[Team Name] Robotics: A Fundraising Guide for FRC Teams

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A GEARCATS RESOURCE FOR FIRST TEAMS · Prepared by the GearCats, FIRST Robotics Competition Team #6500, Raleigh, NC · millbrookrobotics.com

How to use this guide: replace **[Team Name]** and **[School]** with your own. It's written from a North Carolina team's experience, but nearly all of it applies to any FRC team. Our companion guides go deeper on the setup steps: *Steps to 501(c)(3) Status*, *NC Tax Exemption and Sales-Tax Refunds*, *Registering on Benevity*, and the *Sponsor One-Pager Template*.

BOTTOM LINE

An FRC season is a small business. District registration alone runs about $6,000 or more, and a full program with build space, parts, tools and events can cost $30,000–$80,000 a year. Teams that fund themselves reliably do five things:

1. **Know their true cost per student, and lead with it.** Funders respond to "it costs $2,000 to put a student through a season; families pay $400" far more than to "please support our team."
2. **Build the plumbing before they ask.** That means a fiscal home that can accept tax-deductible gifts, a Benevity profile, a donor acknowledgment letter and a funder packet.
3. **Spread revenue across five or more kinds of source**, so losing one sponsor doesn't sink the season.
4. **Ask people, not inboxes.** Most corporate money reaches a team because an employee, parent or mentor inside the company asked for it.
5. **Steward what they win.** Thank fast, deliver every promised benefit, report results, and ask for the renewal before the sponsor sets next year's budget.

An example mix: an established team might raise about 60% of its revenue from donations (corporate, foundation and family), 20% from student fees, 10% from grants and 10% from fundraisers. Your mix will differ; what matters is that no single source dominates.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

Every ask starts from a budget the board has approved. Group it into a handful of categories a funder can take in at a glance:

Category	What it covers	Example share of budget
Facilities and space	Build-space rent, utilities, insurance, storage	30%
Competition	FIRST registration, district and championship events, off-season events	30%
Robot and build	Mechanical parts, electronics, tools, field elements	20%
Team and operations	Outreach materials, team apparel, food, printing, banking	10%
Contingency	Mid-season failures and surprises	5%

Category	What it covers	Example share of budget
Reserve contribution	Rebuilding the cash reserve to the board's target	5%

Compute the true cost per student. Divide program spending (leave out the reserve contribution) by last season's roster, and label it that way. For example, $60,000 of program spending ÷ 30 students is $2,000 per student. With a $400 fee, the team raises $1,600 for every student. That gap is the story you tell funders.

Set the fee first, then raise the difference. Decide what families can reasonably pay, then fundraise the rest, rather than dividing costs across families. Consider a single fee that isn't means-tested, so no family has to disclose its circumstances, with need-based scholarships underneath as a backstop.

Separate one-time from recurring costs. A year with a big tool purchase or a move will show a deficit. Explain it as a planned investment, or reviewers will read next year's budget as understated.

Plan your cash, not just your budget. Registration is due in the fall and parts orders start in January, but some grants and mentor grants paid through FIRST don't reach your account until spring. A reserve of several months' spending lets you front the season.

Price sales tax in, then claim it back if your state refunds it to nonprofits (North Carolina does; see our tax guide).

SET UP THE PLUMBING FIRST

Choose a fiscal home

Option	Good for	Limits
School or district account	Getting started fast; state grants that must flow through the district; using the school's tax status for purchases	District purchasing rules; slow reimbursements; many corporate matching programs exclude schools
Your own 501(c)(3)	Corporate matching, Benevity, foundations, sponsorship invoices in the team's name	Setup takes weeks to months; annual filings; needs a board of at least three
A fiscal sponsor (an existing local nonprofit or education foundation)	Accepting deductible gifts while your own 501(c)(3) is pending	Fees and approvals; the sponsor controls the money

Many teams run both: the school account for district money, a team nonprofit for everything else. Write down which purchases go through which account.

Then put these in place

- **EIN and a bank account in the organization's name**, never a parent's.
- **A team-domain, role-based email** (e.g. sponsors@yourteam.org) that outlives any one volunteer.
- **A Benevity Causes profile** (and YourCause/CyberGrants where your families' employers use them). Without one, employees can't send matched gifts.
- **A donor acknowledgment letter template**: organization name and EIN, gift amount or in-kind description, date, and a statement of any goods or services provided. It's required for gifts of $250 or more.
- **A funder packet** ready to attach: IRS determination letter, W-9, one-page overview, board list, budget and a short financial summary.

- **One donation channel** on your website. Old crowdfunding pages confuse donors.
- **Books that reconcile**: a profit-and-loss statement whose net income matches the change in your bank balance. Funders trust that more than polish.

