

The Starting Block
West Michigan's Regional Kitchen Incubator
Growing Entrepreneurs in Food Systems and Natural Resources

The Starting Block's mission and vision:

To incubate and support the entrepreneurial spirit, in the food systems and natural resources sector, by providing licensed commercial kitchen facilities, entrepreneurial education and peer-to-peer networking to new and expanding businesses in the multi-county, West Central Michigan region and beyond. The Starting Block will be the premier regional resource for growing any new idea into a profitable, local and wealth-creating business.

The Starting Block's history:

The idea for a kitchen incubator to support agricultural product innovation came about in 2002 when a group of representatives from the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA), the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS), and the Michigan State University (MSU) Product Center partnered to advance value-added agriculture in Michigan. This group became a steering committee to stimulate value-added product agriculture in Michigan, with one of their main initiatives to establish regional kitchen incubators.

The Starting Block was initiated under a \$238,700 Grant from USDA, Rural Development, and a \$40,000 Planning Grant from the MEDC. The USDA RBEG grantee on our project was Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS) in Lansing. They commissioned the Market and Feasibility Study, required under the grant, which was completed in 2004 by the University of Michigan EDA University Center for Economic Diversification. The study has two main parts: one part is survey information on potential clients and service providers that is very specific to our geographic region, and the other part is "nuts-and-bolts" information on how to establish and operate a shared-use commercial kitchen incubator. This part is available for purchase online at <http://www.nxlevelorder.com> Click on 'Products,' then 'Digital Downloads' and 'Commercial Kitchen PDF.' It is an excellent resource for starting up a commercial shared kitchen.

In June 2005, The Starting Block, Inc. was registered as a Non-profit Michigan corporation. In August 2005, a lease/with option to purchase agreement was signed for the building, a 10,900 sq. ft. facility, with approximately half consisting of individual offices for rent and conference/classrooms, and half shared-use commercial kitchen of about 2,500 square feet, a smaller catering kitchen of about 600 square feet, and warehouse/storage space.

In October 2005, an application for 501(c)(3) status was filed with the IRS, and a Kitchen Manager and Office Manager were hired. In November 2005, a low-cost, "turn-key" individual office space rental became available to local beginning entrepreneurs, and our first entrepreneurial seminar was offered by Michigan State University. In October 2006, our commercial shared-use kitchen was licensed by the MDA, and our 501(c)(3) tax exempt status was determined by the IRS.

Our USDA inspected facility for meat production, 1,280 square feet, was completed in 2014 thanks to a MEDC grant. In 2015, a MDARD grant allowed the purchase of a vat pasteurizer for making dairy products and an automated fill line for filling bottled products.

We offer a full day "replication" seminar, to walk a group through everything we've learned, and how we're doing things now. Our staff visited ACEnet's Kitchen Incubator in Athens Ohio, for this same training. We are offering a similar session for \$780 at The Starting Block.

Two short videos of The Starting Block are available to view online on YouTube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ5_iQqym3E

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2GgTGNP4Qo>