaries.
- Increasing the technical assistance and expertise available to help entrepreneurs and small business owners implement triple-bottom-line practices that strengthen their businesses.