



SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT Impact Report





Municipal Association of South Carolina



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Dear Friends and Partners,

Starting in 2023, Main Street South Carolina shifted critical program resources to address a pressing reality: while small businesses are the backbone of our local economies, too many – especially in rural areas – lack the tools, visibility, and support needed to thrive. Guided by the Economic Vitality principle of the Main Street America Four Point Approach™, we made a deliberate decision to elevate our small business support initiatives.

Since then, we have expanded our work beyond the traditional downtown revitalization framework to meet businesses where they are. Through WeShopSC, we've helped hundreds of local businesses embrace digital tools to reach new markets. Through our storytelling partnership with Phil Eich of Storyville, we've amplified the authentic voices and stories that make each community unique, building local pride and visibility across the state.

This effort has been supported by a \$600,000 investment over the past two years, made possible through the collaboration of our partners – the South Carolina Department of Commerce through StimulateSC, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission, Storyville, and Beyond Main. Their commitment has strengthened our ability to provide the tools, training, and visibility that help local businesses grow – and, in turn, help communities across South Carolina thrive.

At the heart of this work is a belief shared across the Main Street network: when small businesses thrive, communities thrive. By building capacity, sharing resources, and telling our small business stories, we are ensuring that every community, no matter its size, has the opportunity to succeed.



Jenny C. Boulware
Manager & State Coordinator
Main Street South Carolina



Why This Work Matters



South Carolina's rural small businesses are the backbone of our communities, yet many face steep challenges. Limited resources, digital skills gaps, and barriers to reaching new markets make it difficult for many to compete.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this reality. 65% of rural entrepreneurs reported having no online presence. Without targeted support, too many small businesses risked being left behind. In response, Main Street South Carolina and its partners began building a statewide platform and support system to help rural businesses succeed in the digital economy.



Main Street South Carolina partnered with statewide and national experts to help local Main Street communities strengthen small business capacity. From this effort emerged WeShopSC, a commission-free online marketplace that has grown from representing a handful of small businesses to hundreds of small businesses across South Carolina.

By combining storefront technology, training, and marketing support, the platform has become a digital Main Street, allowing local entrepreneurs to compete with larger retailers while keeping dollars circulating locally.



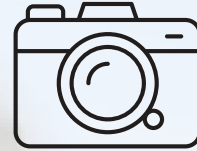
Building Economic Vitality Statewide



700+
Businesses
Onboarded



96
Towns & Cities
Represented



15,000+
Images
Delivered



1.2 million
Digital
Impressions
(and counting)



38
Counties
Engaged

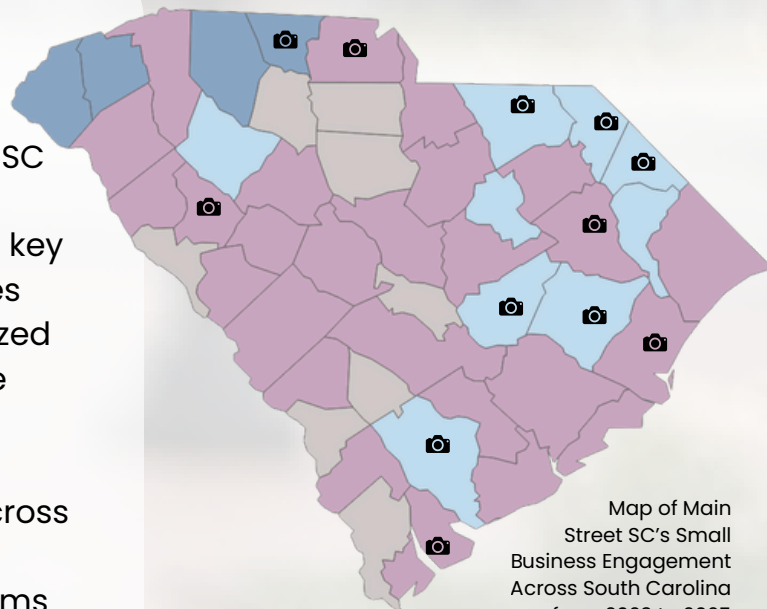


\$600K+
Supporting SC
Small Businesses




Mobilizing Resources for Small Business Across South Carolina

Through a series of critical projects, Main Street SC leveraged investment from the Municipal Association of South Carolina with funding from key regional partners to strengthen small businesses statewide. More than \$600,000 has been mobilized to build WeShopSC, deliver training, and provide technical assistance.

