2026 Call for Innovation Fellows

Background

Since 2011, the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development's Regional Economic Innovation (REI) has supported over 190 innovative economic development projects in Michigan, spurring high-growth entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic innovation. REI partners have achieved remarkable success; with over $68 million in public and private investments generated by 102 Student-Led, Faculty-Guided projects; over 74 Co-Learning Plans; and 17 Co-Implementation projects (also known as Innovation Fellowships). Partners of REI leverage higher education, businesses, local governments, Economic Development Districts, non-profits, economic developers, and others who create, identify, and develop new economic development strategies and practices, and perform technical assistance for communities in Michigan. REI is committed to a process of engagement to create the best and brightest community and economic developers in the world.

Throughout 2025, the REI Network submitted innovative economic development ideas/topics of interest. Through a competitive process, working with the REI Consultative Panel of experts across the state, the following topical areas were determined to be timely and effective areas to assist bringing critical new knowledge to bear on the challenges we currently face in community and economic development. The topical areas are listed within the "Topic" section of this application.

Call for Innovation Fellows

Specifically, the REI Innovation Fellowship program was established in 2016 to tackle tough economic development issues that our distressed communities of Michigan face every day by supporting community leaders on the ground. Innovation Fellowships provide support and coordination to turn concepts into actions, and implement new economic development tools, models, policies, and programs. Innovation Fellows, recruited by REI, its partners, EDDS, and past Co-Learning Plan authors, will identify recommendations in past Co-Learning Plans (*as well as generate new ideas*) to serve as current and practical information for local and state economic development practitioners and policymakers as they consider important decisions for Michigan communities and regions. **These Fellowships should fall within one of four categorial areas, including: 1) resiliency planning, 2) financial resiliency, 3) 21st century communications, and 4) circular economies.** Within a chosen category, applicants must identify one more topics to focus their work on.

Topic

REI has identified the following topical areas for possible Co-Implementation (Innovation Fellowship) projects of 2026. They include: **1. Leveraging Higher Education as Anchors for Community Investment, 2. Ecosystem Over Ownership: Advancing Collaborative Economic Models in Distressed Communities, 3. Donor Advised Funds and Family Wealth: Unlocking Capital for Community, 4. Exploring Job Creation Potential Through Extended Producer Responsibility and Waste Reduction Policies in Michigan, 5. Finding the "Sweet Spot" in Housing Development Permitting: Aligning Government Processes with Developer Expectations, 6. Advancing Community Benefit Agreements in Publicly Funded Economic Development, 7. Other.** Further description of each is shared below.

These topical areas within one of the above-mentioned foci were weighed by the REI Consultative Panel with consideration to these areas' likelihood to create or retain jobs and/or businesses in economically distressed regions of Michigan. They include:

1. Leveraging Higher Education as Anchors for Community Investment

This project would examine strategies to engage higher education institutions in aligning endowments and programs with community investment goals, including partnerships with CDFIs and local business funds.

2. Ecosystem Over Ownership: Advancing Collaborative Economic Models in Distressed Communities

This project would examine community-centered investment models - such as mutual ownership and democratic finance - and assess their impact on small business stability, job retention, and local economic resilience.

3. Donor Advised Funds and Family Wealth: Unlocking Capital for Community

This project would analyze how DAFs, family foundations, and trusts could serve as vehicles for equitable community investment, while identifying barriers and proposing frameworks to increase their use.

4. Exploring Job Creation Potential Through Extended Producer Responsibility and Waste Reduction Policies in Michigan

This study would estimate the impact on job creation for Michigan's salvage, reuse, and recycling industries if the state adopted extended producer responsibility policies and expanded materials recovery programs.

5. Finding the "Sweet Spot" in Housing Development Permitting: Aligning Government Processes with Developer Expectations

This project would explore how local governments can better assess and communicate realistic permitting timelines based on project characteristics - helping communities refine processes to align with the needs of targeted housing development.

6. Advancing Community Benefit Agreements in Publicly Funded Economic Development

This topic would assess Michigan economic development professionals' attitudes toward community benefit agreements and recommend strategies to integrate community benefit planning into standard economic development practices.

7. Other

Application Instructions

An Innovation Fellow should be embedded within the community or organization they seek to work with to achieve the project's goals. Innovation Fellows are expected to work with a community and/or an organization for their entire Fellowship, and are considered contractors, with financial support from the REI. REI intends to fund one Innovation Fellow for a six-month period.