THE FUNDING MIX

No single source pays for an FRC season. Plan on most of these:

Source	Typical size	Effort	How it starts
Student fair share (fees)	15–20% of the budget	Low	The board sets it each year
Corporate sponsorship	$500 to $10,000+	High	A relationship, a packet and a specific ask
Employee giving: matching gifts, volunteer grants, employee-nominated grants	$250 to $10,000+	Medium	An employee initiates it
Corporate mentor grants paid through FIRST	Varies by company	Low	A company employee mentors the team
Foundation and FIRST-partner grants	$500 to $5,000 is common	Medium	An application window
State or school-district grants	Up to $15,000 per school in NC's program	Medium	The district applies on the team's behalf
In-kind support (materials, machining, space, software)	Varies, often large	Medium	A local manufacturer or vendor
Community fundraisers and events	$200 to $8,000	High volunteer time	The team runs them
Individual and family donors	Varies	Low to medium	An annual appeal and year-end giving

Watch concentration. If one sponsor or one family (with its employer's match) supplies a quarter or more of the budget, you have a single point of failure. Know when that student graduates, and start replacing the support a year ahead.

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP

Build the packet

- **A one-page overview** you can attach to an email or leave behind: who you are, what students learn, results, true cost per student, the ask, and contact details with a donation QR code. (Our *Sponsor One-Pager Template* is a starting point.)
- **A sponsor packet** with the budget summary, outreach numbers, student outcomes, sponsor tiers and benefits.
- **Photos of students working**, not just the robot, with media releases on file.

Set clear tiers

An example ladder (set your own amounts to fit your budget and market):

Tier	Example gift	Typical benefits
Title	$7,500+	Largest logo on the robot and shirts, pit banner, website, press and social recognition, team visit
Platinum	$5,000–$7,499	Large logo on the robot and shirts, pit banner, website and social
Gold	$2,500–$4,999	Logo on the robot and shirts, website and social
Silver	$1,000–$2,499	Logo on shirts, website and social
Bronze	$250–$999	Name on the website and social

Deliver every benefit you promise, and photograph it as proof.

Make the ask

1. **Start with someone you know.** Poll families and mentors for where they work and whom they know. A warm introduction beats a cold web form every time.
2. **Invite before you ask.** Offer a shop visit, a pit tour at an event or a robot demo at the company. People fund what they've seen.
3. **Make one concrete ask:** a named tier, a mentor in a named area (CAD, machining, controls), a student tour, or a specific in-kind item.
4. **Talk about workforce, not trophies.** Companies fund the skills pipeline: design, machining, programming, project management. Use outcomes, e.g. "eight of our ten graduating seniors went into STEM programs."
5. **Follow up within 48 hours** with the packet and a thank-you, whatever the answer.

Corporate foundation portals: read the exclusions first

Many corporate foundations exclude booster clubs, individual schools, athletic teams, "individual clubs or organizations," event sponsorships or hardware purchases. Read the guidelines and any eligibility quiz before you write a word of narrative. And describe the team as a **STEM education program**, not a sports team: words like competition, alliance and match can trip athletics screens. An FRC team is not a sports property or an event organizer, so a form built around buying marketing inventory is the wrong branch.

EMPLOYEE GIVING, MATCHING AND VOLUNTEER GRANTS

Most large companies give through their employees. This is often the fastest money a team can unlock, because the employee does the asking inside the company.

- **Matching gifts:** the company matches an employee's donation, often 1:1 up to an annual cap.
- **Volunteer grants ("dollars for doers"):** the company pays a grant for hours an employee logs mentoring or volunteering.
- **Employee-nominated community grants:** an employee applies on the team's behalf, often for $1,000–$10,000.
- **Mentor grants paid through FIRST:** some companies pay a grant to the team an employee mentors (search FIRST's Team Grant Opportunities page for your families' employers).

How to work it:

1. **Run an employer poll every fall**, at registration, covering parents, mentors, board members, and grandparents too.
2. **Map each employer to its programs.** The employee's view of their own giving portal is the only reliable source.
3. **Give employees a one-page brief**: what the team does, the exact name and EIN to search, and the steps to donate, request a match or log hours.
4. **Have mentors log hours monthly**, not at year-end, when caps and deadlines bite.
5. **Expect company-specific rules.** Being listed in a company's portal isn't the same as being eligible for its match. If you're greyed out, ask the employee to raise it with their giving team.

The no-benefit rule. Matched and employee-routed gifts are charitable donations, often doubled with company money. Don't give those donors sponsor-tier benefits such as a logo on the robot: that can make the gift non-deductible and void the match. Thank them as supporters, and say in the acknowledgment letter that no goods or services were provided.

