

**COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE**  
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

**DATE:** August 15, 2025

**TO:** Supervisor Marcelia Nicholson, Chair, County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Celia Benton, Economic Development Director, Department of Administrative Services

**SUBJECT:** From the Economic Development Director, Department of Administrative Services requesting authorization to apply for, accept, and implement a Grant for a maximum amount of \$250,000 from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation for funding to provide Building Bridges Small Business Grants to help local small businesses acquire and expand their real estate footprint in Milwaukee County.

**POLICY**

Milwaukee County Board review and approval is required for the submission of grant funding applications, pursuant to MCGO 56.06.

**BACKGROUND**

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation ("WEDC") is the State of Wisconsin's lead economic development agency focused on sustainable business growth and job creation. The economic development resources WEDC provides to local governments and private parties include the Small Business Development Grant ("SBDG") Program. This program is meant to "encourage communities and economic development partners to invest in their small businesses" by providing grants to local municipalities for use to "develop innovative programs that directly support small businesses and small business creation."

DAS-Economic Development is seeking authorization to apply for a SBDG in an amount up to \$250,000 for a new round of funds for the Building Bridges Small Business Grants to assist local small businesses in purchasing or leasing commercial real estate. In addition to helping small businesses secure and expand brick-and-mortar businesses, this program aims to reduce commercial real estate vacancies throughout the County. While all 19 Milwaukee County municipalities would like to encourage filling such vacancies, most are not equipped to provide incentives and to find capable entrepreneurs to fill them. However, local ethnic chambers of commerce, Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs), and economic development organizations often work with entrepreneurs who are ready to establish and grow but may not be aware of available spaces throughout the county. By creating this Building Bridges Small Business Grant program, Milwaukee County seeks to build bridges in the local ecosystem by providing access to grant capital for vetted entrepreneurs to fill high priority brick and mortar locations throughout the county.

Milwaukee County intends to continue to partner with local chambers of commerce, CDFIs and technical assistance providers to identify and work with local entrepreneurs that might benefit from this grant program. Eligible businesses would be able to apply

for grants of up to \$10,000 each to help purchase or lease commercial real estate or expand operations in existing brick and mortar businesses. Eligibility would require a brick-and-mortar business, with owners that reside in and operate their business in Milwaukee County, supported by a letter of support from their local municipality, and with a commitment to complete at least 6 hours of technical assistance from a local Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI), Chamber of Commerce, economic development organization, or bank.

Milwaukee County, working with local chambers of commerce, CDFIs, and technical assistance providers, would oversee ensuring entrepreneurs applying for these grants follow the program as required.

The WEDC grant programs have previously been utilized by Milwaukee County to support many projects in the community and the Board of Supervisors approved resolution 24-938 authorizing Economic Development to apply for, receive and implement Small Business Development Grant Funds. This authorization resulted in Milwaukee County receiving \$200,000 in funds to provide grants of \$10,000 to small businesses through our Building Bridges Program.

Since the date of this report, Economic Development estimates that Milwaukee County's Building Bridges Small Business Grants are supporting an investment of \$1,825,368 in commercial corridor businesses, creating 59 jobs and maintaining 61 jobs.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Director of Economic Development – Department of Administrative Services recommends authorization to apply for, accept, and implement a Small Business Development Grant in a maximum amount of \$250,000 from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation to provide ongoing funds for the Building Bridges Small Business Grant Program to assist local entrepreneurs in acquiring and expanding real estate for their brick-and-mortar businesses in Milwaukee County.

### **FISCAL NOTE**

Acceptance of the grant will have a net zero impact on the division's budget. Milwaukee County's role in the process will be that of manager of the grant program. Any staff time to provide support for the program will be absorbed in the division's existing budget.

Prepared By: Celia Benton

Approved By:

*Celia Benton*

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Celia Benton

Economic Development Director, Department of Administrative Services

Attachment:        Resolution  
                         Fiscal Note

cc: David Crowley, County Executive  
Liz Sumner, Comptroller  
Community, Environment and Economic Development Committee Members  
Finance Committee Members  
MaryJo Meyers, Chief of Staff, Office of the County Executive  
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services  
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board of Supervisors  
Allyson Smith, Committee Coordinator  
Ken Smith, County Board Research Analyst