

About The Sustainable Business Innovation Cohort

What are we trying to do with the Sustainable Business Innovation Cohort?

The Erb Family Foundation seeks to support the nonprofit organizations (i.e. Business Supporting Organizations) that provide expertise and capital to small businesses to help them become more prosperous while, or perhaps because, they care about their neighbors, their employees, and the environment. The Sustainable Business Innovation Cohort is an opportunity for nonprofit business supporting organizations to experiment, learn, and connect with each other so they can better serve the small businesses striving to be a force for good in their community.

What does the Erb Family Foundation mean when it says, “sustainable business?”

We support nonprofits that work with sustainable businesses, which we define as businesses that prioritize people (such as their employees or neighbors), the environment, and profitability — also known as a triple bottom line approach. The Foundation’s sustainable business guidelines outline three ways that we look to grow the sustainable business sector:

- 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 entrepreneurs and small business owners to implement triple-bottom-line practices that strengthen their businesses.

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. Small businesses today face rising costs, supply chain uncertainties, shifting customer expectations, and increasing pressure to stay competitive. The good news: sustainable business practices — those that support the planet and society — can directly strengthen financial performance, operational resilience, and long-term stability. For Southeast Michigan, where small businesses contribute to jobs, economic diversification, and local spending, that matters more than ever.

How do you hope this project will build on the existing resources available in the current ecosystem?

Southeast Michigan is fortunate to have many small businesses and a robust network of organizations that support them. We hope to identify and support organizations who are specifically helping small businesses be more sustainable (i.e. integrating better people and planet practices into their business). Sustainability can take many forms and can mean different things to different people. We hope to help organizations who are already providing services to small businesses by providing resources and peers who can develop, grow, and strengthen their sustainability practices so their businesses can thrive and benefit our communities.

Who will the Foundation support through the cohort program?

We are looking to fund up to 10 organizations that meet the following requirements:

- 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.
- Serves small businesses.
- 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.
- \$100K in revenue — 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 statements audited by an independent certified public accountant is required.

What support will the Erb Family Foundation provide to the cohort grant partners?

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- Funding - Up to \$125,000 per year for three years. This is an opportunity to try something new that builds on what you are already doing.
- Coaching - 1:1 and group coaching to develop and implement a learning plan.
- Peers - A cohort of peer organizations who are also working with small businesses and believe that businesses can care about people, planet, and profits.

What types of partnerships are you able to fund for the SBIC?

There is no one right way to partner for this opportunity. We welcome individual organizations, two organizations who wish to work together or their work complements each other, a for-profit organization partnering with a non-profit partner, and anything else in between. We are also open to fiscally sponsored projects.

Does the work have to directly support individual businesses or can it be focused on strengthening sector infrastructure (such as policy and advocacy) for the benefit of business in SE Michigan that work in that sector?

If your project idea is focused strictly on advocacy, this is not the funding opportunity for you. While advocacy can be a part of the conversation of making triple-bottom-line practices possible, this project is aimed at business serving organizations providing technical assistance and capital support to small businesses. We intend for this funding to support services for the entrepreneur, small business owner, and the leadership team running businesses, informing the decisions they're making every day to be a profitable and resilient business by making better decisions — for the environment and for people. That said, if there are compelling ideas to support the ecosystem at large to implement more sustainable business practices, we welcome you to apply.

What are examples of the types of projects that you would like to support?

We are open to different types of projects that offer some form of technical assistance or capital support for entrepreneurs and small businesses that pertain to sustainable business practices. Good people practices may include fair wages, benefits, childcare, partnerships with mission-driven organizations, finding other ways to give back to the community, etc. Good planet practices could mean sustainable sourcing, circularity, monitoring your greenhouse gas emissions, etc. Capital support could mean finding ways to support the implementation of the practices mentioned above, or it could mean giving capital to entrepreneurs who are already doing this well. We invite creativity around what this may look like in practice.

Do you anticipate that the grant partners selected in the cohort will be those that focus on a particular type of business, such as businesses of a certain size, or no?

We don't have a specific definition for what we mean by small business. The intention of this funding is to make resources more accessible to the businesses who are small enough that they may not have the expertise or capacity in-house to integrate new practices and systems into their business and could benefit from external support from a business supporting organization.

Is there a specific number of businesses that we need to support to be eligible?

No, there is not a specific number of businesses that would make someone eligible for this program. However, we are looking for business serving organizations who have already have a track record helping business owners with various needs.

Are nonprofits businesses? Do social enterprises count?

Yes, they are, and we know that they're a huge part of our economy. Nonprofits have their mission, but then also a lot of them are employing people, showing up in their community, and having an environmental impact. If you work with nonprofits to support their operations, not just around their mission, that could be a fit for this opportunity.