Proposed Innovation Project

Please provide a detailed narrative, not to exceed five pages, that describes the proposed scope of work. It should be double-spaced, have three-quarter-inch margins and 12-point font. It should clearly identify sections containing the following:

1. Cover page, including your name, email address, phone number, affiliation, and project title;

2. Description of population served or researched through the project idea (ALICE, Asset-Limited/Income Constrained Employed);
3. Identified Redevelopment Ready Communities and/or concentration of opportunity zone tracts;
4. Foci area of resiliency planning, financial resiliency, 21st century communications or circular economies;
5. Discussion of the significance and implications of the topical area(s) chosen for Michigan communities and regions;
6. A brief summary of the problem and how your proposed project will address the economic development challenge or opportunity, also utilizing prior Co-Learning Plan or Student-Led, Faculty-Guided project information, if applicable;
7. The purpose in taking on this project, noting any special contributions it may make toward economic development efforts in Michigan. Is the project new to the community you wish to work with or to Michigan? How?;
8. A list of who you plan to work with to implement this project. Have you already made contact with these individuals/organizations?;
9. A basic timeline of your proposed project, including possible tasks for individuals or teams;
10. Resources (besides financial support), that REI could provide, that you might find useful for your project? Please be specific;
11. The skills, qualifications, and/or connections unique to you to guide this community or organization in this project;
12. A description of and how your project might generate living-wage jobs, public/private investments, or could be transformative in the community;
13. A Dissemination Plan listing Who/What/Where/How (social media, video, press release, presentation, etc.) and When (timeline with benchmarks);
14. A **letter of endorsement** from your organization or from the community you intend to work with;
15. One to three paragraphs describing how you fulfill the qualifications listed below.
16. A predicted number and description of jobs that may be created or retained, if applicable;
17. Describe briefly how you plan to make your final report ADA compliant/accessible.

Required Qualifications

- Strong knowledge base in the topic or area of interest and formal training in facilitating or leading successful projects
- Creative problem solver
- An opportunistic mindset
- Energy and passion for the project

- Proactive and prudent
- A high level of social capital
- A long-term vision for the project

Funding

Up to $6,000 for a six-eight month period.

Use of AI:

The growing prevalence and use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the production of community and economic development products calls upon us to provide reasonable guidance to our partners and colleagues on how that usage may be ethically employed. These guidelines are an initial set of recommendations that recognize that AI is a fast-evolving technology that may have value in addressing capacity issues for communities in writing and data analysis.

We offer these guidelines as a beginning point in this evolving field and as the practice of AI in community and economic development matures welcome additional insights and suggestions on how we might best employ these tools ethically to advance the equitable use of AI to assist our communities.

We recommend that community and economic development scholars and practitioners:

- Disclose the use of any AI tools in the introduction or methods section of a product to provide for transparency.
- Describe in detail in the appropriate locations through footnotes or other appropriate citation methods which parts of the text/data are affected.
- AI tools may have inherent limitations and biases in their application to specific identity groups. If known, explain these limitations and biases in an appropriate footnote or appendix.
- AI tools may also pose ethical challenges in issues of data security and privacy. Explain how data security and privacy are not compromised in your use of AI.
- No AI tool will be accepted as a credited author on a project. That is because any attribution of authorship carries with it accountability for the work, and AI tools cannot take such responsibility.

Deliverables

1. Four written updates, provided according to the schedule below. Each update must be 1-2 pages in length, and must indicate major steps taken to accomplish goals, barriers, and successes/outcomes.
2. A Final Report, 15 pages in length. It must describe the major steps taken, lessons learned, and any outcomes or successes achieved (including any measurable, such as jobs, investments, etc.).

Updates and deliverables should be sent according to the schedule below:

- **December 08, 2025** – Applications Due
- **January 2026** – Notices of Award
- **February 27, 2026** – First Project Update
- **April 1, 2026** – Second Project Update
- **May 4, 2026** – Third Project Update
- **June 26, 2026** – Fourth Project Update
- **July 1, 2026** - Presentation Due
- **July/August 2026** - Present at Innovate Michigan! Summit
- **July 30, 2026** – Final Report Due

Submission

Applications must be received by **5:00 pm EST on December 08, 2025.**

- *Online submissions* at reicenter.org (preferred method)
- *Email submissions* may be submitted as file attachments and sent to jondyjen@,msu.edu (you must enter your Innovation Fellow Project Title, the date, and your last name in the subject as: "Innovation Project Title, date, last name." Submissions will be acknowledged by an e-mail message to the lead author named on the application).

Questions

Please contact Jenan Jondy at jondyjen@msu.edu or 517-353-9555.