



City of Lowell Department of Planning and Development, Economic Development Office

Storefront Improvement Program Guidelines

Program Description

The Storefront Improvement Program provides matching grants to property owners or tenants seeking to renovate or restore ground-floor commercial building exterior facades. The Program seeks to increase accessibility into storefronts, improve the physical appearance of independently owned businesses, and enhance the commercial districts of Lowell.

This program provides:

- **90% matching grant up to \$20,000 for ADA improvements** to entrance, including but not limited to ramps, lifts, doors, hardware, automatic openers, accessible parking, and signage
- **50% matching grant up to \$15,000 for other façade improvements**, including windows, paneling, architectural details, and restoration of historic features
- **50% matching grant up to \$2,500 for signage**, including window signage, lighting, and awning improvements

Please note that improvements made prior to approval of a design and contract by the Economic Development Office in the Department of Planning and Development will not be funded. Large-scale projects may require a licensed architect and contractor to refine a conceptual design and to implement the City-approved plans.

Application Form

To participate in the Storefront Improvement Program, property owners or tenants must review the Storefront Improvement Program Guidelines (below) and complete the Storefront Improvement Program Application Form. Applications may be completed in the following ways:

Online (preferred): <https://lowellma.gov/1769/Storefront-Improvement-Program>.

Paper: Paper applications are available at the Economic Development Office in the Department of Planning and Development and may be picked up during regular business hours, which are Mon., Wed., Thurs.: 8 am-5:00 pm; Tues: 8 am-8 pm; Fri: 8 am-12 (noon). You may submit a paper preliminary application by bringing it to the Department of Planning and Development OR by mailing it to:

Department of Planning and Development
Economic Development Office
50 Arcand Drive, 2nd floor
Lowell, MA 01852

Grant Contact Information

Email: DoBizinLowell@Lowellma.gov

Phone: 978-674-4252

Guidelines

The City of Lowell Department of Planning and Development (DPD) established the Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) to provide financial assistance to property owners or commercial tenants seeking to remove architectural barriers, renovate the commercial building façade, and enhance exterior signage. The program's objectives are to improve accessibility and the physical appearance of establishments and enhance commercial districts. The program provides a matching grant, in the form of a reimbursement, for the funding of aesthetic improvements that coordinate all the important features of the storefront into a more attractive image while creating an accessible entrance for the public. This may include removal of physical barriers, restoration of architectural details, window and door improvements, and appropriately scaled signage and lighting. Applicants are responsible for hiring licensed architects, contractors, and sign fabricators. An eligible tenant is defined as a commercial establishment selling goods or services directly to members of the public for personal use and whose use is not solely for re-sale purposes (wholesale). Included in this definition are food and creative for-profit businesses. Improvements, or payments to a vendor, that are made prior to a signed SIP contract with the Economic Development Office in the Department of Planning and Development are not eligible for reimbursement and will not be considered.

Eligibility Criteria

The following criteria apply to all Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) applicants and prospective projects:

1. Applicants must be property owners or commercial tenants whose storefronts face onto a Lowell street.
2. Commercial tenants must offer goods or services that are open to the public.
3. Preference will be given to independently owned businesses not required by contractual arrangement to maintain standardized décor, architecture, signs, or similar features.
4. Preference will be given to businesses owned by historically disadvantaged persons (women, people of color, veterans, individuals that are disabled, and members of the LGBTQ+ community).
5. Preference will be given to commercial tenants in a commercial district or corridor.
6. Tenants must have written approval from property owners to participate in SIP and must have a current lease that is for a minimum of one year and with an option to renew. Month-to-month leases will not be accepted.
7. Proposed improvements must be permanent and physically attached to the storefront (e.g. sandwich board-style signs for the sidewalk and patio furniture are not eligible).
8. Billboards on property, if applicable, must be permanently removed as part of the improvement.
9. Property owners must be up-to-date on all municipal taxes prior to participation in the program.
10. Applicants must comply with all federal, state, and local laws and regulations pertaining to licensing, permits, building code, accessibility regulations, and zoning requirements.
11. Past participants of the Storefront Improvement Program who have completed awarded projects and been reimbursed per the terms of their contract may apply to the program again after five (5) years from the date of first grant contract.