This approach has reached 700+ businesses across 96 towns in nearly all counties, leveraging the trusted relationships of local Main Street programs to meet entrepreneurs where they are. Additionally, the social media impact of local storytelling campaigns has been immense, with over 1.2 million views across platforms and counting. Pairing resources with local leadership has ensured critical support so small businesses can compete, grow, and thrive in today's digital economy.



Map of Main Street SC's Small Business Engagement Across South Carolina from 2023 to 2025

-  SCRC SEID Main Street SC Training Project
-  ARC E-Commerce in SC's Appalachian Region
-  Other Counties with Businesses on WeShopSC
-  Storyville Photo Sprints

Telling Our Stories

The Power of Positive Local Storytelling

South Carolina's small businesses power local economies. They provide essential goods and services, create jobs, and often serve as the gathering places where neighbors meet. Yet many lack the visibility and tools to compete in today's digital marketplaces. The **Story Sprint Initiative** was created to close that gap by equipping entrepreneurs with professional images and clear narratives that highlight who they are and why their work matters. These stories not only highlight the people behind the businesses, but they also provide professional marketing assets needed to reach new customers and strengthen their bottom line.



Meet Phil Eich: Storyteller and Listener

At the center of this work is Phil Eich, founder of Storyville and one of the nation's most leading community storytellers. Phil's career has been focused on helping people recognize the value of their own experiences and showing how authentic stories can spark economic growth, attract investment, and build pride. From small towns in Michigan to Main Street programs across the country, Phil has proven the power of listening first to shape everyday conversations into compelling narratives. In South Carolina, he combined technical skills as a photographer and writer with a rare ability to translate community voices into stories that resonate.

A Career Built on Community Connection

With a background in education, history, and civic marketing, Phil founded Storyville in 2020 and has since partnered with over 400 communities nationwide. His focus is simple but powerful: people make stories, and stories make places. In South Carolina, this approach has given entrepreneurs new confidence, pride, and professionalism in how they present themselves to the world and compete in today's digital economy.

Statewide Impact by the Numbers

By July 2025, Phil and the Main Street teams across the state delivered hundreds of professional images for 112 small businesses in 13 communities – from the Pee Dee to the Lowcountry. For many, it was their first time receiving professional assistance. Their photos and stories quickly gained traction on social media channels, totaling 1.2 million views to-date and helping to counter negative messaging and highlight local strengths. These assets are now featured on WeShopSC, tourism sites, and business social media pages – creating new opportunities for visibility, customer growth, and long-term digital presence.



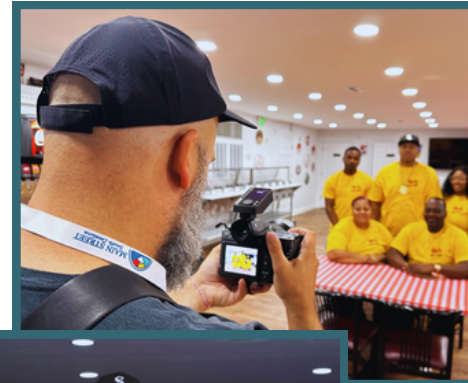
Building Community

Reaching Audiences Far Beyond Main Street

The impact of these stories extends far beyond individual businesses. With dozens shared online, the project has already generated over 600,000 Facebook impressions, amplifying rural entrepreneurs' voices across South Carolina and beyond. That reach drives customer engagement, new opportunities, and stronger reputations for small businesses. It also signals to visitors, investors, and residents that small-town South Carolina is open, resilient, welcoming, and worth paying attention to. This visibility builds statewide pride, fosters collaboration among towns, and highlights the creativity and determination of rural entrepreneurs whose stories resonate far beyond their communities. In January 2026, a "train-the-storyteller" outreach will expand this work, building local capacity in 10 locations and training 50 additional storytellers across South Carolina.

Business Owners See the Difference

For many business owners, the transformation has been immediate. They describe their new images and narratives as gamechangers, giving them tools to market with confidence and professionalism. Websites have been refreshed, social media feeds revitalized, and WeShopSC storefronts updated with new polish that attracts attention. One owner said, *"These photos finally show my business the way I see it, and now my customers see it too."* That pride is more than cosmetic; it builds lasting growth.



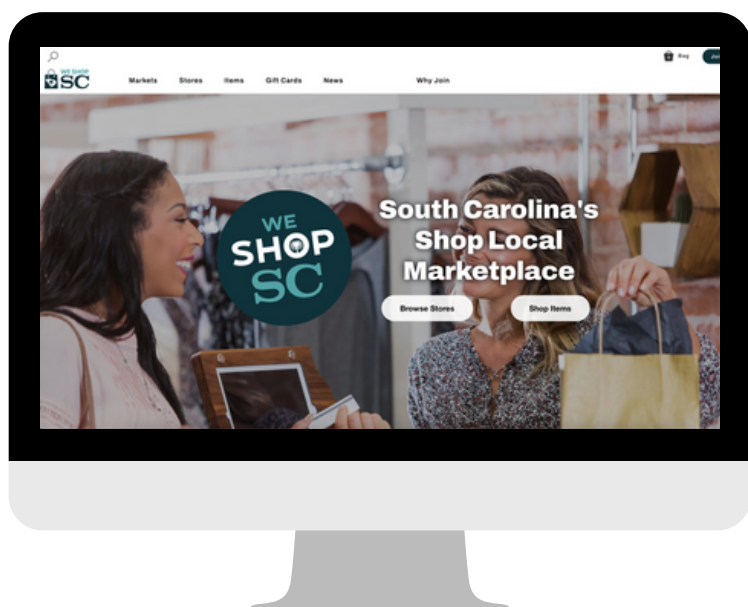
Building Confident Communities

This work is about more than marketing, it is about transforming the narrative at the community level. By equipping entrepreneurs with digital tools and training, Main Street South Carolina and its partners are fostering resilience, pride, and connection. Built on the trusted relationships of local Main Street programs, the initiative strengthens small businesses as the core of economic vitality. From the Pee Dee to the Lowcountry to the Upstate, it shows how empowering entrepreneurs sustains local pride, drives growth, and builds more connected communities across South Carolina. **In doing so, it ensures that small towns are not only visible in the digital economy but competitive within it.**

Empowering Small Businesses

A Digital Marketplace for Every Community

WeShopSC was created to meet a critical need: provide small businesses across South Carolina a modern, user-friendly way to sell online without the cost and complexity that often come with traditional e-commerce platforms. As a commission-free digital Main Street, it allows businesses to keep more of what they earn, while presenting their products and services on a site designed to feel local, accessible, and community-driven. Backed by the Municipal Association of South Carolina and Main Street SC, and powered by Beyond Main's national platform, WeShopSC is a practical and visionary tool. It demonstrates that digital growth and local economic vitality can work hand-in-hand when technology is tailored to the realities of rural and small-town entrepreneurs.



A Growing Digital Community

The response to WeShopSC has been both fast and enthusiastic. Since launching in mid-2023, the platform has grown to include over 700 small businesses from every corner of the state. These businesses represent not just traditional retail, but also restaurants, service providers, artisans, and specialty shops that give each South Carolina community its unique character. What makes this adoption remarkable is how quickly entrepreneurs with little prior digital experience have embraced the platform. Communities now have a digital hub where their businesses stand alongside one another, creating a stronger collective presence and reinforcing the importance of shopping local, whether in-person or online.

Growing Visibility for Local Shops

Traffic to WeShopSC continues to build steadily. From August 2023 to August 2025, the platform logged 59,330 unique visitors and 101,432 page views — averaging 2,400 visitors and 4,100 views each month. This consistent engagement signals sustainable growth rather than a short-term spike.

For many businesses, WeShopSC is the first opportunity to showcase their products to a statewide — and in some cases national — audience. Serving as both a digital directory and marketplace, the site boosts visibility, helps weather slow seasons, and keeps local businesses competitive in an economy that increasingly begins online.



Digital Tools and Training

Tools and Training That Build Confidence

WeShopSC is more than a storefront platform — it provides a full support system to help businesses succeed. Each profile includes tools larger retailers take for granted: inventory management, order fulfillment, digital gift cards, promotional features, and multimedia content. Equally important is the personalized technical assistance delivered through Main Street SC and partners. Business owners have benefited from in-person workshops, small-group training, and one-on-one coaching that teach them to manage shops, create strong listings, and market effectively. The platform is also organized into local markets, grouping businesses by community or theme, giving entrepreneurs visibility locally while connecting them to a statewide audience. By blending technology with training and community context, WeShopSC lowers barriers and builds confidence.



Amplifying Local Talent

WeShopSC has been bolstered by marketing campaigns and the Small Business Ambassador Program designed to elevate the voices of South Carolina's entrepreneurs. Digital ads, podcasts, and media features have helped amplify awareness of the platform, drawing new customers and reinforcing the message that small businesses can thrive online.

The ambassador program, featuring grant-cohort businesses, added a peer-led dimension to outreach. This layered approach, statewide marketing combined with peer leadership, ensures that momentum is not only generated but also sustained over time.

WeShopSC by the Numbers (Aug 2023–Aug 2025)

- 700+ small businesses onboarded statewide
- 59,330 unique visitors to the platform
- 101,432 total site views (~2,400 visitors/month, 4,100 views/month)
- 96 towns and cities represented on storefronts
- 25 counties engaged through workshops and training
- 12 Small Business Ambassadors mentoring peers

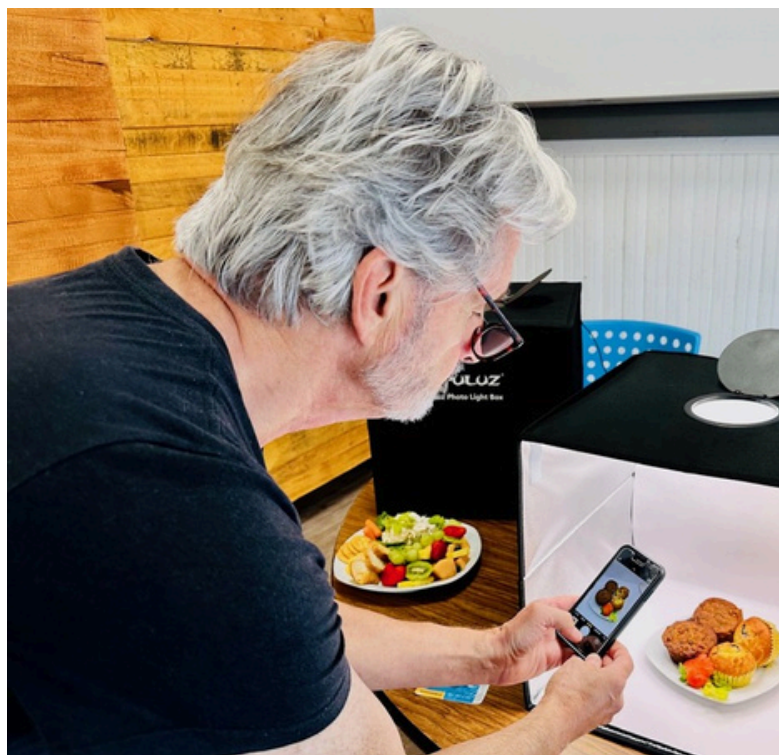
What Makes It Unique:

- Commission-free storefronts with professional e-commerce tools
- Local "markets" that keep community identity front and center
- Training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for participating businesses
- Statewide marketing campaigns to drive customer awareness

Hands-on Technical Assistance

Strategic Framework for Technical Assistance

The technical assistance work behind WeShopSC was designed with one goal in mind: to ensure that small businesses could do more than simply open an online storefront, they could actually thrive in the digital economy. Main Street SC and its partners focused on building lasting capacity within communities, not just providing tools. This meant combining technology with personal coaching, local training, and peer leadership so entrepreneurs had the skills and relationships to sustain their growth. By aligning with the mission of local Main Street programs, the initiative strategically positioned small businesses as drivers of economic vitality in their towns.



Implementation

On the ground, technical assistance came to life through a mix of light box trainings, digital media workshops, one-on-one coaching sessions, and the more intensive Growth Accelerator cohorts. Owners learned how to manage inventory, polish product listings with photography and descriptions, sync systems like Square and Shopify, and apply digital marketing strategies. The accelerator provided an even more hands-on model, supporting eight businesses in rural distressed counties with personalized strategies for growth. Group trainings provided shared resources — including branded marketing templates and how-to guides — while local sessions built trust and confidence by meeting entrepreneurs where they were. For many participants, these were the first professional e-commerce trainings they had ever received, making the program not only instructional but transformational.



12

Ambassadors

Peer leaders trained to mentor other small businesses



2

Accelerator Cohorts

Intensive, hands-on support for 8 selected small businesses



25+

Trainings & Workshops

Light box sessions, digital media workshops, and storefront launch events.



160+

Businesses Supported

Direct technical assistance provided through coaching and training

Small Business Accelerator Program

Overview

The WeShopSC Accelerator is an impact-driven program designed to empower local South Carolina businesses. Through a 12-week program of in-depth, one-on-one weekly coaching sessions and tailored guidance, our mission is to help entrepreneurs build a sustainable foundation for growth.



Program Pillars



Finance & Operations

Improving sales data analysis and increasing operational efficiency.



Strategy & Business Development

Refining brand identity and creating strategic growth plans.



WeShopSC & E-commerce

Assisting with platform integration and inventory management.



Marketing & Sales

Developing strategic campaigns to drive sales and create innovative product offerings.

FUNDED THROUGH



Personalized Guidance for Business Growth

Each business received a highly personalized guide tailored to their specific needs. These comprehensive guides were designed to empower owners to continue their growth beyond the program and included:

- **Brand & Foundational Guidance:** Comprehensive guidance on merchandising, operations, vendor and buyer strategy for retail-focused businesses, and brand guides.
- **Key Recommendations & Content:** An in-depth overview of our team's key recommendations for continuing business development, with a focus on e-commerce and digital strategy.
- **Custom Marketing Strategy:** A detailed and personalized marketing plan, including a social media content plan, content pillars, email marketing ideas, seasonal promotions, and a 12-month marketing calendar.
- **Financial Tracker:** A personalized financial tracker to help owners continuously review their performance and guide future business decisions.

Cohort Business Spotlights Summer 2025



Awaken Coffee – Mullins, SC

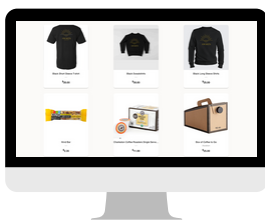
Awaken Coffee is a mission-driven shop rooted in community connection and locally sourced offerings. The accelerator supported Awaken in redesigning its website, launching online ordering, and developing a seasonal marketing plan.

We also worked with owner Audrey to create the Community Cares Program, a unifying brand for initiatives like food waste reduction and charity partnerships.

“The one-on-one support gave us clarity, confidence, and practical tools to grow both in our shop and online.”

WeShopSC Storefront

Updated marketplace profile with product listings, images, and a refreshed business description to highlight their mission and offerings.



Marketing Guidance

Provided tailored recommendations to align content with brand voice, highlight community impact, and boost audience engagement.



Website Updates

Updated the Wix website and layout to improve navigation, integrate the WeShopSC profile, and create a cohesive brand experience.



South Carolina Artisans Center – Walterboro, SC

The South Carolina Artisans Center represents over 200 jury-selected makers and thousands of handcrafted items. With accelerator support, the Center launched a curated WeShopSC storefront, refined product categories, and aligned branding across its digital platforms.

By focusing on small, shippable items and elevating artist storytelling online, the Center is extending its 30-year legacy into the digital marketplace.

“This program gave us the structure to bring South Carolina artisans into the digital age while keeping their stories at the heart of every product.”



16% sales increase after expanding their digital presence and launching a new e-commerce storefront.

Cohort Business Spotlights Summer 2025



Twig & Colleton Coffee – Walterboro, SC

Owned by sisters Mandy and Jesse, Twig and Colleton Coffee sit just a few doors apart on Walterboro's Main Street.

Twig, a boutique for gifts, jewelry, candles, and home goods, worked through the accelerator to expand top-performing categories, launch curated gift bundles on WeShopSC, and explore new vendor partnerships.

Colleton Coffee focused on loyalty programs, retail add-ons, and community events to build its role as both a gathering space and online shop. Together, the sisters are leveraging cross-promotion and digital tools to grow their businesses side by side.

"The coaching helped us think strategically about how we run Twig and Colleton Coffee. Their guidance has been encouraging and practical, not to mention delightful."



Sarabeth Jordan Boutique – Laurens, SC

Sarabeth Jordan Boutique has become a style anchor in downtown Laurens, offering women's apparel, gifts, and permanent jewelry.

Through the accelerator, the boutique launched its new jewelry service with an integrated booking system on WeShopSC, improved Shopify integration, and stronger merchandising strategies. With upcoming collaborations and plans for a brand ambassador program, Sarabeth is positioning her shop as both a local destination and an online brand.

"Participating in the coaching program allowed me to take a closer look at my business operations and make meaningful updates that strengthened both my in-store and online presence."



Successfully launched a **new vertical of business**, offering a permanent jewelry service through the WeShopSC reservation system.

Key Lessons Learned to Date

1. Digital Readiness is Uneven

Many rural businesses had little or no online presence before WeShopSC, but hands-on guidance showed that first-time users can adopt digital tools successfully. Removing barriers like commissions and complex setup dramatically increases adoption. Demand for an online tool like WeShopSC is high among small businesses, notable in the increase from 26 retailer accounts at the beginning of 2023 to over 700 by Summer of 2025.



2. Training Must Be Practical and Local

Light box trainings, workshops, and one-on-one coaching were most effective when delivered in familiar settings. Trusted relationships with local Main Street managers built confidence, while “learning by doing” had more impact than presentations alone.



3. Storytelling and Visibility Drive Engagement

Businesses with strong visuals, clear product descriptions, and active social media saw higher engagement. Photography and branding gave owners pride, and visibility on WeShopSC creating momentum for broader marketing and customer reach.



Key Lessons Learned to Date

4. Layered Support Multiplies Impact

A tiered approach, technical assistance, accelerators, and ambassadors, gave businesses multiple entry points. Targeted investments created demonstration effects for communities, and peer leaders amplified credibility by encouraging hesitant businesses to join.

5. Small Businesses Anchor Community Identity

Coffee shops, boutiques, and artisan centers showed that small businesses are more than storefronts — they are cultural anchors and gathering places. Strengthening them digitally strengthened both local pride and economic vitality.

6. Sustained Support Ensures Long-Term Success

A one-time setup is not enough. Small businesses in our rural communities need ongoing coaching, marketing, and ambassador leadership to sustain activity. Long-term success depends on keeping the platform relevant, promoted, and responsive to evolving needs.



WeShopSC Success Solutions

To drive growth and long term success, WeShopSC introduced the following tools and resources designed to support small businesses and local marketplaces across the state.

Platform Development



- Square and Shopify Integration
- Market Manager Portal
- Marketplace Features
 - Free Directory, Reservation System, Gift Card Network (Store, Market, Platform levels)
- Enhanced discoverability via search and filter features

Resource Development, Training, and Technical Assistance



- Monthly and Quarterly Community Calls
- Community On-Site Visits and Trainings
- Virtual Accelerator Programs
- One-on-One Community Market and Small Business Technical Training and assistance sessions
- Small Business Resource Center and Toolkits
- Market Manager Resources and Toolkits

Marketing Support

- WeShopSC brand strategy development
- Marketing Templates, Toolkits, and Materials
- Printshop
- Social Media Account Development and Promotion
- WeShopSC Advertising and Marketing Campaign Execution



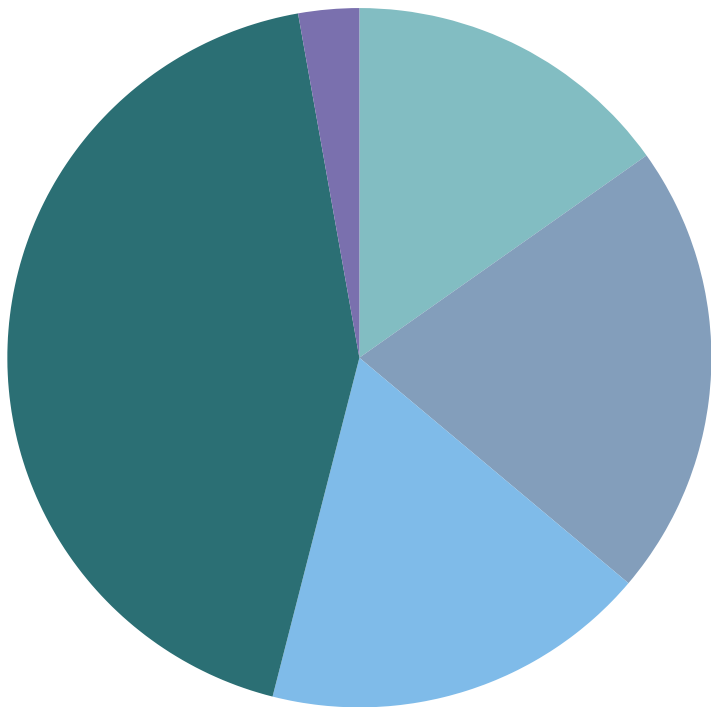
Funding and Investment

Over the past two years, investments from the Municipal Association of South Carolina, partner contributions, and state and federal grants has supported the development of the platform, marketing campaigns, technical assistance, and hands-on support for small businesses across the state. Below is a breakdown of how these funds have been used.

