

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE

INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

DATE: November 3, 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 providing an update on the Building Bridges Small Business Program

REQUEST

This report is for informational purposes only.

BACKGROUND

File 24-938 – Approval for Economic Development to accept a \$200,000 Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation grant to create the Building Bridges Small Business Grant

In December 2024, DAS-Economic Development received authorization to pursue grant funds from Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's (WEDC) Small Business Development Grant to create the Building Bridges program. The Building Bridges Grants support the investment small businesses are making to open or grow their businesses in our municipality's commercial corridors. Grants up to \$10,000 were available to brick-and-mortar businesses that were in Milwaukee County and whose owners also resided in Milwaukee County. In May 2025, Economic Development received approval from WEDC for the \$200,000 in grant funds. Applications were then opened and a total of 199 applications were received between May and August 2025.

WEDC funds fueled revitalization, activation or expansion of 20 Milwaukee County small businesses with \$10,000 grants. Awards were announced in two waves of 10 with press releases from the County Executive's Office August 26th and September 24th, 2025.

The 20 businesses that received awards reflect the diversity of our community and enrich the services our residents have access to close in Milwaukee County. Awardees hailed from 12 of our 18 County Board supervisory districts. The County grants directly supported:

Business Types:

- 40% - Start Up Businesses (8)
- 60% - Existing Businesses (12)
 - 25% opening a second location (5)
 - 20% remodeling (4)
 - 15% expanding to a brick-and-mortar for first time (3)

Business Service Areas:

- 10 Food/Beverage service businesses
- 3 Event Venues
- 2 Retail Shops
- 2 Entertainment/Activity businesses
- 2 Wellness/Mental Health service providers
- 1 Salon and Beauty Academy

Owner/s Identified as:

- 80% Woman Owned (16)* **in full or partial*
- 45% Black, African American or BIPOC Owned (9)
- 20% Asian Owned (4)
- 15% Hispanic/Latino Owned (3)
- 15% LGBTQ+ Owned (3)
- 10% American Indian or Native Alaskan Owned (2)
- 5% Owned Identifies as Disabled (1)

A brief description of each awarded business is included in the attached summary.

Economic Development is currently in the process of distributing the Building Bridges grant funds. WEDC provided Milwaukee County with the first payment of \$100,000 in the beginning of September, and the final \$100,000 payment at the end of October. Economic Development has received and deposited all grant funds in a dedicated bank account. By the end of October, six of the business have met all requirements and have received their funds. To receive the grant disbursement businesses, need to submit proof of payments of at least \$50,000 on their project related costs.

Our investment in our local small businesses through this grant program has supported substantial growth and impact. These businesses have or plan to inject just over \$4 million dollars to complete their projects to open, expand or improve their spaces. In addition, these businesses have retained 139 jobs, and they are expecting to add as many as 105 new jobs to our local economy by activating these projects.

In addition to the activation of the Building Bridges Grants, the Economic Development Team added a new four-year limited term Small Business Liaison position, to further support small businesses in our communities with our Building Bridges programming. This position will be focused on fostering communication, collaboration and partnerships between municipalities, local businesses and resource providers.

In mid-October, Lisa Sullivan joined Milwaukee County, Economic Development as the Small Business Liaison. Lisa is an accomplished small business economic development specialist with multifaced experience working with ecosystem partners and advancing community development. She has over 15 years' experience supporting small businesses "putting dreams to work" while at the Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC), a leading economic development technical assistance provider and Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). She is adept in leading

initiatives supporting small business development and is an accomplished event, program and project manager. She has a passion for all things small business and works tirelessly to advocate, connect and elevate a path forward for entrepreneurs. She holds a bachelor's degree in business with a specialty in marketing from Marquette University and Milwaukee County has been her adult home since college and home to her 4 adult children as well.

With the grants fully awarded the Building Bridges program is moving forward with continued support to our small businesses and we are working to socialize this new initiative. Our 90-day onboarding plan includes: meeting with our municipalities' economic development partners and with ecosystem resource providers, improving our marketing and communications to area entrepreneurs and continuing to provide service to our grant recipients. By early November, in addition to onboarding with Economic Development and the County, our Small Business Liaison has met with 8 municipalities, attended 9 outreach events and had 6 appointments with grant recipients. She is also assisting in development and promotion opportunities to market and elevate the valuable role small businesses provide in our communities.

The newly launched Milwaukee County Building Bridges Program partners with municipalities, business support organizations and entrepreneurs to:

- Provide small business support to start or expand brick-and-mortar commercial corridor businesses and connect entrepreneurs to available resources and business support organizations
- Collaborate with municipalities on commercial corridor activation, development and promotion
- Support new activations of space and place by providing architectural renderings on a limited basis to help market new uses and attract funding—sparking the momentum and investment needed to open a business.
- Provide architectural specification documents to vetted businesses to support bid procurement, construction, and the permitting process necessary to gain occupancy and open a business.

RECOMMENDATION

Informational only. No action requested at this time.

Prepared By: Heather Reindl, Contracts Manager and Lisa Sullivan, Small Business Liaison

Approved By:

Celia Benton

Celia Benton

Economic Development Director, Department of Administrative Services

cc: David Crowley, County Executive
Economic and Community Development Committee Members
MaryJo Meyers, Chief of Staff, Office of the County Executive
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Liz Sumner, Comptroller
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board of Supervisors
Clarence H. Kinnard, Committee Coordinator
Jane Geyer, County Board Research Analyst