12. Past participants may request to apply to the program again prior to the passing of five (5) years from the date of the first contract, but these requests will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. To be considered for access to funds before five (5) years, applicants must demonstrate one or more of the following:
 - a. The applicant has relocated and any previously funded items under the Storefront Improvement Program are unable to be re-used.
 - b. The applicant has opened an additional location in Lowell and the additional location is requesting access to funds.
 - c. The applicant is experiencing a hardship due to an emergency or natural disaster (e.g., a fire, flood, break-in, COVID-19) and construction is required to mitigate circumstances (e.g., windows or doors that open for increased circulation or ease of customer payment transactions, new siding on the front of the business, replaced windows or doors).

The City of Lowell reserves the right to apply additional criteria before accepting a project if program demand exceeds budgeted resources.

Design Principles and Guidelines

Storefronts should be oriented to the pedestrian and facilitate access into the store; provide visual interest both day and night and create a store identity unique to Lowell and/or the respective neighborhood. Improvements funded by the program must be compatible with the character and architecture of the individual building and, to the extent appropriate, with other nearby buildings. Buildings with significant architectural qualities are strongly encouraged to restore and maintain these features. Improvements for buildings not having notably historic or architectural features should be an opportunity to enhance the appearance of the building and its streetscape. Businesses must comply with local, state, and federal accessibility requirements. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law, which includes standards for accessible design to ensure that businesses are accessible to individuals with disabilities. The Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) is state agency that has its own accessibility regulations. While MAAB and ADA accessibility standards are similar in many respects, there are some differences. In cases where the regulations differ, those requiring a greater level of accessibility supersede the others. Please make sure to review ADA and MAAB standards and regulations in order to make sure improvements are compliant.

1. Eligible Storefront Improvements

The following improvements are encouraged:

- a. Accessible* entrance into storefront (i.e. ramps, lifts, etc.) and accessible* doors (i.e., automatic door openers, ADA and Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) - compliant hardware, etc.) *per M.G.L. c. 22, § 13A, of 521 CMR
- b. Restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings, and removal of elements which cover architectural details
- c. Window display areas which are appropriately scaled, and which facilitate night viewing, window replacement and window framing visible from the street which are appropriately scaled to the building
- d. Signage that is attractively integrated into the architecture of the building, including the window area, awnings or canopies, and entryways
- e. Lighting that is visually appealing and appropriately illuminates signage, storefront window displays, and recessed areas of a building façade

- f. Awnings or canopies that can be both functional and visually appealing
- g. Landscaping features attached to the building where appropriate, such as window boxes or planters
- h. New entrance and storefront construction, appropriately scaled within an existing building
- i. Other approved items (i.e. painting, cleaning, repointing, etc.) necessary to achieve the overall improvement

For examples of barrier removal, please see “The Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removals” at www.ada.gov/rachek.pdf and “ADA Guide for Small Businesses” at www.ada.gov/smbusgd.pdf. MAAB specifications can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/aab-rules-and-regulations>.

Prior Improvements

Alterations and improvements, or payments to a vendor, made prior to receiving a signed reimbursement contract or a “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” from the City are not eligible for reimbursement. The applicant must agree not to change or alter the improved facade without prior written approval from DPD for five (5) years from the date of the rebate check issued under the Storefront Improvement Program. Accessibility features, reimbursed under the Storefront Improvement Program, may not be removed without a planned replacement that DPD staff will review.