Total Investment: \$615,000+

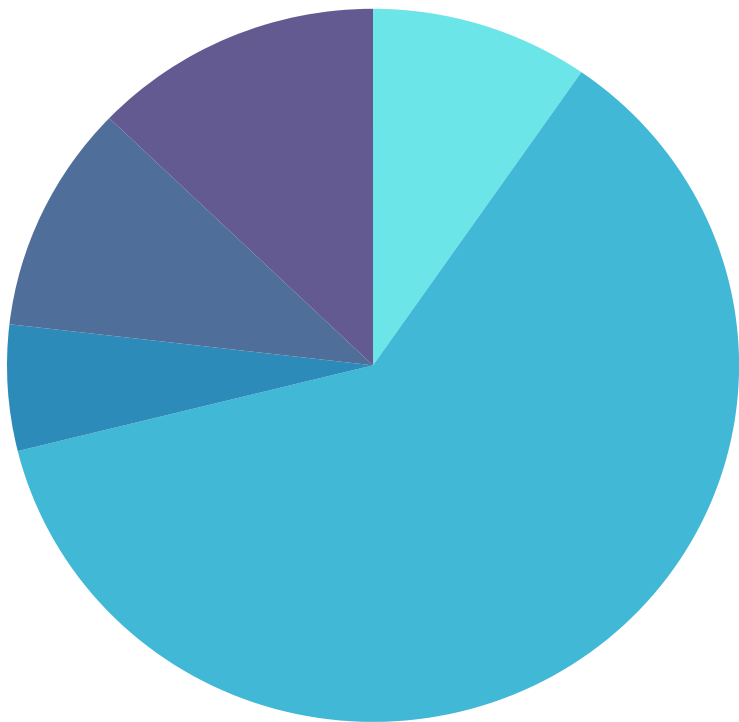
Funding Sources

- Grants (Appalachian Regional Commission)
- Grants (SC Dept. of Commerce SimulateSC)
- Grants (Southeast Crescent Regional Cmsn...)
- Municipal Association of SC Investment
- Partner/Local Contributions



Investment Areas

- Platform & Technology
- Grant-Funded Business Support
- Marketing & Promotion
- Community Engagement
- Staff & Operations



Communities also invested locally in technical assistance, totaling \$19,950 across 14 cities. Together, these investments represent a collective effort to strengthen South Carolina's small businesses both in-store and online.

Advancing Small Business Support Opportunities & Goals

2026 Priorities

- **Engage all counties in South Carolina**
 - **GOAL:** Reach all 46 counties with at least one program/initiative/business by Dec 2026
 - **HOW:** Offer targeted regional workshops.
- **Offer small business accelerator cohorts annually**
 - **GOAL:** Offer 2 accelerator cohorts annually; increase participation by 20% YOY through 2027
 - **HOW:** Partner with local organizations and communities to identify participants.
- **Increase small business profiles and marketplace offerings**
 - **GOAL:** Enroll 500 new businesses & add 5,000 products by Dec 2026; track quarterly
 - **HOW:** Launch milestone campaigns highlighting business mix & offerings.
- **Strengthen shopper engagement**
 - **GOAL:** Increase shoppers by 20% & achieve 100 total transactions by end of 2026
 - **HOW:** Launch digital marketing awareness campaigns to drive sales for small businesses & build brand affinity and awareness.

Resources Needed:

- Dedicated budget to advance priorities
- Sustainability & scalability partnerships
- Staff capacity



Building Stronger Communities Together

South Carolina is proving what's possible when small businesses have access to digital tools, training, and resources. Thanks to the support of the Municipal Association of South Carolina and its partners, WeShopSC has become a statewide model for helping local businesses thrive online and in their communities.

Together, we are building the future of shop local, expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs, and ensuring that South Carolina's unique small businesses continue to grow.



Implementation Partners



Main Street SC Communities



@WeShopSC





Municipal Association
of South Carolina