The MINavigator High Tech Connect Program (MIN) – Request for Applications
Application Deadline: Thursday, December 17, 2026 @ Noon ET

Overview

The Michigan Economic Development Corporation ("MEDC") is announcing a new opportunity under the MINavigator High Tech Connect Program (the "Program"). The Program will be administered by the MEDC and will serve as the successor to the SmartZone Gateway Representative ("GWR") Program, providing a coordinated approach to connecting high-technology Michigan businesses and entrepreneurs with resources, expertise, and support across the state. The Program is open to applicants who have a proven track record of providing services to support high-technology companies through demonstrated experience, expertise, and results.

Background

On June 29, 2000, the State of Michigan enacted Public Act 248, establishing a framework to strengthen public-private partnerships in technology transfer, commercialization, and high-technology economic development. The legislation authorized the creation of certified technology parks, known as SmartZones, designed to leverage university research and foster collaboration among local governments, public universities, and private-sector partners.[1]

Since 2009, the Michigan Strategic Fund ("MSF") has provided funding to SmartZones through the 21st Century Jobs Trust Fund to support the creation and growth of technology-based businesses and jobs, leveraging Michigan's high-technology industries, skilled workforce, and nationally recognized university system.

In 2015, the GWRProgram was established to strengthen the SmartZone network by providing experienced points of contact for high-tech startups and connecting entrepreneurs to Michigan's broader technology and entrepreneurial ecosystem. The program currently supports twenty-two (22) organizations contributing to Michigan's high-tech innovation landscape.

Historically, program allocations and guidelines were governed by the 21st Century Jobs Trust Fund and corresponding statute. With approval of the FY2027 state budget, funding was transferred to the General Fund and will be administered by the MEDC, and not the MSF. Under the new funding structure, the FY27 awards will require approval through a Request for Applications process. Therefore, the GWR Program and awards will officially end on June 30, 2027.

New Opportunity - $1,875,000 available for FY27

Overview
The Program will address key technology startup needs by providing regionally based grant funding for up to fifteen (15) organizations who demonstrate a need, can clearly define their pathway to supporting high-technology innovation and growth, and have a proven track record of success. This revitalized approach will align with the original framework defined under Public Act

[1] Michigan State University, *SmartZones*

248, with a strategic focus centered around leveraging university research, expanding commercialization, and stimulating high-tech economic development through public-private partnership.

The Program is intended to improve regional connectivity, increase utilization of existing resources, and strengthen the pipeline of high-tech companies advancing toward commercialization and scale.

Under the restructured Program, high technology-based companies would continue to be introduced to the local ecosystem. However, this would now be done by a regionally based MINavigator – a vetted and trusted advisor who can demonstrate their understanding of established statewide and local tools and comfortably translate this to high-tech companies looking to grow and scale in Michigan.

MINavigators will facilitate access to a comprehensive range of services, which may include business planning, market validation, technology commercialization, intellectual property, product development, capital readiness, funding, and talent. They will also leverage partnerships with industry, investors, universities, and service providers to expand resources available to high-technology companies and strengthen regional innovation ecosystems.

Participating organizations are strongly encouraged to collaborate with other organizations serving their region to coordinate resources, leverage complementary expertise, and expand the support available to entrepreneurs and high-technology companies.

Eligibility Criteria:

To be eligible for consideration, each applicant must, at a minimum:

1. Be a Michigan based non-profit organization, exempt from federal taxation under Section 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(6) of the Internal Revenue Code.

   AND

2. Demonstrate that proposed activities will produce measurable advancement of high technology-based companies and contribute to Michigan's economic growth, with performance measured through company progression, capital formation, commercialization, and revenue outcomes.

Further, each eligible applicant must clearly demonstrate the following:

A. A proven track record of providing services to support high-technology companies through demonstrated experience, expertise, and results.

B. A defined high-technology focus, including identified technology sectors and a clear connection to Michigan's economic-development priorities.

C. Ability to identify regional technology shortfalls if applicable, and plan to remedy.

D. Proven experience providing business incubation, acceleration, commercialization or equivalent entrepreneurial support to high-tech companies.

E. Qualified personnel with expertise in technology commercialization, business development, capital formation and/or entrepreneurship.

F. A well-documented company-selection process that identifies, vets and prioritizes companies with meaningful potential for high-tech innovation, commercialization and growth.

G. Provide or facilitate access to a comprehensive portfolio of services, including business planning, market validation, technology commercialization, intellectual property, product development, capital readiness, funding and talent.

H. Established meaningful ecosystem partnerships with universities/research institutions, industry, investors, economic-development organizations and other relevant service providers.

I. Maintain a measurable client-performance system capable of tracking company formation, jobs, investment, revenue, commercialization and other program outcomes.

J. Establish annual performance targets and milestones that are realistic based on historical performance, regional market conditions and available resources.

K. Financial sustainability and leverage, including matching resources and a plan to sustain core incubation activities beyond the requested public investment.

L. Grant funds shall support reasonable and necessary costs associated with approved MINavigator Program activities and MINavigator salary. The MINavigator salary should primarily support one dedicated position in addition to MINavigator expenses. No more than 15% of the grant funds may be allocated to administrative/overhead costs. All costs must be directly related to approved Program activities, adequately documented, and consistent with the applicable grant agreement.

   Examples of allowable administrative/overhead costs include:
   - Benefits
   - Marketing
   - IT and subscription costs

   Examples of costs that are not allowable include:
   - Direct grants to clients
   - Sponsorships
   - Rent and building maintenance

Application Timing and Review Process

The MEDC will publish the Request for Applications (RFA) on the MINavigator webpage and will begin accepting Program applications on **November 19, 2026.**

All questions pertaining to the RFA are due no later than **Thursday, December 3**, at noon and may be submitted to MIN@michigan.org. Questions will be compiled into a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document that will be posted to the RFA website page.

The application period will close at noon on **Thursday, December 17, 2026.**

Estimated Timeline:

