



TO:

Mr. Eric Smith

Director, Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Economic Development Administration

U.S. Department of Commerce

March 16, 2023

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We are writing in response to the Economic Development Administration's Request for Information on Implementation of the Regional Technology and Innovation Hub (RTIH) Program.

The African American Mayors Association (AAMA) is the only organization exclusively representing African-American mayors in the United States. AAMA exists to empower local leaders for the benefit of their citizens. The role of the African American Mayors Association includes taking positions on public policies that impact the vitality and sustainability of cities; providing mayors with leadership and management tools; and creating a forum for member mayors to share best practices related to municipal management.

From representing four out of five of the most populous cities in the country as well as small, rural communities, to having a presence within all six regions of the Economic Development Administration (EDA), AAMA's footprint extends far and wide with nearly 100 active member-mayors.

Below represents AAMA's views and recommendations with respect to characteristics and design of RTIH, as well as funding, support, and administration of the program.

CHARACTERISTICS AND DESIGN

RTIH is a historic investment that can potentially transform regional innovation ecosystems across the country. This would be of great benefit to AAMA communities that are smaller, more rural, or that have not seen the sort of growth experienced elsewhere as a result of previous technology booms.



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As such, AAMA's member-mayors are energized by this program and are invested in ensuring that it is implemented equitably so that communities of color, HBCUs, and communities outside of metropolitan areas with mature technology ecosystems receive the benefits that Congress intended.

This program is being implemented at a time when the Minority Business Development Agency has new authority to ensure that any funding for regional technology and innovation hubs incorporate Minority Business Enterprises and entrepreneurs of color.

AAMA would like to see that scoring categories within a forthcoming Notice of Funding Opportunity reward applications that benefit:

- Smaller communities;
- Rural communities;
- Communities of color;
- Communities with an HBCU or MSI;
- Communities with a high density of HBCU or MSI graduates; and
- Minority Business Enterprises and entrepreneurs of color.

Further, it is common that AAMA member-mayors represent blue cities in red states. Given that some Governors may pass on leading in seeking these funds—or even playing a secondary role within a consortium—AAMA would like to ensure that the EDA does not negatively view any applications with such a dynamic and that AAMA cities still qualify without state support.

A few examples of AAMA cities that have strong tech ecosystems are Kansas City (MO), Baltimore (MD), and Durham (NC). Kansas City, which installed the first Google Fiber Internet service in 2011, serves as the home base for a growing number of tech companies—with over 16,000 people working in information technology as of May 2021 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Baltimore, over 65,000 people work in computer and mathematical occupations as of 2021 with careers as software developers, computer systems analysts, computer user





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support specialists, and information security analysts. Lastly, Durham has drawn tech talent since 1965 when IBM moved to the city and—as of 2021—over 21,000 people in the city work in the computer and mathematical jobs.

FUNDING, SUPPORT & ADMINISTRATION

While transformative, RTIH is one federal program. As such, AAMA would like to see a scoring category within a forthcoming Notice of Funding Opportunity that prioritizes applications that exhibit how success in being designated a tech hub would align with a region’s efforts to seek funding from other federal programs.

By its nature, carrying out implementation of a region’s vision for a technology and innovation hub will take a significant amount of time. RTIH is an investment in the future that has downstream effects for a region’s economy, workforce, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, etc. Taking into account that it is the intent for successful applications to bring together a coalition of stakeholders, it is important that the federal government’s expectation by which to evaluate the various impacts of hubs are over a longer time horizon (e.g. ten years).

As it relates to engaging communities, that is something that should begin—and not end—in the planning phase. As tech hub visions are implemented, it is important that the EDA requires successful consortiums to regularly seek input from the public, especially from underserved communities.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this transformational program. AAMA and its member-mayors stand ready as partners to ensure this historic investment in technology and innovation development across the country is implemented in an equitable manner so that it has its desired impact.

Frank Scott, Jr.
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Co-Chair, Task Force on Wealth Creation

Rachel Proctor
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