



eNewsletter

Welcome to the *Maryland Minority Research and Development Initiative (MMRDI) eNewsletter* sent to you courtesy of TEDCO and its partners in this Initiative. The program is winding down, but the MMRDI partners will continue to provide you with the resources you need to continue your pursuit of SBIR/STTR funding. You can review the guidance we've provided thus far by perusing our [archive](#) of past newsletters. Also, look to next month's final issue for a resource guide on how to find SBIR/STTR assistance for yourself.

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I. Confessions of a SBIR Solicitation Topic Author

This Fall, MMRDI got an insiders' perspective on how an SBIR solicitation is developed by talking with an SBIR/STTR program manager who oversees the topic recommendations of the agency's scientists and engineers. MMRDI staff often hear companies express concern that their proposals are rejected because SBIR solicitations are drafted by topic authors who already have an awardee in mind. Although all of the participating SBIR agencies address the solicitation process differently, the Program Manager of the National Institute of Standards and Technology

(NIST) stressed that preemptive activity in the generation of solicitations is definitely not part of the process. NIST SBIR Program Manager Clara Asmail and MMRDI Program Manager Jacqueline Du Bois get to the core of the solicitation issue in their interview.

MMRDI: Program Manager Asmail, thank you for joining us today. To get right to the point, could you please tell us about how the Department of Commerce arrives at the topics that make their way into a particular round of SBIR solicitation topics?

Asmail: Thank you for having me. As you well know, each SBIR agency has its own solicitation process. I can only speak to NIST's and to some extent to NOAA's (National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration's) procedures, since both fall within the authority of the Department of Commerce. That aside, it would have been simpler to answer this question two years ago when we only had one type of NIST SBIR subtopic. We now refer to subtopics that fall under the original guidelines as "R" or Regular topics. Our new topic categories are referred to as "SBIR-TT" topics.

MMRDI: OK, so what are "R" subtopics?

Asmail: "R" subtopics describe research areas that are high priority for NIST Laboratories' missions. These topics support industrially-relevant measurement science, standards, and technology. That is, during the course of their work, NIST researchers may recognize the need for a device, material, or algorithm that is not available off the shelf anywhere. The submission of an "R" subtopic in the annual SBIR solicitation is a way to encourage technology-based small businesses to both bring their innovation capability to the needs of the researchers, as well as present a case for a particular innovation's market opportunity beyond the NIST Labs.

MMRDI: What might serve as grounds for the rejection for a proposal submitted in response to a regular subtopic?

Asmail: "R" subtopics typically describe the end-point functionality required by the NIST research program, and as such give specifications that are needed to integrate the desired SBIR deliverable into the NIST Laboratory setting. The specifications can at times be very detailed, for example if a detector is being solicited, then the dark count, wavelength range, and sensitivity will be provided. It is understood that the solicited research will be a significant improvement on the current state-of-the-art available in the market. We expect it to be a challenge to build the specified deliverable. That's the spirit of "Innovative Research." Companies that submit proposals that offer only incremental changes to an existing fix or propose their own benchmarks of operability will not get funded. We are looking for innovative ideas with a reasonable chance of success. There is risk involved for both NIST and the proposing company: indeed the project may fail (the result does not meet spec.). Our reviewers evaluate proposals with this in mind. But, there is no penalty for failure of a good idea -- other than the fact that the hope of a new product that can be sold for profit is dashed.

Asmail, con't: We are often faced with a couple of proposals that present equally promising and novel approaches. But, we rarely make more than one award for a given subtopic 1) because of limited available funds and 2) more importantly, because of the need to avoid any potential conflicts with the confidentiality of proprietary information. In cases where we have multiple proposals of merit, we look for the one that brings more resources to bear on the project and weigh the letters of support. All other conditions being equal, we want to reward the team that is the most qualified to do the work.

MMRDI: Now what can you tell me about the new “SBIR-TT” subtopics?

Asmail: In the last two years, the NIST SBIR Program has deployed a new approach to the SBIR Program by including research topics in the annual solicitation that are directed towards advancing work that was begun at the NIST Labs. In this new SBIR-TT approach, NIST researchers identify work -- that they have published or patented -- which has potential commercial value but still requires further research. For the work to be done under the SBIR award, a company’s proposal must specify the innovative research that is needed in order to push the NIST background technology closer to the marketplace.

The new “TT” subtopics include: a description of the background technology with appropriate references for more details; the research gap that prevent it from direct market adoption with all the details as would be in the “R” subtopics; and whatever NIST resources would be made available to potential proposers to support their work. This could include consultation time with the NIST researcher(s), materials, equipment, drawings, etc. It is usually the case that the NIST researchers will not engage in that research themselves because the federal government will not compete with private industry.

MMRDI: So from what you’ve said NIST’s SBIR solicitation topics are generated on the basis of the immediate and forecasted needs of current NIST research endeavors. Or, they derive from a need to move NIST technologies into the market place via technology transfer through a for-profit small business. The SBIR-TT option sounds like an incredible opportunity for a small business that has the capacity to improve the functionality of a NIST innovation, but may not have its own intellectual property. I’m sure the SBIR-TT subtopics require a lot of back and forth communication between the companies and the topic author. What happens during the black-out period when companies are prohibited from contacting the topic authors?