What is the desired outcome? What would the Foundation consider a sign of success for this cohort?

As a spenddown foundation (i.e. we plan to close the Foundation in 2034), we want to support organizations and leaders who can champion the issues and values that we care about long after we are gone.

In the short term (the next three years), we hope that these grants will enable organizations to provide more access for small business owners to expertise and financial resources that strengthen their business by implementing practices that are good for people and the environment and learn from what is working and what isn't. In the long term, we hope that the relationships between these organizations and leaders will form a network of resources and advocates that will continue to have impact after the grants ends.

Will this opportunity be offered again?

Right now, we are only planning to do this once. Over the next three years, we will continue to listen to our grant partners and stakeholders to determine how we can make grants that have the most impact for the Foundation's remaining years before we close in 2034.

Is this the only way to get a Sustainable Business grant from the Erb Family Foundation?

No, we also make grants outside of this SBIC opportunity.

I have more questions, what should I do?

Refer to the [website](#), sign up for office hours, or email us (sbcohort@erbff.org). This document will continue to be updated as we receive more questions.

Can funding support ecosystem resources or infrastructure? NEW! Added 5/14

This funding is intended to support services and resources that directly impact entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs will help us review applications, so we can identify the programs and ideas that will be the most helpful to entrepreneurs who are building businesses that are financially strong while also having a positive impact on people and/or the environment.

Can funding support our existing program? NEW! Added 5/14

This is an opportunity to try something new or build on an existing program. We don't want you to create something brand new because often it is difficult to continue funding and running the program when the three-year grant ends. However, we also encourage applicants to use this funding and support as an opportunity to strengthen, experiment, and improve their programs. The community of peer organizations and learning coaches are meant to be resources for your team to take a step back so you can think and act strategically about what you can do so that your programs can have the most impact and be resilient.

Can we use part of the grant funding to regrant or loan to entrepreneurs? NEW! Added 5/14

Yes! We welcome projects and ideas that use a portion of the up to \$100,000/year in program funds to regrant or loan to entrepreneurs.

Can an individual be an applicant? NEW! Added 5/14

We are looking for organizations with at least \$100,000 in revenue. Even if you are consultant with revenues that exceed \$100,000, we encourage you to consider partnering with an organization. Part of the intention of these grants is to support programs to reach more or different businesses in a way that they can continue after the grant concludes. As in individual, we'd be curious to hear how partnering with an organization enables you to use your personal experience and expertise to build programs that can have reach beyond what you can do as an individual.

How is this funding different than traditional entrepreneurship funding? NEW! Added 5/21

We use an additional lens when reviewing programs and organizations to support. Like many other entrepreneurship funders, we are looking to support programs that provide

technical assistance and/or financial capital to business owners. On top of that, we are looking for programs that help entrepreneurs implement practices that are good for their employees, their community, and/or the environment, as a way to make their businesses more successful and resilient. These businesses are often referred to as triple-bottom-line businesses.

Cohort Experience

What are the expectations for the cohort members?

In addition to executing the project that is in your proposal, grant partners will be required to participate in ongoing coaching and attend nine in-person cohort meetings.

We've 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. In Year 1, we expect that in addition to the three day-long cohort meetings referenced above, the one-on-one meetings with the learning coach will total between 5 and 20 hours, depending on the needs and interest of the grant partners.

We ask that two people from your team be available to participate in the nine in-person meetings. Ideally, one person will be in a leadership role, and one person will be involved in the day-to-day of your organization's programs. The three meetings will be held for one day during the following weeks: October 5-9, 2026; February 1-5, 2027; and June 21-25, 2027. A specific date 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.

Our hope is that grant partners approach their work with the learning coach and the cohort meetings with a learning mindset, adapt their work in response to what they learn, and be open to sharing these learning with others.

What will the cohort meetings be like?

We hope to co-create this experience with the grant partners! We have hired a team to facilitate the cohort meetings. They will work with grant partners to design the content and structure of the meetings. We expect that it will include a mix of networking, workshops, and group discussions. We are planning for all cohort meetings to be in-person for a full-day in metro-Detroit. The first meeting will be at the Foundation's office in Royal Oak.

What are we supposed to work on with the learning coach?

The learning coach will work with your team 1:1 to develop a learning plan. The learning plan will look different for each grant partner, and it will be customized to your program. In simple terms, the learning plan is a tool that helps your team articulate what success will look like for their grant-funded project, what outcomes you hope your program will produce, identify the type of information/feedback/data that will help you know if you are headed in the right direction, improve to be more effective, communicate the program's impact to others, and then will also work with you on any measurement needs, as needed.

The learning coach will also join the cohort meetings to lead and support discussions between grant partners about what they are learning and trying. The learning coach will help identify topics that are arising from the individual cohort members that may be helpful for the entire group.

