

Regional resource for entrepreneurs: Business Hub expands its reach

By Art Nicholas

When most people hear “South Haven Regional Business Hub,” they might assume it serves a small lakeshore community. Think again. Under its new executive director, A. Elizabeth Bernhard, the hub has grown into a regional force for small business development — drawing clients from Allegan, Kalamazoo, Berrien, Barry, Calhoun, Ottawa, and Kent counties, in addition to its home base of Van Buren.

“Our name says South Haven, but we focus on all of the counties in southwest Michigan,” Bernhard said in a recent interview. “Van Buren County represents our largest client base, but our second largest is Kalamazoo County, followed by Allegan and Berrien.” The organization is already wrestling with whether its name still fits — and a rebranding may be on the horizon.

The hub’s mission is straightforward but vital: helping entrepreneurs and small business owners start, grow, and stay in business. The stakes are high. Nationally, more than half of all small businesses fail within five years. The hub’s 2025 Impact Report puts the problem in stark local terms: with an average of 2,700 new business applications filed region-wide each year, far too many of those businesses won’t survive — typically not because of bad ideas or lack of passion, but



because of gaps in business fundamentals: understanding financials, building a customer base, navigating marketing.

The hub’s own numbers tell a different story for the businesses it serves. Since its founding in 2023, it has supported 89 businesses, with 82 currently active. Hub-supported businesses have collectively generated 328 jobs (created or retained), \$28.7 million in small business revenue, and \$14.76 million in annual payroll. The hub has awarded \$56,000 in grants to clients and reports a 254 percent growth rate — alongside a 92 percent business retention rate that dramatically outpaces the national average of around 50 percent.

“Businesses rarely fail for lack of ideas,” Bernhard writes in the impact report. “They fail when entrepreneurs lack the knowledge, skills, and strategic guidance needed to execute effectively.” The hub

addresses this by wrapping education, mentorship, and peer community around entrepreneurs who have the drive but need the tools.

Bernhard came to the hub in July 2025, having served as a strategic partner of the organization while leading the Manufacturing Growth Alliance, a Benton Harbor-based statewide nonprofit. A native of Barry County and South Haven resident since 2019, she said the position felt like the right opportunity at the right time — a chance to work in her own community rather than crisscrossing the state.

The hub’s client base is notably diverse. According to the impact report, 58 percent of businesses served are woman-owned, 27 percent are Black or African American-owned, and 14 percent are Hispanic or Latino-owned — a signal that the hub is reaching entrepreneurs who have historically had less access to business support

resources.

The hub offers a ladder of programs accessible to entrepreneurs across the region. The Startup Series — six standalone sessions covering business financials, marketing, sales, and more — served 69 entrepreneurs in 2025. The Growth Series, a 26-week intensive cohort for more established businesses, provided deep support to seven growth-stage firms in 2025. A new fourth program, the Strong Leader Series, launched in December with 16 South Haven-area business leaders; every single participant reported achieving their primary goal for attending, and 100 percent said they would recommend the series to others.

A key ingredient is mentorship. The lakeshore region attracts accomplished retirees eager to give back — people who have built, grown, and sold businesses. In 2025, volunteers logged 2,762 hours of direct sup-

port to hub clients. Mentors provide strategic coaching and accountability, while a pool of volunteer subject matter experts — CPAs, marketing professionals, bookkeepers — provides technical assistance on an as-needed basis.

The hub’s collaborative philosophy extends to its ecosystem of more than 20 regional partners, including the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Michigan SBDC, Southwest Michigan First, Market One, Emerge Innovation Hub, and both the South Haven Area and Southwest Michigan Regional Chambers of Commerce. Financially, the hub brought in \$174,075 in total 2025 revenue — 75 percent from grants, 21 percent from individual donations and sponsorships — and invested 63 percent of expenses directly into programming.

Looking ahead, the hub’s most ambitious new initiative is a planned “Lakeshore Capital Consortium” — modeled after a successful Kalamazoo program founded by board chair Debi Howe — which will bring together financial institutions ranging from traditional banks to CDFIs to serve as a clearinghouse

for small business capital needs. The initiative is expected to launch in 2027.

Historically, the hub’s municipal relationships have been concentrated in South Haven. But Bernhard said reaching other cities — including those in Allegan County — is now a strategic priority. “We believe that when we make the same business case to other municipalities, whether it’s Bangor, Covert, or Allegan, they too will see the value and the ROI,” she said.

For entrepreneurs across Allegan County and southwest Michigan looking to start or scale a business, the Growth Series is currently accepting applications through May 13 6PM; the cohort begins June 10. The hub’s flagship showcase event, The Pitch — where Growth Series graduates present their business visions to the broader community — is scheduled for December 2 at Lake Michigan College in South Haven, and is open to the public. More information is available at southhavenregionalbusinesshub.org, or by contacting Executive Director Elizabeth Bernhard at elizabeth@southhavenregionalbusinesshub.org or 269-720-1699.

CORRECTION

A death notice printed on April 2 listed should of read LINDA MAY JOHNSON, 74, of Ganges Twp. passed away on February 13, 2026.

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