

Business Association Development Grant Engagement Program

Business District Associations are essential organizations that play a critical role in the development and success of local economics. As the representatives that support the collective interests of the businesses within specified geographies, they foster collaboration among local business owners, property owners, and community stakeholders. The associations act as the unified voice advocating for the initiatives and improvements to those corridors which enhance the vibrancy and appeal of the area. Such associations are key to creating thriving, sustainable commercial districts that benefit businesses, residents, and the broader community.

In recognition of this work, The City of Rockford is opening the 2026 Business Association Grant Development Engagement Program (BADGE). The BADGE Program provides seed funding which enables local businesses, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders to form sustainable business associations that represent and advocate for businesses within a defined geographic area. The goal is to build capacity for local economic development, strengthen collaboration and create a unified voice for advocacy, marketing and investment. Once organizations have established themselves through the BADGE Program, they will be eligible to apply for funding to support programmatic and organizational activities through the Business Association Grant (BAG) Program.

PROGRAM GOALS

- Develop governance, bylaws, membership and mission.
- Recruit members and establish communication systems and engagement within the association's district.
- Conduct business needs assessments and area assessments, as well as create strategic plans to address issues and advancement for the area.
- Execute early-stage activities such as marketing, corridor cleanup and events.
- Commit to forming a governing structure, begin implementing activities, and apply for the BAG Program as well as meet those Program requirements.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

- Applicants can apply for up to \$10,000.
 - Up to \$5,000 for organization establishment
 - Up to \$5,000 for initial/building organization operations/programs
 - City will act as Fiscal Agent and will remain Fiscal Agent until the entity is established.
- Funding is provided for 2026 (January 1, 2026 – December 31, 2026)
 - If the BADGE Program is completed in Q2 of 2026, the Recipient of the BADGE Program can apply for the Business Association Grant Program for 2026.
- Formal application with all requested information is required
- Applicants must define a specific geographic boundary that does not cover an existing business association's footprint.
- Applicants must be a group of at least five local businesses, entrepreneurs, or stakeholders with an established interest in the identified area.

- Applicants will need to work with an established chamber, nonprofit, or community organization to act as fiscal agent.
- Eligible use of funds includes the following start-up costs:
 - Legal and administrative start-up fees
 - Organizational Development
 - Engagement activities
 - Outreach and Marketing
 - Program implementation

APPLICATION will at a minimum, include the below elements.

- Organization Information
- Association's proposed working name
- Contact information
- Geographic boundaries
- Five (5) key stakeholders
 - Names & contact information.
 - Demonstration of involvement and commitment to proposed area.
 - Stakeholders must include at least three (3) businesses in the area
- Demonstration of engagement or commitment from represented corridor. This can include meetings, town halls, and support letters. Documentation from meetings and townhalls must include a list of participants, feedback and support demonstrated by the participants.
- Business Association narrative that describes needs, vision, activities, partnerships and sustainability plan.
- Budget
- Budget Narrative (including backup documentation and quotes)

BADGE PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Successful completion of the BADGE Program will result in the Applicant completing the below:

- Board Roster
- Approved Bylaws
- Two most recent board packets
- Financial policies, including internal controls for vendors, payments, etc.
- Internal policy for avoiding duplicative billing.
- Legal Status
- Mission and Vision
- Anticipated activities and partnerships
- Sustainability plan