Are the learning plans for the participants focused exclusively on the specific innovation project, or are they intended to be somewhat broader and support overall organizational capacity-building?

We think about learning as a muscle and a habit. The learning plans that each grant partner will work on will be focused on the grant-funded work, however, we hope the skills and processes that are developed will benefit grant partners' other work.

What metrics do you plan to collect? **NEW! Added 5/14**

We do not have set metrics that we plan to collect across all the grant partners. The learning coaches will work with each grant partner to develop their own learning plan, which will include identifying the data that is helpful for that specific organization as they improve their work.

Application

How do I access the GOapply grants portal?

Register with our GOapply grants portal here: <https://goapply2.akoyago.com/erbff>. An account is required before accessing the application invitation link. To access the application after using the invitation link, we recommend bookmarking our grants portal login page for easy access.

How do I access the application?

The SBIC Opportunity is accessible only through this invitation link, after registering with our GOapply grant portal:

https://goapply2.akoyago.com/erbff/application/sustainable_business

How do I create an account?

1. Visit our GOapply grants portal here via a desktop device.
2. Select “Create a New Account”
3. Search for your organization using your EIN / Tax ID number, then select it from a list. This will prepopulate your Organizational Profile using Pub78 data. If you do not have an EIN “Skip, Manually Enter” option to manually create an Organizational Profile.
4. After registering for your account, you may access the application via the invitation link here.

My organization is a program or center of a larger nonprofit (examples include universities and national nonprofits). Or, we do not have an EIN. How should I register?

- If your organization does not have its own EIN, please use the EIN of your managing organization.
- If your organization has its own EIN, but is not a 501(c)3, please register using your EIN. During the application process, select the “Fiscal Sponsor” option during the eligibility screen to include who will be managing funds on your behalf.
- If your organization does not have its own EIN, but has a Fiscal Sponsor, please contact grants management at grants@erbff.org so we may set up your application.

Can multiple users access the same application for a single organization?

Yes, multiple users can access a single organization’s applications. Each individual may register for an account using the organization’s EIN. Once registered, any individual at your organization may contribute to the application.

Can multiple organizations access the same application?

No, applications are attached to a single organization's EIN.

I registered for a new account, then tried to log in. I am getting an error message that my account is not yet approved. What do I do about that?

New user accounts must be verified by our grants portal, a process that may take up to 5 minutes. Please wait and then try again. If you still have trouble accessing your account, please contact grants management: grants@erbff.org.

We are applying with a fiscal sponsor, or as a project of a large university or nonprofit. What should we know?

When registering, use the EIN of the larger university or nonprofit. In the "Department or Program" field of your Organizational Profile, you can specify your organization.

For our financial and reporting requirements, please provide your fiscal sponsor or managing organization's information for the following:

- Audited financial statement, financial review, or Form 990
- Board List
- For all other attachments, please provide documentation at project level.

How do I preview the entire application without having to draft or submit information?

In the GOapply grants portal, access a blank copy of the application from the In Progress tab. Next to your active application, select View to work on the application, and select the Download icon to download a PDF.

Do I need to save my progress through the application?

GOapply automatically saves in the background approximately every 3-5 minutes. Utilize the Save Draft button at the bottom of the page before closing the application to ensure your progress is saved. We recommend drafting question responses outside of the application to prevent issues.

What are the file limitations for this application?

PDF formatted files are highly preferred. Encrypted, password-protected, or very large files may cause upload errors or submission delays. The total size for all attachments combined should be 20MB or less. If you must upload an Excel spreadsheet, only include one tab. Additional tabs may not be viewable.

How do I know if my application was received?

After submission, you will see a post-application page with next steps. You will also receive a confirmation email to your inbox from Dianne Warren, Grants Manager, generally within 10 minutes of submission. If you do not receive this email after checking filters and spam, contact grants management so we may confirm submission.

How do I correct or update my application after submission?

Contact grants management at grants@erbff.org so we may reopen your application.

How do I download a copy of my application after submission?

In GOapply, navigate to the Submitted tab at the top of your portal after logging in. You will see a list of any submitted applications or reports. Use the View button to see your application in your browser and use the Download button to download a PDF of your submission and all attachments.

What are you looking for in a strong application?

A panel of reviewers that are both internal and external to the Foundation will be providing input on the strongest applications, so we can't say for sure what will stand out to each reviewer.

That said, here a few characteristics that we expect the strongest applications will articulate:

- Knowledge of the end users (small business owners!) and what their business needs are.
- How the grant-funded project/program/idea builds on or relates to the organization's other work. We hope that what you are proposing is informed by the work you are already doing with small business owners.
- A clear vision for what success will look like for the grant-funded project and an idea for what it will take to accomplish it.
- An interest in learning. We don't expect organizations to be experts, but we will be looking for organizations who value learning and improving.
- An interest in building relationships. We will be bringing people together nine (!) times over three years, so we will be looking for organizations that find building relationships and connections to others strengthens their work.
- Meaningful connection and understanding of the local Southeast Michigan small business community.

