

South Haven's Business Hub posts record numbers — and Is just getting started



By Art Nicholas |
South Haven Beacon

There's a quiet revolution happening for small businesses in South Haven and Van Buren County — and the numbers in the South Haven Regional Business Hub's newly released 2025 Impact Report make the case compellingly.

Since its founding in 2023, the hub has supported 89 businesses, with 82 currently active. Those businesses together account for 328 jobs created or retained, \$28.7 million in small business revenue, \$14.76 million in annual payroll, and \$56,000 in grants awarded to clients. The organization has achieved a 254 percent growth rate in businesses served and — most strikingly — a 92 percent business retention rate, nearly double the national average of around 50 percent.

"Businesses rarely fail for lack of ideas," writes Executive Director Elizabeth Bernhard in the report. "They fail when entrepreneurs lack the knowledge, skills, and strategic guidance needed to execute effectively." Bernhard joined the hub in July 2025 — becoming its first-ever full-time employee — after years as a strategic partner while leading the Manufacturing Growth Alliance. A Southwest

Michigan native and South Haven resident since 2019, she was recruited by board chair and founder Debi Howe when Howe was ready to step back from day-to-day operations.

"When this opportunity came up, it was just the right place and the right time," Bernhard said. "It's been very refreshing to work in my community with the partners I know best."

Community is at the heart of the hub's model — and one of South Haven's most distinctive assets is the depth of talented, engaged retirees who want to give back. In 2025, volunteers contributed 2,762 hours of direct support to hub clients. Volunteer mentors are paired with business owners based on expertise and industry, while a separate pool of subject matter experts — CPAs, bookkeepers, marketing professionals — steps in for specific technical needs. The hub's board of directors and mentor roster reads like a who's who of regional business expertise, from retired banking and manufacturing executives to AI strategists and succession planning specialists.

It's a model born of a real and often invisible problem Bernhard hears from entrepreneurs constantly. "I once had



an entrepreneur say to me, 'Elizabeth, I can't talk to my team about my fears because I'll freak them out. I can't talk to my wife because she's sick of hearing about the business. And my therapist is great, but she doesn't know business,'" she recalled. "Every entrepreneur, regardless of industry, size, or location, has that fundamental need to be in community with peers."

The 2025 Impact Report profiles two compelling local success stories. Max Gleiss launched Max Transportation and Car Service after completing the hub's Startup Series, attending every session and building the licensing, insurance, and market positioning foundation for his business. In just one year, his company logged more than 50,000 miles and became a go-to transportation provider for South Haven events including the Icebreaker Festival, winery tours, weddings, and corporate contracts. "The Business



Hub's knowledge, guidance, and support made a real difference in helping my business reach where it is today," Gleiss said.

Lisa Miller of Forever Clean Soap Works — a handcrafted, non-toxic soap and personal care business based in St. Joseph — completed the 2025 Growth Series and used her hub grant, funded by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, to overhaul her website and launch professional email marketing. She is now training her first apprentice and expanding into new markets. Her advice to fellow entrepreneurs: "Being too cautious and conservative can be a detriment to your business. Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith in order to advance."

In 2025, the hub served 69 entrepreneurs through the Startup Series and seven growth-stage businesses through the intensive 26-week Growth Series. A new offering, the Strong Leader Series, launched in December with 16 South Haven area business leaders — and achieved a perfect record: every participant met their primary goal for attending, and 100

percent said they would recommend it to others. The series returns in October 2026.

The hub also completed a Succession Planning Series, addressing a critical and often overlooked need: baby boomer business owners approaching retirement without a transition plan. A final free session is scheduled for April 22 at Lake Michigan College in South Haven.

For 2026, the hub is also launching the Founders Circle — an invitation-only alumni network for Growth Series graduates — while beginning work toward a Lakeshore Capital Consortium: a network of financial institutions designed to help small businesses navigate funding from credit repair to alternative lending. That initiative is slated for 2027.

The hub's 2025 finances reflect a lean, mission-focused operation: \$174,075 in total revenue against \$154,697 in expenses, with a net surplus of \$19,378. Sixty-three percent of expenses went directly into programming. The hub is working to diversify beyond its current grant-heavy revenue mix (75 percent of 2025 revenue

came from state grants) through individual giving — nearly \$37,000 was raised from donors last year, a record, with a goal to triple that in 2026 through a campaign called Friends of the Hub.

However, the end of 2025 brought a serious challenge: more than \$100,000 in Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity grant funding was placed at risk due to state budget cuts. The hub worked with local legislators to advocate for restoration of those funds — a reminder of how dependent small business support infrastructure can be on state priorities.

For South Haven and Van Buren County entrepreneurs, the message is simple: you don't have to go it alone. Growth Series applications are open now through May 13 6PM; the cohort begins June 10, and The Pitch — the hub's flagship public showcase — is set for December 2 at Lake Michigan College. To learn more, visit southhavenregionalbusinesshub.org or contact Elizabeth Bernhard at elizabeth@southhavenregionalbusinesshub.org or 269-720-1699.

Lohrstorfer talks about trip to Antarctica



Martha Lohrstorfer
By James Windell When Martha Lohrstorfer talks about a

trip she took, it's likely to be about a part of the world you haven't visited.

In fact, the title of her talk at the Scott Club on April 21, 2026, is "Journey to the End of the World: The Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and Antarctica."

"This will be a fantastic educational opportunity to learn about a part of the world you may not have visited," says Anna Krajecki, Program Chair of South Haven's Scott Club.

The trip Martha and her husband John took to Antarctica is fascinating because it truly is a journey to the end of the world offering an

experience you simply can't replicate anywhere else on Earth. Unlike a trip to a major city in the U.S. or Europe, a trip to Antarctica combines extreme remoteness, surreal landscapes, abundant wildlife, and the feeling of stepping into a world that's barely been touched by humans. There are no cities, no trees — just a place of vast ice sheets, towering glaciers, and sculptural icebergs, and plenty of wildlife.

Lohrstorfer's presentation will take the audience on a visual tour not only of Antarctica, but also of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. The Falkland Islands

are a remote South Atlantic archipelago with a blend of rugged beauty, rich wildlife, and a complex history. Eight hundred miles east of the Falklands is South Georgia, a long, mountainous island in the South Atlantic, which has no permanent residents, but an abundance of animals.

Lohrstorfer is a retired Kalamazoo librarian who moved to South Haven 20 years ago. She and her husband John are active disaster responders with the Red Cross. Martha has deployed 41 times all over the country, including Guam. When they are not traveling with the Red Cross, they enjoy adventures to not

so well-known spots — like Antarctica.

"Journey to the End of the World" will be presented on Tuesday, April 21, 2026, at 1:00 pm. It is free and the public is invited. The location of this program will depend on the progress of the lift construction at Scott Club. If necessary, the program will be held at the First Congregational Church, 651 Phoenix Street, across the street from Scott Club. Check the Scott Club website or the Scott Club Facebook page for updated information on the location of this program.

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