GRANTS ANY FRC TEAM CAN PURSUE

Grant programs change every season. The details below were checked in November 2026; confirm each one on the funder's page before applying.

Grant	Who's eligible	Timing	What to know
FIRST Team Grant Opportunities page	Varies by sponsor; many are tied to a company's home communities or to an employee mentor	Posted throughout the year	Check it monthly. Some grants are forfeited if you pay FIRST registration before the award, so read before you pay.
NASA FRC Sponsorship Grants	For the 2027 season NASA is prioritizing rookie and year-two teams and offering no veteran grants	2027 applications closed 30 Sep 2026; awards posted the week of 9 Nov 2026	Covers registration and is paid directly to FIRST. Rookie teams should apply as soon as they have a team number.
Gene Haas Foundation	FRC and FTC teams that use CNC machining in designing and building their robot	Applications for the next season open 1 May	Funds can't be spent on Haas products or services. The GearCats have received support two years running.
John Deere FIRST Team Grant	Teams in a John Deere home community or with a John Deere employee mentor	2026–27 FRC applications were due 6 Nov 2026	Teams with a Deere mentor should apply even if they don't qualify for upfront funding; approved teams may get World Championship support.
Company-community grants (e.g. Boeing, Dow, BAE Systems)	Teams near a company site or with an employee mentor	Windows vary, often late spring to fall	Listed on FIRST's grant page. Your employer poll tells you which ones apply.
KGMIAA Robotics Sponsorship (Kettering/GMI alumni)	FRC, FTC and VEX teams nationwide	Annual window	Small awards, often a few hundred dollars; a short video can replace the essay.
Vendor parts sponsorships (e.g. Team REV,	Any team	Annual	In-kind parts. Pick one vendor: Team REV won't consider teams supported by other FIRST-focused vendors.

Grant	Who's eligible	Timing	What to know
West Coast Products)			
State and school-district programs	Varies by state (e.g. North Carolina's After-School Robotics Grant; Michigan's 99h robotics grants)	Varies	Usually the district applies, and the money is spent under district rules. Ask your FIRST Program Delivery Partner what exists in your state.
Local community foundations and service clubs	Teams in their area	Often annual	Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions and county education foundations fund local STEM programs, and they like robot demos at their meetings.

Grant habits that pay off:

- Keep a **grant calendar** with each window's open and close dates. Some corporate windows close early when request volume is high.
- Keep an **answer library** (mission, budget, outcomes, outreach, board, diversity, financials) so each application starts 80% written.
- **Submit final reports on time.** Many funders won't consider a team again until its last report is in.

IN-KIND SUPPORT AND MENTORS

Local manufacturers often find it easier to give material, machine time or expertise than a check, and for a team that can be worth more.

- **Keep a specific wish list:** aluminum sheet and tubing, polycarbonate, plywood, 3D-printer filament, powder coating, machining or water-jet time, a sheet-metal brake, a small lathe, CAD software, laptops for programming students, build space.
- **Climb the relationship ladder:** a student tour first, then a mentor, then in-kind help, then money. Each step makes the next one easier.
- **Look beyond companies:** community-college machining and mechatronics programs, university engineering departments and student organizations, and makerspaces can offer mentors, equipment and space.
- **Acknowledge in-kind gifts properly:** describe what was given in the acknowledgment letter; the donor, not the team, puts a value on it.

Recruit mentors for what they bring to students. A mentor whose employer pays volunteer grants is a welcome bonus, not the reason to recruit. Mentors recruited for their employer's money rarely stay.

COMMUNITY FUNDRAISERS

Events raise money and visibility, but they cost volunteer time. Pick a few you can run well.

Idea	Rough return	Notes
Host an FRC or off-season event at your school	An estimated $4,000–$8,000 net from concessions, pre-sold team lunches and food trucks	The biggest single opportunity a team can have, and a showcase for sponsors and legislators

Idea	Rough return	Notes
Restaurant give-back nights	$100–$500 a night	Low effort; promote to families and your community
Robot demos at festivals, libraries and company events	Donations plus recruiting	Bring a donation QR code and a sign-up sheet
Sponsor-a-student letter campaign	$1,000–$5,000	Students write to family and neighbors, explaining the true cost per student
Year-end giving appeal and Giving Tuesday	Varies	Many company matches reset on 31 December, so remind matched donors in early December
Team store (shirts, buttons)	$300–$1,000	Mostly a visibility play

Check the rules first: your school's facility and food-sales rules, county health permits for food, your state's raffle laws, and whether your state requires you to collect sales tax on merchandise.

STEWARDSHIP: KEEP THE SPONSORS YOU WIN

Renewing a sponsor costs far less effort than finding a new one.

