

NORWALK INNOVATIONS INITIATIVE GUIDELINES

The Norwalk Innovations Initiative provides entrepreneurs, start-ups, and existing businesses with grant funding to support initial establishment, expansion efforts, and growth within the City of Norwalk, CT. Limited, one-time financial assistance will be available to Norwalk entrepreneurs, start-ups, and existing businesses that employ or plan to employ between 2 and 50 individuals. The goals of the Initiative are to support entrepreneurs, start-ups, and existing businesses and decrease vacancy rates and decrease unemployment rates.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible to participate in the Norwalk Innovations Initiative, participants must:

1. Be a Norwalk business or plan to register a business in Norwalk
2. Employ or plan to employ between 2 and 50 employees
3. Have been a client or participant in an educational, financial, or mentorship program with the City of Norwalk or any of its affiliated partners. Affiliated partners include:
 - a. The Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce
 - b. The Greater Norwalk Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
 - c. The Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
 - d. Norwalk ACTS
 - e. SCORE
 - f. The Black Business Alliance
 - g. The Women's Business Development Council
 - h. The State of Connecticut (Department of Economic and Community Development, AdvanceCT, CT Innovations, CT Small Business Development Center)
 - i. Other; as approved by the Norwalk Department of Business Development and Tourism
4. Be current on all local, state, and federal tax obligations
5. Have no unresolved zoning or blight violations

GRANT AMOUNTS & AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS

There is currently **\$50,000** available for the 2026 round of the Norwalk Innovations Initiative via capital funds. Grants awarded may range between \$1,000 and \$20,000. The funding will be broken down as follows*:

1. At least 30% of the total funding amount will be reserved for Women and Minority Owned Enterprises (WMBE) & entrepreneurs.
2. At least 20% of the total funding will be used to support businesses in the realm of Creative Economy. This includes business and information technology, arts and culture, media and marketing, design, and manufacturing.

***Prioritization will be given to businesses and/or entrepreneurs that have significant jobs provided or created and occupy, or plan to occupy, a large amount of ground-floor commercial/retail space.**

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USE OF FUNDS

Funds are intended to support start-up and initial business costs. They are also intended to support job growth opportunities and expansion into physical commercial spaces in Norwalk. As such funds may be used for a variety of expenses, including but not limited to the following:

1. Business registration and licensing fees;
2. Local permitting and licensing fees;
3. Physical space improvements and build out;
4. Rent;
5. Utilities;
6. Machinery;
7. Capital expenditures;
8. Payroll;
9. Insurance;
10. Health and safety improvements;
11. Others (priorly approved by the Department of Business Development and Tourism).

Funds cannot be used for:

1. Marketing;
2. Political or lobbying activities;
3. Non-business-related expenses;
4. Debt service;
5. Any other purpose deemed inappropriate or expressly prohibited by federal regulation, or by the City of Norwalk.

Norwalk Innovations grants are reimbursable in nature. Recipients must provide proof of payment in the form of receipts, paid invoices, and the like in order to receive reimbursement. Partial payments are allowed. Applicants can expect checks to be sent a maximum of four weeks after documentation has been submitted. If any item can be competitively procured, the recipient must do so according to the City of Norwalk Procurement Standards which are as follows:

- Any item or service that is under \$1,000 requires one quote, estimate, bid, or pricing example.
- Any item or service that is over \$1,000 but less than \$10,000 requires at least two quotes, estimates, bids, or pricing examples.
- Any item or service that is over \$10,000 requires at least three quotes, estimates, bids, or pricing examples.

Operating expenses, such as payroll, utility costs, rent, and permitting fees, are not required to be procured. If there is a specific item that is unique and cannot meet the procurement standards, the applicant must submit a justification to that effect to the Department of Business Development and Tourism and receive prior approval from the Department before purchasing.

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APPLICATION PROCESS

Applications for the initiative can be found here. Once the initial application is submitted, reviewed, and approved, selected applicants will be offered to participate in the Norwalk Innovations Pitch Competition (July/August). Applicants selected to continue shall be required to meet with the City of Norwalk's Business Development Manager for a pre-pitch meeting.

During the Pitch Competition applicants will pitch to industry professionals, City officials, and program administrators their ideas for expansion, growth, business establishment, and impact. It is important that the presentation include what the business is, what the funds would be used for, expansion plans, any jobs that may be added, as well as the number of existing jobs, and any physical space you may be taking or plan to take.

Applicants should note that all information submitted in connection with this application is subject to verification. Nondisclosure or the making of false or misleading statements will result in disqualification, forfeiture of benefits, and/or criminal prosecution under the laws of the State.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

Applicants may be asked to provide documentation as required by program staff to determine eligibility. Incomplete applications may be excluded from grant consideration. Tax and financial information provided as part of this application process will be maintained as confidential and will only be used by program staff for determining eligibility and participation in the program.

