



Santa Cruz County News

Website: www.santacruzcountyaz.gov

For Immediate Release

Santa Cruz County Launches Supports For Small Businesses, Artists and Nonprofits

Local businesses, artists and nonprofits seeking to hire, expand their operations, or launch new business ventures are receiving support from Santa Cruz County, Arizona. Three programs are intended to support local small businesses in recovering from the impacts of the pandemic:

- 1. Digital platform for local, independent businesses** A \$60,500 grant from USDA Rural Development the county received last summer is enabling the launch of a digital platform, Localight, to help residents find and support local independent businesses. Localight is a Public Benefit Corporation that has created over 155 merchant profiles down the I-19 corridor. To date, 100 independent businesses have opted in to accept Localight as a payment method (with customers earning 2%-5% back on each purchase). Those local dollars can be spent within the independent business network and recirculate in the local economy, further supporting economic recovery.
- 2. Youth internship program for local high school students to learn digital commerce skills.** As part of the same \$60,500 grant the county received from USDA Rural Development, the Santa Cruz County School Superintendent's Office Gear Up Program is pairing 45 students with local businesses to support their digital needs. Starting April 13, student interns from local high schools will be consulting with local organizations on web design, social media, and other digital operations projects. Students and the 10 participating businesses and 5 county departments were selected through an application review process. The county publicized that as part of a survey launched and publicized last fall; 66 businesses responded to that survey to identify their digital business needs.
- 3. Small business forgivable loans program** As part of its American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 funding from the US Department of Treasury, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is putting \$1 million into the community to help small business owners, entrepreneurs and employers (including 501c3 nonprofits) recover from impacts of the pandemic. This \$1 million investment supplements the \$500,000 grants the Board of Supervisors has already allocated for "Community Financial Capacity." Grantee selections for that program will be announced in May through the Community

Foundation for Southern Arizona.

Small businesses, artists and 501c3 nonprofits can apply for up to \$25,000 in forgivable loans, with up to \$2,500 for artist development grants. Forgivable loan amounts will be contingent upon need. In March, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors awarded Prestamos CDFI, a division of Chicanos Por La Causa, the contract to administer the forgivable loans. Préstamos is a federally-chartered Community Development Financial Institution with significant experience administering loan and grant programs nationwide and assisting with small business support needs. More details about this program will be available in May at <https://www.prestamosloans.org/santa-cruz-loan/> (in English), <https://www.prestamosloans.org/es/santa-cruz-county-arpa-fund-prestamos-personables/> (in Spanish) and <https://cfsaz.org/santa-cruz-county-forgivable-loans> and santacruzcountyaz.gov.

The need for Santa Cruz County small business supports comes from a report commissioned by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, *Santa Cruz County, Arizona COVID-19 Economic Recovery Survey and Strategy*, available at <https://www.santacruzcountyaz.gov/833/Plans-and-Reports>. That report assessed how local industry has been impacted by COVID-19. A priority recommendation included strengthening existing local, independently owned businesses that have suffered significant losses during the pandemic. Local, independent businesses are critical to the economy, as nearly 4 times more money stays local when spent at these merchants, compared to 14% of money spent at major chains that stays in the local economy.

To learn more about these programs, see the attached: SCC Supports For Small Businesses, Artists and Nonprofits with dates of community events, radio/podcasts and informational sessions. A southern Arizona contractor, Startup Unidos (SU), is coordinating bilingual resources and information sessions through support from the USDA grant. Startup Unidos has roots in Nogales and experience implementing economic and workforce development initiatives in the county since 2015. For more about the informational events for these programs, contact Sergio Astorga, Small Business Outreach and Project Coordinator at SU, sa@startupunidos.com or 520-306-6849.

The digital platform for local commerce, Localight, is in process of launching nationwide through civic and national partners, including the American Independent Business Alliance (which represents 50,000 independent merchants nationally) and Heartland Payment Systems (which serves 250,000 small businesses through the United States and Canada). Website: <https://join.localight.com/> For more information about this program in Santa Cruz County, email hello@localight.com or call (520) 201-6099.

For more about Santa Cruz County's forgivable loan program, please contact Laura Verduzco laura.verduzco@cplc.org. For more information about grant and county funding for these programs, contact Angie Donelson (angie.donelson@gmail.com). END##