

Baker announces economic development grant in Framingham



Gov. Charlie Baker announces a new grant at SMOC headquarters in Framingham that is designed to jumpstart economic and employment opportunities in urban communities. In back are, from left, Rep. Carmine Gentile, Rep. Chris Walsh, Sen. Karen Spilka, SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Allan Jung

By Brad Avery/Daily News Staff

Posted Jan. 14, 2016 at 5:40 PM

FRAMINGHAM - Gov. Charlie Baker and the head of SMOC unveiled details Thursday about a grant program aimed at helping women, minorities, veterans, immigrants and people with disabilities start or expand their businesses.

Baker and South Middlesex Opportunity Council Executive Director Jim Cuddy outlined plans for a \$125,000 urban agenda economic development grant awarded to Framingham to help local entrepreneurs build their small businesses.

As part of the Baker-Polito administration's urban agenda program, 16 grants totaling \$3 million were awarded to 13 communities. SMOC, in partnership with the town of Framingham, the Framingham Downtown Renaissance and several other local organizations, received the money

to create a microlending program and a resource center for low and moderate-income residents looking to open their own business.

"The grant we're talking about today ... is to basically launch a one-stop micro-enterprise center here in Framingham and to have that become what I would describe sort of as a locus for new ideas and big ideas and business opportunities for folks here in this community," Baker said.

"These grants, this program, is all about us trying to work with folks, mostly in urban areas, to help them do the things that can make them great."

The initiative will have a special focus on helping minorities, women, veterans, immigrants and people with disabilities start or expand their businesses, said Heidi Eagles, SMOC director of resource development. SMOC will create resource connection and create training guides to help business men and women navigate through the legal and bureaucratic process involved in getting their businesses off the ground.

"One thing we will provide is technical assistance," said SMOC COO Charles Gagnon. "Which means they will have to participate in technical assistance workshops, one-on-one counseling and we expect to review their business performance every 90 days. So we're going to invest and we're going to stay vested in the performance of their business."

State Sen. Karen Spilka, D-Ashland spoke enthusiastically about the economic potential of the program, calling MetroWest "the heart of the innovation economy with Framingham smack in the center of it." She praised the diversity of businesses in town, from Bose to local Brazilian bakeries.

SMOC intends to launch the program immediately. Along with the Framingham Downtown Renaissance, SMOC is partnered with Framingham State University, MassBay Community College, MetroWest Legal Services, MutualOne Bank, Middlesex Savings Bank, the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce and the Brazil New England Chamber of Commerce.

In addition to praising the economic progress, Baker also used the press conference to discuss the opioid addiction epidemic, adding that Wednesday evening the state House of Representatives had passed a companion bill to legislation that tackles intervention treatment, recovery issues and prevention education.

"My hope is that at this point we now have a bill from the House, a bill from the Senate and I would love to see that get conferenced out sometime after the Senate gets back into session so we can continue to work hard dealing with this very, very important, horribly tragic problem that we face here, there and everywhere around the commonwealth," Baker said. "Anyone who thinks addiction is a 'them' issue isn't paying attention. It's an 'us' issue."

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Carol Carroll of Natick, who is with the SMOC program, Voices Against Violence, talks with Gov. Charlie Baker prior to his announcing a new grant at SMOC headquarters in Framingham that is designed to jumpstart economic and employment opportunities in urban communities. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Allan Jung



A full house was present as Gov. Charlie Baker announces a new grant at SMOC headquarters in Framingham Thursday. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Allan Jung