



Sarah Leys  
Director  
Community and Economic  
Development Department

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Ald. Janessa Wilkins, Chair  
Planning and Development Committee

**FROM:** Sarah Leys, Deputy Director  
Community & Economic Development Department

**DATE:** February 23, 2026

**RE:** 2026 Funding Agreement with the Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce

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Please find the attached 2026 funding agreement with the Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce (GRCC) as the Regional Economic Development Organization.

This agreement supports the GRCC as a key partner in advancing economic development by attracting, retaining, and growing primary jobs through a strong, competitive business community, while backing GRCC-led strategies around business growth, regional marketing, site readiness, workforce and talent alignment, and innovation. In turn, the GRCC commits to supporting the City’s overall economic development vision and specific projects to ensure prosperity across all residents and areas of Rockford and the surrounding region. Through its expertise and work plan, the GRCC will help implement the City’s strategies in areas such as leadership development, business retention and attraction, marketing, workforce alignment, and innovation, working collaboratively to resolve any strategic conflicts. The GRCC also recognizes the close link between economic and community development and agrees to actively participate in broader community development efforts that contribute to overall community health.

Since the merger with RAEDC, leadership at GRCC spent time creating a new strategic plan for regional economic development, hiring 815Impact to facilitate stakeholder conversations. That plan is included in this packet with their proposal. To oversee and implement this work, GRCC hired a Vice President of Business Expansion and Attraction, and his team be focused on the following activities:

**Business Retention & Expansion (BRE)**

Business Retention & Expansion remains the most immediate and cost-effective strategy for sustaining Rockford’s economic stability. Ongoing outreach to existing employers helps identify operational



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challenges, workforce needs, and growth opportunities before they escalate into job loss or relocation risks. Coordinated BRE efforts between the city, the Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce, and regional partners allow for timely problem-solving and reinforce Rockford's reputation as a business-supportive community. Council awareness and support of BRE initiatives can help protect the existing tax base while encouraging reinvestment and job retention.

### **New Business Attraction**

New Business Attraction efforts focus on positioning Rockford competitively for companies considering expansion or relocation. This includes maintaining site readiness, supporting infrastructure improvements, and evaluating strategic incentive tools that align with community priorities. City Council plays a key role in enabling timely project responses and ensuring that Rockford presents a coordinated, business-friendly environment for prospects and site selectors. Attraction strategies are designed to complement existing industry strengths while prioritizing projects that deliver long-term economic value, quality employment opportunities, and sustainable growth.

### **Marketing to Target Industries**

A targeted industry marketing approach allows Rockford to focus resources on sectors where the region has established advantages, including precision manufacturing, food and beverage manufacturing, and pharmaceutical manufacturing. Clear, consistent messaging strengthens Rockford's visibility and credibility in competitive markets. Strategic marketing efforts may include coordinated branding, industry outreach, trade association engagement, and collaboration with regional partners to highlight workforce capabilities, transportation access, and available sites. Aligning marketing with identified target sectors helps ensure efficient use of public and private resources.

### **Metric and Data Tracking**

Effective metric and data tracking provides transparency and accountability for economic development initiatives presented to the City Council and the public. Tracking employer engagement, project pipeline activity, workforce alignment outcomes, and industry growth indicators allows decision-makers to evaluate progress against strategic goals. Utilizing consistent data systems and reporting practices supports informed policy decisions, helps measure return on investment, and ensures alignment with broader regional economic development priorities. A data-driven approach enables the city to refine strategies over time while clearly communicating with measurable outcomes.

The funding request will support the full work, and represents 3% of the GRCC budget.

Please contact me with any questions at 779-348-7442. Thank you