This *how-to* guide provides you with an overview of the organizations you may need to work with and the tools you need to have. Please review this packet prior to attending your appointment.

Please note that all of the information in this packet are suggestions to help you get started as easily as possible. Of course, it is up to you, to utilize as much of the information as you choose. We look forward to working with you to make your business or redevelopment project successful.
How can you best utilize the services of the BUSINESSFirst team?

- Sign up for a 30 minute appointment with the team at: [http://businessfirst.eventbrite.com](http://businessfirst.eventbrite.com). The team accepts appointments on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month from 2:30pm – 4:30pm.

- Complete the survey to help us better prepare for your appointment. [http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BIZFirst](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BIZFirst) (this must be done one week prior to your appointment)

- Review this [how-to guide](#) prior to your meeting.

- If you have a preliminary business plan, budget, or layout drawing for your project created already, submit prior to your meeting or bring them with you. [submit@businessfirst.support](mailto:submit@businessfirst.support)

- Do not sign a lease, purchase agreement or make a down payment prior to your appointment.

- If you have never owned a business before, we recommend you meet with the experts at the IL Small Business Development Center prior to your meeting with our team. Most services are free.
Let’s start with the partners you may need to work with and what they do.

**City of Rockford Community & Economic Development**  
779-348-7162  
businessfirst@rockfordil.gov  
425 East State Street, Rockford, IL, 61104  

**City of Rockford Construction & Development Services**  
779-348-7158  
businessfirst@rockfordil.gov  
425 East State Street, Rockford, IL, 61104  

**City of Rockford Land Use & Zoning**  
779-348-7158  
businessfirst@rockfordil.gov  
425 East State Street, Rockford, IL, 61104  

**Rock River Water Reclamation District**  
815-387-7660  
businessfirst@rrwrd.dst.il.us  
3501 Kishwaukee Street, Rockford, IL, 61109  
http://www.rrwrd.dst.il.us/?page_id=1888

**IL Small Business Development Center**  
815-921-2081  
businessfirst@rockvalleycollege.edu  
EIGERlab, 605 S Fulton Ave, Rockford, IL 61103  
http://www.rockvalleycollege.edu/business/sbdc/index.cfm
Let’s start with the partners you may need to work with and what they do.

**Winnebago County Building Department**
815-319-4350  
businessfirst@wincoil.us  
404 Elm Street, Rockford, IL, 61101  
[http://www.wincoil.us/departments/building](http://www.wincoil.us/departments/building)

**Winnebago County Zoning Department**
815-319-4350  
businessfirst@wincoil.us  
404 Elm Street, Rockford, IL, 61101  

**Winnebago County Clerk’s Office**
815-319-4250  
businessfirst@wincoil.us  
404 Elm Street, Rockford, IL, 61101  
[http://www.winnebagocountyclerk.com](http://www.winnebagocountyclerk.com)

**Winnebago County Health Department**
815-720-4100  
businessfirst@wchd.org  
401 Division Street, Rockford, IL, 61110  

**WINGIS**
Property Information (taxes, assessment, economic development tools, elected officials)
There are Business District Associations (BDA) in many of our corridors.

**Auburn Street Business District Association**  
815-963-7678  
Bill Hoople

**Miracle Mile Rockford**  
815-975-0466  
info@miraclemilerockford.com

1643 N Alpine Rd, Suite 104, PBM 129, Rockford, IL 61107 (this is mailing address – there is no physical office)  
http://www.miraclemilerockford.com

Geography: E State Street from Swedish American Hospital to Rockford College

**Midtown Association**  
815-997-5888  
secretary@midtowndistrict.com

218 7th St, Rockford, IL 61104  
http://midtowndistrict.com

Geography: 7th Street and surrounding area

**River District Association**  
779-207-0110  
info@riverdistrict.com

102 North Main St, Rockford, IL, 61101  
http://www.riverdistrict.com

Geography: Downtown

**Southwest Ideas for Today and Tomorrow (SWIFTT)**  
815-965-3606  
jdbove106@aol.com

1005 S Main St., PO Box 966, Rockford, IL, 61105  
http://www.facebook.org/rockfordswiftt

Geography: South Main Street and surrounding area

**Additional BDAS**  
779-348-7162  
businessfirst@rockfordil.gov

There are additional BDA’s on Broadway, 11th Street, and Auburn. Please contact City of Rockford Community & Economic Development for more information.
• Community and Economic Development will help you with determining what, if any, financial incentives are available for the property you are considering and if you need a business license or special use permit, for properties within the City of Rockford

• Construction and Development Services will review your construction drawings (with Public Works and the Fire Department) to determine what is required within City code, what permits will be required and if your location is zoned properly for your use. They can also let you know if there are any documented outstanding violations on the property.
If your business has any affect on the sanitary sewer system, the Rock River Water Reclamation District engineers will need to review your mechanics to ensure they meet the needs of your business and the public sanitary sewer systems.

The IL Small Business Development Center will assist you in creating a business plan so that you fully understand the costs of start up and operations to sustain your business. They offer classes as well as individual counseling.
• **County Clerk** will help you if you need a business and/or liquor license and help you register if you do.

• **Zoning Department** will review your site choice and determine if it is zoned properly for your use. They can help you with determining what, if any, financial incentives are available for the property you are considering, for locations outside of the City of Rockford.

• **Building Department** will review your construction drawings to determine what is required within County code and what permits will be required.
Environmental Health Services will review your food service plans to ensure that all health sanitation requirements are accounted for.

