



New city grant program could help Evanston businesses recover from pandemic

Shun Graves, Assistant City Editor

A new grant program launched in January by Evanston's economic development office seeks to help small businesses still struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic's long-term economic impacts.

The Small Business Recovery Program will award grants of up to \$25,000 per applicant. The city will fund the program using \$250,000 from the \$3 million Evanston Thrives initiative.

Applications opened Feb. 14, and eligible businesses of 50 or fewer workers must demonstrate how the pandemic negatively impacted them. They must also outline how they plan to use the funds.

As the city continues to accept applications, the program aims to acknowledge the continued struggles of small businesses amid mixed signals from retailers and vacancy trends.

“I think it’s really wonderful that the city is being so generous with its dollars and trying to direct those to local businesses,” said Andy Vick, executive director of Downtown Evanston. “A lot of businesses don’t have the extra resources to do those kinds of things, like adding new signage out front or updating their facades.”

The Small Business Recovery Program comes as Evanston allocates the remainder of its American Rescue Plan Act funding. During the pandemic, the federal government sent billions of dollars to local governments that then decided how to use the monetary influx for relief efforts.

Many businesses have emerged strongly from pandemic woes. Matthew Abitbol launched his downtown Commonwealth Running Company right before the pandemic, and he said things “are going well” and he does not plan to apply for a grant.

However, many other businesses are still recovering. Applications for the grants have already exceeded the allocated funds, according to Katherine Gotsick, who leads the Main-Dempster Mile business district, and Katie Boden, an economic development coordinator for the city.

"I didn't realize it was quite so universal," Gotsick said. "I was sorry to hear that there were still a lot of businesses struggling."



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People walk in downtown Evanston on Thursday, Feb. 29. A new grant program could help still-struggling local businesses cover their expenses.

As of January, downtown businesses were still seeing mixed messages about the economic health of Evanston's busiest district, with improved occupancy of storefronts but continued office vacancies. At the same time, hubs like the Church Street Plaza have seen a recent uptick in tenants.

The new grant program ranks among numerous initiatives already launched by the city. For example, Sustain Evanston focuses on projects promoting sustainability. Other initiatives include the Entrepreneurship Support Program for new businesses and the Storefront Modernization Program, which helps to improve businesses' appearances.

"Any connection like that is good," Abitbol said. "If it's important to the city of Evanston to have a downtown — and a thriving downtown — you have to understand what businesses are going through and what they need."

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