GRANT APPROVAL PROCESS

All submitted applications will be reviewed on the stated eligibility requirements and tax obligations by the Department of Business Development and Tourism. Once the applicant is confirmed as eligible, and if selected to continue, they will be notified and offered to participate in the Pitch Competition. The Department will conduct a poll to determine the best date and time slot for all finalists. The Pitch Competition will be held in person.

Once the panel is convened, the applicant will be expected to give a presentation to the panel that adequately explains their business and their use of funds. Applicants will be ranked and scored on a rubric (attached) that will be provided ahead of time for review. The rubric not only focuses on the business itself but on the owner/entrepreneur as well. The results of the rubric will be averaged and the top applicants will be awarded grants. Funding amounts will vary based on rubric scoring and economic impact of the business. The selection results will be final.

Once an applicant has been approved to receive funding, they will be required to execute a grant agreement with the City of Norwalk and provide a W-9 form. Both forms will be provided in a grant package following the approval notification.

Recipients will have one year from the date of the agreement to utilize their allocated funds.

QUESTIONS AND ASSISTANCE

If you have any questions or need assistance with your application, please email the Business Development Manager, Alex Cross, at across@norwalkct.gov or call 475-291-2745.

Rubric for Norwalk Innovations Initiative			
Category	Criteria	Points	Score
Product/Service (20 Points)	Improved or new experience/features over currently available solutions?	5	
	Can the product or service be protected or is it easily copied? (higher points if protectible)	5	
	Is the product/service being sold today?	5	
	Does the product/service show potential for strong growth?	5	
Presentation Materials (20 Points)	Does the presentation convey the required information to clearly understand the product/service?	5	
	Do the presentation materials include supporting financial metrics/market data?	5	
	Is the presentation neat, organized, and free of spelling/grammatical errors and easy to understand?	5	
	Was a sample of the product/service demonstrated?	5	
Presentation Delivery (30 Points)	Did the presenter speak clearly and confidently?	10	
	Did the presenter demonstrate a mastering of knowledge of their product/service?	10	
	Was the presenter able to answer the judge's questions succinctly?	10	
The Entrepreneur (30 Points)	Was the presenter engaging and interesting to listen to?	10	
	Does the presenter exhibit the characteristics required to make you believe they have what it takes to make the business a success?	10	
	Has the presenter convinced you that their product/service is needed in the market?	10	

Total Score _____ / 100

Rubric for Norwalk Innovations Initiative			
Category	Criteria	Points	Score
Physical Space (15 Points)	Will you be occupying physical space?	0(N) or 5 (Y)	
	Will you be occupying ground floor physical space?	0(N) or 5 (Y)	
	Is or will your physical space be located in Norwalk's urban core?	0(N) or 5 (Y)	
Employment (15 Points)	Will you be hiring employees?	0(N) or 5 (Y)	
	How many?	0 - none 3 - 2 to 15 5 - 15 +	
	Do you prioritize Norwalk residents in your hiring?	0(N) or 5 (Y)	
Industry	Is the business in the realm of the Creative Economy? (Info tech, arts and culture, manufacturing, marketing, media, etc.)	0(N) or 5 (Y)	

Total Score _____ / 35

Guidelines and Sample Questions for Judges

The Pitch Competition rubric consists of 21 questions designed to rate the contestants in a consistent and fair fashion. The rubric has been divided into eight (8) sections, Product/Service, Presentation Materials, Presentation Delivery, The Entrepreneur, Physical Space, Employment, and Industry. The Pitch is as much about the assessment of the ability of the entrepreneur to execute their plan as it is about the quality of the product/service that they are attempting to bring to the market. Attention should be focused on the ability of the entrepreneur to convince you, the judge, that they will be successful no matter what, that they have a solid understanding of the market they are attempting to sell into, the related financials, and finally that their product/service is needed.

When using the rubric to grade the presenters, the basic logic for grading should follow these basic guidelines:

	5 Point Question	10 Point Question
Underperform	1-2	1-4
Adequate	3-4	5-8
Mastery	5	9-10

The following are some example questions that may be of help while interviewing the presenters.

- Who is your target customer base?
- Have you sold your product/service to this customer base yet?
- If not, what do you need besides money to be ready to begin selling?
- Have you looked at the competitive landscape and who is your competition?
- Why will people buy your product/service instead of your competitor?
- How big is the total addressable market in terms of dollars/customers?
- How do you plan to market your product/service?
- How much do you think you can sell, in dollars, year 1, 2, 3?
- If you win Shark Tank, what will you be spending the prize money on?
- What are the challenges you have been facing getting your business started thus far?
- How have you paid for what you have accomplished to date?
- Do you currently have any investors?
- Is your product/service unique enough that you might be able to patent it?