*Environmental Health Services* will also review your site to ensure that all septic and well facilities serve the needs of your business.
Location is everything!

- Determine the exact location of your property that you are considering to determine if you will be working with the City or County building department.

- Work with the Small Business Development Center to review demographics and traffic count in the area to know if the location is a profitable location good fit for your business.

- There are business district associations (BDA)’s operating within most of the commercial corridors of the City of Rockford. We recommend that you contact them if you are opening a business within their district. Their contact info can be found on page 5. Also, a map showing the geography of each district can be found at [http://www.businessfirst.support.com](http://www.businessfirst.support.com).
Use

• You need to know what the property was previously used for and exactly what you want to use it for next. Properties are zoned for very specific uses. If your new use is drastically different and not allowed within assigned zoning, you will need to go through a process with the Zoning Board of Appeals to request a change.

• If you intend to open any business which involves serving food or beverages you will need to work with the Rock River Water Reclamation District and the Winnebago County Health Department.

• If you intend to open a business that serves or sells wine, beer, liquor or tobacco you will have to apply through the Liquor and Tobacco Advisory Board (LTAB – City of Rockford) or Liquor Commission (Winnebago County). You must also contact your Alderman and County Board member to determine if they will support a liquor license at that location.

• If your new use requires construction of any sort, we highly recommend you hire a licensed design professional, such as an architect, and a professional general contractor.
The Potential Benefits of Ownership

- If you plan to purchase your property, speak with the City and County Economic Development Directors to determine if you may be eligible for incentives such as:
  - Tax Increment Financing District (TIF)
  - Historical Tax Credits
  - Enterprise Zone
  - Rivers Edge
- Please do not purchase or lease a property until you have gone through the entire process of BUSINESSFirst and fully understand the costs you are about to incur.

Utilities & Mechanicals

- If your new use requires construction of any sort, we highly recommend you hire a licensed design professional, such as an architect and a professional general contractor.
- You will need them to review gas, water, electrical, HVAC, sewer, fire and fiber access for your use as well as related costs.
- Professionals can assist you in working with the local utilities and to determine what work will need to be done to improve your property.
- They will also produce the drawings and plans you will need for every step for construction permits, special use permits, liquor, tobacco and zoning hearings.
Special Use Permits

- Certain property “uses” require the application for a special use permit. These may include: sale of tobacco, sale of liquor, tattoo services, title loan stores, cash stores, gaming, auto related uses and potential others depending on location. Special use permits are different than business licenses.

Liquor & Tobacco

- If your new use is a restaurant, bar, nightclub, or includes sale of tobacco, you will need to present your business case to either the Liquor Commission (Winnebago County) or the Liquor and Tobacco Advisory Board (LTAB – City of Rockford). The staff will assist you through this process. You will need to present: security plans, construction plans, parking plans, hours of operation, music arrangements, gaming requests, cover charge, and business plan.
- The Commission or LTAB will make a recommendation which is then reviewed by the appropriate Committee. The committee may recommend to support or deny the Commission or LTAB recommendation to the full Council or Board. The full Council or Board will then vote. This process can take up to 3 months.
- There are several different liquor licenses depending on your use. The legal and zoning staff will provide you with this information.
- We highly recommend that you are completely confident that you are going to obtain a liquor permit prior to signing a lease, purchase agreement or making a down payment.
**Costs/Expenses**

- There are costs all along the way of opening a new business, including: licenses, professional services (architect, general contractor, attorney, accountant, insurance), permits, and construction.
- Please take your time in working with all of the BUSINESSFirst team as well as the Small Business Development Center to fully understand the costs you are about to incur before moving forward.

**Timeline**

- It is the intent of every member of the BUSINESSFirst team to assist you through the process of redeveloping an existing property or opening a new business in an existing property in the most efficient process possible.
- As you go through your first appointment, they will help you develop a timeline so that you have realistic expectations of when you will see that first customer walk through your door!
- It is best to take your time, work with professionals and make educated decisions up front instead of having to spend money fixing mistakes.
Research

• Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) – you can submit FOIA requests to the City, County, Reclamation District and Health Department to learn about any issues that may be present with the property you are considering.

Submittals

• Prior to attending your first BUSINESSFirst appointment, please ...
  • If you have a preliminary business plan, budget, or layout drawing for your project created already, submit (submit@businessfirst.support) prior to your meeting or bring them with you.
  • Complete the survey at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BIZFirst . This must be done one week prior to your appointment so that our team may be prepared to discuss your property.

• If you choose to proceed with redeveloping your property or opening a new business, there will be more plan submittals required. Depending on whether your property is in the City or County you must submit to the appropriate email. All emails can be found on page 3 and 4 of this document.
Thank You to Our Partners

Rockford Community Partners is proud to thank the following partners for participating in the creation of BUSINESSFirst and working together to ensure the most efficient and effective process to assist in the redevelopment of existing properties and opening a new business in an existing property.

1. Alderman Joe Chiarelli & Tim Durkee
2. Bath & Body Fusion
3. City of Peoria
4. City of Rockford
5. CMM & Associates
6. Contemporary Hammer Works
7. Dickerson Nieman
8. First Midwest Group
9. Gary Anderson & Associates
10. Larson & Darby Group
11. Midtown Association
12. Miracle Mile Rockford
14. River District Association
15. Rock River Development Partnership
16. Rock River Water Reclamation District
17. Rockford Area Association of Realtors
18. Rural on Tap
19. IL Small Business Development Center
20. Winnebago County
21. Winnebago County Clerk
22. Winnebago County Health Department