Asmail: Only NOAA has a black-out period of no communication with topic authors. NIST has a brown-out since communication is allowed through the website. We institute the communication constraints to keep the competition open and fair. If one company has the opportunity to gain special insight into what the federal agency is seeking, its motivation, or other information that is not otherwise public, they would have an unfair advantage.

MMRDI: So the outages are about maintaining fair competition rather than relieving topic authors from extraneous last minute calls?

Asmail: [Laughing]. I don't think that there would ever be a sense of "relief" since the traffic is never that large to be onerous for any given subtopic or subtopic author. Again, the reason for NIST and NOAA to restrict communication is to maintain fair and honest competition. NOAA doesn't have the IT tools to allow --or the resources to build-- a web-based discussion forum, thus their more stringent approach.

MMRDI: One final question... It sounds as though the drafting of solicitation topics to either spin out existing technologies, or meet the current needs of NIST researchers in the lab could cause companies to produce technologies or services available for insertion too long after they are actually needed. This would especially be true if companies follow the Phase I to Phase II to Phase III approach. Do you think that NIST may begin placing more of an emphasis on forecasting its future needs given growing concerns about our Nation's technological competitiveness in the global environment?

Asmail: The research work done at NIST and the needs which are solicited through the SBIR Program are ahead of the commercial insertion curve. For the most part, the 2-4 years that an SBIR project would take to reach maturation would generally align with market needs. It's the strategic planning of our research programs that inform the content of the research we solicit through the SBIR program.

MMRDI: Well, Ms. Asmail, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you about the intricacies of NIST's SBIR solicitation process.

Asmail: It was a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

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II. Tip of the Month – Know Your Start Date

Presenting your research aims and identifying appropriate benchmarks of success aren't the only things you need to pay attention to as you draft your SBIR and STTR proposals. You also need to consider an official start date for your work based on the assumption that you will win an award. Your official start date will rarely be the date of your award announcement. Rather, it should be first day you expect your collaborative partners, researchers, and laboratory equipment to be ready and available to begin work.

Your start date should not be a guess. It should be based on conversations with both your principle investigator and your federal contracting officer about the project's start-up needs and the agency's contracting requirements. Make sure that you factor in the amount of time required to order and receive supplies as well as finalize contracts with all of the individuals involved. Knowing your official start date is important is because you will want to limit the amount of time preparatory actions cut into your tight project timelines.

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III. *Pass it On!* Upcoming MMRDI Events and Related SBIR Information

- **Orientation to the SBIR ToolkitsSM**
Date: By appointment
Contact: Ralph Blakeney (MD Small Business Development Center)
Phone: (301) 403-2742 ext. 29
Email: rblakeney@mdsbdc.umd.edu
Cost: Free
- **“How to Win SBIR Funding”SM Workshop**
Date: December 8, 2009
Time: 8:30 AM – 5:30 PM
Location: Hampton Inn; 7027 Arundel Mills Circle
Hanover, MD 21076
Registration: <https://host.securelook.com/sec4Dir/orderform.html>
Syllabus: <http://sbir.us/course/MD91208.pdf>
Contact: John Davis (SBIR Resource Center[®])
Phone: (410) 315-8101
Email: sbir@sbir.us
RSVP: December 7, 2009
Cost: \$325 by November 24, 2009, \$375 afterwards
***** MMRDI companies will be underwritten by \$225.00, subject to verification *****
- **Government Cost Accounting and Budgeting Workshop**
Date: December 15, 2009
Time: 9:00 AM – 12:30 PM
Location: University of Maryland; 7100 Baltimore Avenue, Suite 402
College Park, MD 20740
Registration: <https://host.securelook.com/sec4Dir/orderform.html>
Syllabus: <http://sbir.us/course/MD91215.pdf>
Contact: Ralph Blakeney, 301-403-2740
or, John Davis, 410-315-8101
RSVP: December 14, 2009
Cost: \$195 until December 11, 2009, see <http://sbir.us> for fees after early deadline
***** MMRDI companies will be underwritten by \$95.00, subject to verification *****

MidAtlantic SBIR/STTR Conference
November 30, 2009 - December 2, 2009
Waterfront Place Hotel
Two Waterfront Place; Morgantown, WV 26501
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Contact: Wayne Barte
Registration URL: <http://www.midatlanticsbir.com/Index.aspx>
Cost: \$299-\$349

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IV. Open SBIR/STTR Solicitation

Department of Energy (SBIR and STTR)

Open: September 23, 2009

Close: November 20, 2009

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Open: October 14, 2009

Close: January 14, 2010

National Institute of Standards and Technology – Regular (SBIR)

Open: October 30, 2009

Close: January 22, 2010

National Institute of Standards and Technology – Tech Transfer (SBIR)

Open: October, 2009

Close: January 22, 2010

Department of Homeland Security (S&T Directorate)

Open: November 18, 2009

Close: January 4, 2010

National Science Foundation (SBIR)

Open: November 3, 2009

Close: December 3, 2009

Department of Health & Human Services (PHS/NIH - SBIR & STTR)

Open: since January 24, 2009

Close: December 7, 2009

Department of Defense (SBIR)

Open: December 8, 2009

Close: January 14, 2010

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The opening and closing dates are subject to change. Please contact Jacqueline Du Bois at 410-715-4176 or jdubois@marylandtedco.org for updated information.

NOTE: Should you choose to not receive this monthly eNewsletter, please send an email to jdubois@marylandtedco.org.

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