Financial Assistance

Funding offered is a matching grant in which the City would reimburse the applicant as follows:

- **90% matching grant up to \$20,000 for ADA improvements** to entrance, including but not limited to ramps, lifts, doors hardware and automatic openers, accessible parking, and signage
- **50% matching grant up to \$15,000 for other façade improvements**, including windows, paneling, architectural details and restoration of historic features
- **50% matching grant up to \$2,500 for signage**, including window signage, lighting and awning improvements

Architectural design fees may be included in the total cost of eligible improvements but cannot exceed \$5,000 of the total reimbursement. Any projects requesting reimbursement for more than \$2,500.00 must have an accessible storefront or be willing to create one through the Storefront Improvement Program. Under no circumstances will funding be provided in excess of \$2,500 unless and until the property has an accessible entrance per federal and state accessibility regulations. The Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) will only reimburse applicants after the applicant has paid his/her contractor and vendor(s) in full and after the project is determined to have been completed in accordance with the contract scope of services, and all federal, state and local laws and regulations, between the City and applicant. Any work paid for or conducted prior to a signed contract or “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” from the City will not be considered as eligible for reimbursement.

Application and Information

If you wish to participate in the Storefront Improvement Program, please contact the Economic Development Office in DPD at 978-674-4252 or DoBizinLowell@Lowellma.gov. The City of Lowell will

provide auxiliary aids and services, written materials in alternative formats, and reasonable modifications in policies and procedures to persons with disabilities upon request.

Procedures

All prospective applicants must follow the procedures in the order outlined below.

1. Applicant meets with Economic Development (ED) staff for initial project discussion and files an application. Additional meetings with ED and other City staff may be necessary to discuss SIP as well as the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) Variance process and design alternatives, depending on proposed scope of work.
2. Applicant's designer prepares design drawings and submits them to ED staff for review and approval.
3. Upon approval of final designs, the applicant has thirty (30) days to solicit three written bids from the contractors necessary to complete the improvement scope of work. Bids from each contractor must be on contractor letterhead and itemized so that a cost is associated with each task or material to be installed.
4. Upon approval of submitted bids, the applicant will enter into a contract for reimbursement with the City of Lowell. The maximum funding amount indicated on the contract will be based upon the lowest bid for proposed improvement project and program grant limits.
5. A pre-construction meeting takes place between the applicant, ED staff, selected contractor, project architect, and other City staff (as needed).
6. ED staff sends applicant a "Notice to Proceed with Improvements" or signed contract. Any work completed prior to receiving the "Notice to Proceed with Improvements" or signed contract will not be reimbursed.
7. Applicant has sixty (60) days from the execution date of the contract to begin implementation of approved improvements. Applicant must provide ED staff with copies of all building permits and certifications received for improvement project.
8. Contractor constructs project improvements as specified in the final design. Any changes previously agreed upon and contracted must have prior written approval of the appropriate City staff (e.g. Division of Development Services). It is up to the applicant to notify all the appropriate City staff of these changes in writing.
9. Applicant must notify ED staff immediately of any unforeseen issues that come up during construction which may alter the agreed upon final design. Site visits by ED staff and any other City staff (as needed) may be required before proceeding, particularly if accessibility will be affected.
10. Applicant notifies ED staff once project is completed.
11. ED and other City staff (e.g. Building Commissioner, Historic Board Administrator) certifies that the improvements comply with the final drawings and specifications, including relevant ADA codes and including any specifications communicated from the MAAB variance application process, if necessary.
12. The architect and/or contractor(s) must submit letters to ED staff acknowledging full payment by the applicant. The applicant must submit to ED staff copies of all paid invoices and copies of cancelled checks or credit card statements.
13. ED staff submits invoices for City of Lowell to issue reimbursement check, which will be made out to the applicant, not the architect, contractor, or another third party. The Storefront

Improvement Program (SIP) reserves the right to make adjustments regarding conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines. City staff from the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) may withhold funds if accessibility upgrades are constructed incorrectly, not to code, and if an MAAB Variance is/has not been granted by the MAAB.

Termination

The City of Lowell has the right to terminate any agreement under the Storefront Improvement Program if a participant is found to be in violation of any conditions set forth in these guidelines or if the project has been started prior to an executed agreement with the City of Lowell.