FREE CHECKLIST · SMALL BUDGET · 2026

Launch on a shoestring.

5 steps from a $0 prototype to a small paid first version.

Why this matters: nobody builds and runs a custom app for free, and an offer that sounds free often costs you your code, your data or a big bill later. But a lot of the path really is free, and the store fees are smaller than most people think: Apple charges $99 a year and Google Play $25 once.

How to use this: do the 5 steps on page 2 in order and tick each one only when it's done. Page 3 has the costs you can't avoid, a year-one budget, and the free help available in the Inland Empire.



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THE PATH

5 steps, in order

- [ ] 01

Write the one problem and the one user

WHY Apps that try to do everything for everyone cost the most and get used the least.

DO Finish this sentence: “My app helps ___ do ___ without ___.” Keep it on one line.

- [ ] 02

Build a clickable prototype for free

WHY A rough prototype makes the idea real enough to test and makes every developer quote more accurate.

DO Use a no-code builder's free plan (Bubble, FlutterFlow, Adalo let you build for free) or paper sketches photographed into a slideshow.

- [ ] 03

Show it to 10 people who have the problem

WHY Friends say nice things. People with the problem tell you if they'd pay.

DO Ask each one: would you pay for this, and how much? Write down the exact words they use.

- [ ] 04

Book 2 or 3 free developer consultations

WHY A first call is free with most developers and it's a free education in what version one really needs.

DO Bring the one-line problem, the prototype and your budget range. Ask what they'd cut from version one.

- [ ] 05

Pay for one small first version

WHY A minimum viable product with one core workflow costs far less than a full app, and you only pay for what users asked for.

DO Agree a written scope, put the store accounts and code in your name, and pay in milestones you can test.

Tick a box only when the step is done, not planned.

BUDGET Year one: the costs you can't avoid

ITEM	TYPICAL	YOUR NUMBER
Apple Developer Program	$99 per year	
Google Play developer account	$25 one time	
Domain name	varies by registrar	
No-code plan to publish (if you use one)	e.g. FlutterFlow Basic, listed at $39/month	
Hosting / database (if the app stores data)	varies with usage	
Small paid first version (MVP)	get 2–3 written quotes	
Year one		

EQUITY If someone offers to build it for a share

- ✓ Treat it like taking on a business partner, because that's what it is.
- ✓ Put ownership percentages, vesting and what happens if one of you leaves in writing.
- ✓ Make sure the code, accounts and domain belong to the company, not to either person.

FREE HELP Free help in the Inland Empire

The Inland Empire Small Business Development Center, hosted at Cal State San Bernardino, offers no-cost one-on-one business advising to small businesses in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. SCORE Inland Empire lists free mentoring appointments at the Menifee Valley Chamber of Commerce. They won't write your code, but they can help with the plan, pricing and funding.

Ready for step 4?

Software Dev Bytes is based in Menifee. Book a free 30-minute consultation with your prototype in hand and I'll tell you the cheapest sensible first version, even if that means you don't hire me yet.

softwaredevbytes.com/book-appointment

Sources: Apple Developer Program membership details (developer.apple.com/programs/whats-included). Google Play Console Help (support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/6112435). Bubble pricing plans manual (manual.bubble.io). NxCode review of FlutterFlow pricing (nxcode.io, Nov 2026). Inland Empire SBDC (iece.csusb.edu). SCORE Inland Empire local counseling locations (score.org/inlandempire).

Prices change; check each provider's current page before you budget. General information, not financial or legal advice.