



Elected officials, economic developers, and entrepreneurs celebrate the MEBI's partnership with Startup Space with a balloon release. (Photo courtesy Paul Ellis)

## Metro East Incubator hits its stride

Incorporated in April 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, the Metro East Business Incubator has developed a new platform, new programs and staffing to successfully serve startups and emerging enterprises. As the first-of-its-kind support agency for this part of the region, the MEBI also strives to field “best in class” services.

In August 2021 the MEBI hosted a public event at Soucial Kitchen in Swansea, one of the agency’s partners, to celebrate partnership with Startup Space, a national incubation platform. MEBI staff and its working board have since been using functionality built into the Startup Space platform to organize the incubator’s client list, then to track and monitor mentoring and business advising.

Startup Space has also allowed the MEBI to expand its resources beyond the immediate area to provide access to business advising, events, referrals, training and other resources nationwide.

Earlier this year, the MEBI was designated as a “spoke” in the Community Navigator Program for which the Small Business Development Center at Southern Illinois Univ. Edwardsville (SIUE) serves as hub. Since then, the MEBI has partnered with other Navigators to co-sponsor business advising and events both online and in person.

Over the same period, the MEBI tapped members of its Advisory Council to designate its first cadre of mentors. Armed with functionality through the Startup Space platform and training provided by the Economic Impact Catalyst staff (the enterprise behind the platform), these seasoned business owners began offering encouragement, support and business advising to MEBI clients.

Kevin Riggs was hired in April as the Executive Director for the MEBI. A business leader with links to the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois and other networks, Riggs will help expand the MEBI’s breadth and depth of resources.

The MEBI is funded through annual appropriation from the State of Illinois, as well as from contributions from Illinois American Water, Town & County Bank, and other sources.

## 2022 YEAR IN REVIEW

### Retail is back (it never really left) in Fairview Heights

With its flagship super regional mall and 3.5 million square feet of retail space overall, Fairview Heights is truly “the retail hub of Southern Illinois.” Although most of the city has been built out, its centers continue to outperform other locations in the Metro East and redevelopment of “second generation” retail uses is well underway.

Since Fairview Heights has no municipal property tax, city leaders rely most heavily upon sales tax to fund services. The pandemic-related slowdowns and shutdowns of the past few years, which quickly and sharply impacted retail sales, required imaginative action in response.

In late 2019, Fairview Heights approved a Strategic Economic Development Plan which confirmed the community’s positioning as a retail mecca and recommended closer attention to sales per square foot. In cooperation with its vendor, The FOURCE, Fairview Heights kicked off the “All In” campaign, an innovative digital initiative deploying “state of the art” social media, including a shopping app, to help entice visitors from across Southern Illinois to eat, play, shop and stay locally.

When COVID hit in March of the following year, the city was able to pivot the campaign so as to support survival of local businesses. Survive they did and, in many cases, new tools and participation in the campaign allowed merchants to rack up record sales.

Today, a retail recovery is well underway, led by St. Clair Square. With its parent company, CBL Properties, Inc. emerging from the pandemic and financial reorganization, the mall is now enjoying record customer traffic. In collaboration with the city, the mall is completing exterior and public space improvements to the Shoppes at St. Clair, including expanded provision for outdoor dining.

Perhaps most significantly, the mall and city leaders are negotiating with potential tenants to fill the big box formerly occupied by Sears and are guardedly optimistic about success in 2023.

Another significant development this past year has been creation of a new arts district in partnership with ArtVillage, Inc. This association of artists and investors has assembled properties and developed a sculpture park, an artist-in-residency program, and other activities. ArtVillage has leased a vacant parcel at Bunkum Rd. and Lincoln Trail from Fairview Heights which will be developed in 2023 into a more complete sculpture park.

While the mall is the city’s marquee location, great things are happening along Lincoln Trail, the community’s historical commercial center but one under decline in past decades. A new cadre of business and property owners is beginning to renew this corridor with help from the city.

Emblematic of these retail pioneers is TC’s Treats, a sandwich and ice cream shop moving to Lincoln Trail from O’Fallon. Owners William and Malaika Chavous have purchased and plan to renovate a former TitleMax location early next year with financial assistance from the city.



## WE'RE OPEN.

So you can be.

The Metro East now has a one-stop center for starting and growing a small business.



## FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS

### CITY OF POSSIBILITIES

FAIRVIEWHEIGHTSIL.COM



## SHOP | EAT | PLAY | LIVE



### DOWNLOAD OUR APP

Get exclusive offers and earn rewards for doing your favorite things in Fairview Heights.







### The Metro East Business Incubator offers a variety of services to entrepreneurs, including:

- Business Advising**  
One-on-one sessions with a more experienced entrepreneur oriented towards achievement of a specific goal(s)
- Business Plan Creation/Review**  
The fundamental step in creating a business—assistance in crafting, enhancing and/or updating the document
- Events**  
Sessions led by subject experts for multiple participants—may be in person or virtual
- Mentoring**  
One-on-one sessions with a seasoned entrepreneur for general encouragement and guidance
- Referrals**  
Connections to resources (agencies, people, programs) that can meet the needs of client entrepreneurs
- Training**  
Subject focused education provided by international, national, regional, and/or local experts

At present, all services are provided to clients **free of cost to them**.  
Call the MEBI's Executive Director, Kevin Riggs, at **(314) 337-4317**  
Visit us on the web: **themebi.org**  
Visit the MEBI hub on Startup Space: **startupspace.app**



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