Program Highlights

Rural Focus – Applications are open to aspiring entrepreneurs in the rural communities of Johnston County, NC. The Rural Spark Program will focus in the rural areas of Johnston County.

Training & Mentorship – Participants complete the REAL Entrepreneurship Pitch It! program—an eight-session, in-person, multi-instructor-led course designed to strengthen business planning and presentation skills.

New Business Focus – Applicants may have prior business experience, but their pitch must represent a new venture that is not established prior to the conclusion of the first night of class.

Professional Pitch Experience – Finalists present their ideas during Pitch Day in January 2027, location and date to be determined.

Funding & Recognition – Compete for up grant awards of $2500 for first place, $1500 for second place, and $1000 for third place.

Community Impact – Participants gain county-wide exposure, expert feedback, and valuable connections with peers, mentors, and partners who can help their ideas grow.

How It Works

Step 1: Apply Online

Entrepreneurs in eligible communities are invited to apply between **Aug 1 and Sept 15, 2026**.

Applications are open to individuals with a new business concept that has not been formally established prior to the conclusion of the first night of class on **September 28, 2026**.

Applicants must:

- complete an online application form;
- Register as a Small Business Center counseling client
- Commit to attending all eight training sessions
- Agree to the terms and conditions of the program

Step 2: Receive Your Invitation

After the application deadline and all applications have been reviewed, selected entrepreneurs will receive their invitation by email. Selected participants will be notified by email no later than September 17th.
Confirmation of participation is required by September 22. If we do not receive confirmation, your seat will be offered to the next person on the waitlist.

Step 3: Complete the REAL Entrepreneurship Pitch It! Program

Accepted contestants will participate in an eight session, in person, multi-instructor-led program from September 28 – November 23, 2026.

**To remain eligible, participants may not miss more than two classes and must participate in all required in-person activities and events.*

Step 4: Pitch Day - Live (Location to be determined)

Contestants present their pitches before local judges who will determine winners of start-up funding for their business launch.

Independent scores are confidential. Attendance in person is mandatory; no make-up day will be provided.

Step 5: Continue the Journey

All participants gain lasting benefits and remain part of the statewide SBCN community.

**Participants must complete the Small Business Center Network Annual File Update/Impact Survey for no less than three years following participation in the program.*

Eligibility Checklist

- Have a new for-profit business concept not formally established before September 28, 2026.
- Reside in and plan to start a business in an eligible rural area of Johnston County NC, and apply through the SBCN website (Aug 1 – Sept 15, 2026).
- Be 18 years of age or older.

Note: Incomplete applications will not be considered for review.

Eligibility Restrictions

- Employees of the North Carolina Small Business Center Network (SBCN)
- Immediate family members of SBCN employees- defined as anyone residing in the same household of an SBC employee
- Employees of Truist and their immediate family members.
- Judges and their immediate family members•

Terms and Conditions

Please review the following terms carefully before submitting your application. By submitting an application for the Rural Spark Program presented by the Truist Foundation, applicants agree to the following terms and conditions:

1. **Applicant Responsibility** – Any expenses incurred in applying or participating are the applicant's responsibility.
2. **Taxes and Payments** – Winners are responsible for all taxes. Coordinators are not responsible for tax payments.
3. **Non-Employment** – Participation does not constitute employment or entitle participants to wages.
4. **Media Consent** – Applicants grant the SBCN, Johnston Community College, Truist Bank, and affiliates rights to use names, likenesses, and materials for promotional purposes.
5. **Information Sharing** – Applicants consent to sharing of application and participation details among SBCN, Truist Bank, Johnston Community College, and affiliated agents or partners for administration and publicity.
6. **Copyright** – Applicants grant JCC SBC all rights to recordings, photos, and materials produced in connection with the competition.
7. **Release and Indemnification** – Applicants release and hold harmless all affiliated entities from any and all claims or liabilities arising out of participation.
8. **Removal** – The program reserves the right to remove a contestant from the program at any time for any reason.

By submitting an application, applicants acknowledge that they have read, understood, and agree to these terms and conditions.