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- An interest in developing better business resiliency through implementing better people and planet practices.

Can I get an extension on my application?

No, we will not accept late proposals. All proposals must be submitted by June 18th at 11:59 pm EST. 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.

What information do I need to submit a proposal?

The proposal has several questions that will help us understand your idea and how it fits with your current work. The questions can be found in the [RFP Document](#) for this opportunity. Along with the questions, we will require the following documents:

1. New Grant Budget (including general operating support and project support, totaling up to \$125,000 per year. See below for more guidance on the budget.)
2. Organization Operating Budget for the Most Recent Fiscal Year
3. Audited Financial Statement, Financial Review, or Form 990
4. Board List
5. There will also be an option to include supplemental materials. This is not a requirement, but if you believe that it will help your application, you are welcome to include additional information.

Can two organizations apply together?

Yes! The organization who submits the application must meet the eligibility requirements. Make sure to tell us in the proposal how the partnership between the two organizations will work.

Is there a specific template I should use for the budget?

We have created a budget template that is available to use for this application. Here's the link to the template document: [SBIC Budget Template.xlsx](#), please download a copy if you choose to use the template for your submission. You do not have to use our template, but please ensure that all relevant information is clearly represented in your submission.

What should I include in the budget? Is there anything else I should know?

Organizations may request up to a total of \$375,000 over the three years to support their proposed project. This includes \$25,000 per year in general operating support for the time spent participating in cohort activities.

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Staff time spent working on the project should be reflected under project expenses. Staff time spent participating in the cohort meetings or with the learning coach will be covered by the general operating support of \$25,000 per year.

Grants must be a minimum of \$50,000 and a maximum of \$125,000 per year (standard \$25,000 in general operating; minimum \$25,000 and maximum of \$100,000 in project expenses).

A few tips and best practices:

- You can use your own budget format or our [template](#).
- Please upload your budget as a .pdf.
- Please itemize salaries.
- Feel free to change categories or budget lines to better match your program's needs.
- We will cover indirect costs such as rent and utilities in two ways (choose one, or use both):
 - You can include a budget line for "Indirect costs" which is up to 15% of direct project cost
 - You can itemize specific indirect costs (e.g. training, mailings, rent, utilities, financial oversight, etc.)
- General operating support is a fixed cost of \$25,000 per year for the program. This has already been reflected in the budget template.

Please contact the sustainable business team (sbcohort@erbff.org) if you have questions or would like help creating your program budget

Example expenses (*There are more examples available for your review in the budget template provided.*):

Salaries, fringe benefits, and payroll taxes		
	75% Project Manager	75,000
	20% Executive Director	30,000
Program Expenses		
	Events/workshops	115,000
	Supplies	20,000
	Technology	17,000
	Social media	10,000
General Operating Support		
	25,000/year	75,000
Total Expenses		\$342,000

Example Revenue:

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Program Expenses	Committed Revenue	Pending Revenue
Erb Family Foundation		312,000
Individual Donations	15,000	
Earned Income		15,000
Total Revenue	\$342,000	

Does my project have to last all three years of the cohort?

All organizations selected for SBIC will receive \$25,000 per year for three years in general operating funding. As part of the general operating funding, we expect that all organizations will participate in the nine cohort meetings over the three years (three per year).

Organizations may also apply for up to \$100,000 per year for three years in project funding. We understand that it may be difficult to align your proposed projects exactly with the three-year window. If your project will not last the full three years, you may request less than three years in funding. If you expect your project to last longer than three years, you can share thoughts around how you might sustain the work after the grant concludes or what support would be helpful in figuring this out.

What does the grants process look like?

The following are all important dates to know in this application process. We'll communicate any changes on www.erbff.org/sb.

June 18th **Applications open May 1st and applications close on June 18th. 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

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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

Mid-September First payments made

What if we don’t have audited financials? NEW! Added 5/15

We only require audited financials for organizations with annual contributions above \$250,000. For organizations with annual contributions under \$250,000 we require Form 990, 990-PF, or other 990-series return for the preceding tax year is required.

Can we send in our financials after the due date? NEW! Added 5/15

While we need the written responses to the questions by June 18th, we may be able to offer extensions for the financial documents. Reach out to us at sbcohort@erbff.org.

What additional attachments should I include? NEW! Added 5/21

All applications must include: Audited Financial Statement, Financial Review, or Form 990; list of your board members; project budget; and an organizational budget. We welcome other attachments if it enhances the application; however, they are not required.