- **Thank within 48 hours**, then send the formal acknowledgment letter.
- **Deliver every benefit**: logo on the robot and shirts, website, social posts. Send photos as proof.
- **Report results** mid-season and at season's end: events, awards, outreach, student outcomes, and how their money was spent.
- **Invite sponsors in**: kickoff, a shop night, the pits at a competition, the end-of-season celebration.
- **Ask for the renewal before their budget is set.** Many companies plan giving in the fall for the next calendar year.
- **Track it all in one place**: contact, gift, date, benefits owed and delivered, renewal date, and who owns the relationship. Plan for contacts changing jobs, and build a second relationship at each sponsor.

ANNUAL FUNDRAISING CALENDAR

Built around a 1 July–30 June fiscal year. Shift it to fit yours, and add your own grant deadlines.

When	Focus
May	Thank-yous and impact reports to every funder. Gene Haas Foundation applications open. Watch for corporate windows that open in spring and can close early.
June–July	Board approves next season's budget. Update the sponsor packet and one-pager with this season's results.
August	Employer poll at registration. Renew Benevity self-certification. Sponsor packet goes out.
September	Corporate sponsorship asks. Grant applications (NASA's rookie window has closed at the end of September). FIRST registration.
October	Invite prospects to off-season events. Renewal asks before companies set next year's giving budgets.
November	Last fall grant deadlines (John Deere's FRC deadline was early November in 2026). Plan the year-end appeal. Giving Tuesday follows Thanksgiving.

When	Focus
December	Year-end appeal. Remind matched donors before company matches reset on 31 December.
January	Kickoff: invite sponsors. Start sponsor updates through build season.
February–April	Competitions: host sponsor and legislator visits, post sponsor recognition, collect photos and outcomes.
April–May	Championships. End-of-season report and renewal asks.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE GEARCATS

1. **Lead with access.** Our board sets the student fee first and then raises the rest. Telling funders the gap between what a season costs per student and what a family pays explains exactly what their gift does.
2. **People inside companies unlock the money.** Two of our mentors work at the same company, and each triggered a mentor grant. A programming mentor's employee-nominated application brought a community grant and opened full employee matching.
3. **Read the exclusions before writing the narrative.** One corporate fund excludes booster clubs by name, and one large foundation declined us at the inquiry stage on a category exclusion that wasn't in its published guidelines. Confirm eligibility before investing hours.
4. **A missed window costs a full year.** We lost a returning corporate grant when its application window closed early because of high request volume. It's on the calendar now, with a reminder a month ahead.
5. **Keep matched gifts off the sponsor-tier ladder.** Employee-matched and Benevity-routed gifts get thanks and recognition as supporters, never logo placement.
6. **Budget only committed money.** Label pledges and pending applications as anticipated, never committed, and make sure no gift is counted twice when it routes through FIRST or an employer.
7. **Claim back the sales tax.** We held 501(c)(3) status for years before registering for North Carolina's sales-tax refunds. Only the last three years can be recovered.
8. **Keep one set of numbers.** When the budget, fee or roster changes, update every funder document the same week. Reviewers notice when two documents disagree.
9. **Send statements that reconcile.** A profit-and-loss statement plus a cash-flow statement that ties to the bank balance builds trust. Check any accounting-software export before it goes out.

CHECKLIST

☐ Board-approved budget grouped into a few categories

☐ True cost per student calculated and labeled to last season's roster

☐ Fiscal home decided; purchasing split agreed with [School]

☐ EIN, bank account, role-based email, single donation page

☐ Benevity profile complete, with self-certification and EFT

☐ Donor acknowledgment letter template and funder packet ready

☐ Sponsor one-pager, sponsor packet and tier ladder updated for this season

☐ Employer poll sent; employees given a one-page brief

☐ Grant calendar built from FIRST's Team Grant Opportunities page and local sources

☐ In-kind wish list written

☐ Two or three community fundraisers chosen, with rules checked

☐ Sponsor tracker set up: benefits owed and delivered, renewal dates, relationship owners

☐ Mid-season and end-of-season sponsor reports scheduled

SOURCES

- FIRST: Team Grant Opportunities
- FIRST: Sponsoring team grants (types and restrictions)
- NASA Robotics Alliance Project: 2026–2027 FRC Sponsorship Grants
- Gene Haas Foundation: Manufacturing Competition Grants
- John Deere: 2026–2027 FIRST Grant Application
- GearCats companion guides: *Steps to 501(c)(3) Status*, *NC Tax Exemption and Sales-Tax Refunds*, *Registering on Benevity*, *Sponsor One-Pager Template*

ABOUT THE GEARCATS

The GearCats are FIRST Robotics Competition Team #6500, a community team based in Raleigh, NC, founded in 2016. We share what we've learned so more students can build robots. Questions about this guide? Reach us through millbrookrobotics.com.