

Connect Local GR

Strengthening Local Procurement.
Expanding Access. Building a Stronger
Regional Economy

Economic Development Project Team Presentation
March 17th, 2026
Office of Equity & Engagement



Why This Matters

Local governments and major institutions collectively spend millions each year on goods, services, and construction.

Connect Local GR is designed to address these gaps.

Yet many local and small businesses:

- Do not understand how to access procurement opportunities
- Are unclear on requirements, timelines, and points of entry
- Lack established, firsthand relationships with City departments and other large organizations
- Learn about opportunities too late to compete effectively

☐ For the purposes of this presentation, when we reference **anchor institutions**, we mean **large, place-based organizations with a long-term commitment to the region whose purchasing, employment, and investment decisions significantly influence the local economy and small-business ecosystem.**

What We're Trying to Solve For

Connect Local GR is designed to solve for **access, clarity, and early connection** between buyers and local businesses.

From the business perspective

- Limited visibility into how procurement decisions are made.
- Fragmented systems and inconsistent expectations across organizations.
- Few opportunities to build relationships *before* bids or RFPs are released.

From the buyer perspective

- Limited insight into local supplier capacity and readiness.
- Repeated engagement with the same vendors.
- Missed opportunities to broaden and strengthen the vendor pipeline.

This event is intentionally positioned **upstream** of procurement.



What Is Connect Local GR?

Connect Local GR is a Reverse Vendor Fair designed to improve access and transparency around procurement.

The concept was inspired by events such as the **West Michigan Public Purchasing Alliance (WMPPA)** buyer fair, which traditionally brings together public-sector buyers and vendors in the fall. Connect Local GR builds on that model by hosting the event downtown and intentionally including **City departments alongside large private -sector and nonprofit anchor institutions** .

Buyers Host Tables
Instead of vendors tabling and pitching, **buyers host tables** and businesses circulate to learn how to engage, prepare, and compete.

Buyers as Educators
Position buyers as **educators** , not gatekeepers

Early Connection
Create **early, upstream connection** before bids or RFPs are released

Reduce Confusion
Reduce confusion and repetitive follow-up for staff

Strengthen Pipeline
Strengthen the local vendor pipeline without changing procurement rules

The focus is clarity and early connection, not transactions.



Who Participates and What Businesses Gain

Buyers

- City departments
- Public agencies
- Anchor institutions
- Nonprofits and major employers

Suppliers

- Micro Local Business Enterprises (MLBEs)
- Small and emerging businesses
- Minority-, women-, and locally owned firms
- Established vendors seeking new entry points

What Businesses Gain

Clarity on Engagement

A clear understanding of how to engage buyers and navigate procurement processes.

Insight into Needs

Awareness of upcoming or recurring needs from various organizations.

Readiness Guidance

Guidance on registration, qualification requirements, and readiness assessments.

Direct Contacts

Named points of contact for ongoing communication and follow -up.

Why Participation Matters and What It Requires

Connect Local GR only works if buyers show up.

Participation:

- Improves vendor readiness before opportunities go live
- Reduces staff time spent answering repetitive questions
- Expands and diversifies vendor pools
- Strengthens local supply chains without changing rules

Coordination, materials, and logistics are supported centrally.

Participating organizations are asked to:

- Staff one table for the event
- Share what they typically purchase and how vendors engage their process
- Provide general timelines and thresholds
- Answer practical, process-focused questions

What We're Asking From Participating Organizations

To participate in Connect Local GR, organizations commit to:

1

Assign the Right Staff

Staff who understand purchasing or contracting processes and can explain how vendors engage and what happens next.

2

Come Prepared With Practical Information

What you typically purchase, how vendors register or prequalify, and general timelines or key steps.

3

Engage Transparently

Set clear, realistic expectations and be clear about what can and cannot be influenced.

4

Align and Follow Through

Ensure consistent internal messaging, staff one table, and support appropriate follow -up.

This ensures the event functions as a pipeline -building and procurement efficiency tool.



Recognizing Impact and Creating a Distinct Experience

Connect Local GR is not only about access—it is also an opportunity to **recognize success, reinforce effective practices, and showcase real outcomes** .

Proposed Recognition Awards

- Rising MLBE Award
- MLBE Leadership Award
- Community Impact Department Award

Showcasing Real Outcomes

Short video excerpts featuring MLBE businesses sharing real outcomes and lessons from participation in the **EBO Program and MLBE Certification**.

Creating a Distinct Event Experience

- Feature **local food and beverage businesses** for lunch and product sampling
- Celebrate the City's history and small businesses while highlighting the future of local entrepreneurship
- Design the event to feel **modern, welcoming, and relationship -driven**
 - Includes a **DJ and energetic programming** to avoid a traditional corporate feel

What Success Looks Like

Near term

- *Increased awareness and readiness among local businesses*
- *Clearer, more consistent communication between buyers and suppliers*
- *Stronger early-stage relationships between departments, anchor institutions, and vendors*

Looking ahead

- *Position Connect Local GR as an annual convening*
- *Align intentionally with SBDC and Grand Rapids Chamber Small Business Week efforts*
- *Create predictable, recurring opportunities for engagement year over year*

Longer term

- *Broader, more competitive vendor pools*
- *Increased local and small-business participation in procurement*
- *Stronger alignment across departments and partner organizations*
- *A more resilient local economy supported by local businesses*

How We Will Measure Success (Initial Metrics)

To ensure accountability and continuous improvement, we will track a focused set of **practical, achievable indicators** following the event.

Participation & Reach

- Number of participating City departments and anchor institutions
- Number of local businesses in attendance
- Representation of certified MLBEs and small businesses

Engagement & Clarity

- Post-event survey feedback from businesses on clarity of procurement pathways and next steps
- Survey feedback from departments and partners on the usefulness of conversations and materials
- Key themes from survey responses used to refine future events

Pipeline Indicators

- Changes in vendor registrations, prequalification submissions, or inquiries following the event
- Increased participation of local and MLBE vendors in future bids or procurement opportunities
- Observed improvements in vendor readiness noted by departments and partners

These measures rely on existing systems and light-touch surveys, without adding reporting burden or changing procurement rules.

Moving Forward

Next Steps and Closing

What Happens Next

- Confirm which departments and partner organizations will participate
- Identify the right staff to represent each table
- Align on messaging and materials so businesses hear consistent information
- Finalize logistics and outreach

The Office of Equity & Engagement will coordinate and support these steps.

Why This Matters

Connect Local GR is about:

- Making it easier to understand how to do business with the City and our partners
- Creating clearer, earlier connections between buyers and local businesses
- Being more intentional about how local dollars circulate in our community

Our Ask

Show up, be clear, and help build a stronger local vendor ecosystem — together.



Questions?

We're ready to discuss how Connect Local GR can benefit our local business and our community.

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