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# City of Cambridge

## Community Development Department

# FAÇADE/SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

# GUIDELINES & APPLICATION

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The City of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD) has established a Façade/Signage Improvement Program that provides technical and financial assistance to property owners or business tenants seeking to renovate or restore their exterior signage, lighting or commercial building facades. The Program's objectives are to improve the physical appearance of independent businesses and enhance the commercial districts.

The Program will provide a matching grant for the funding of well-designed improvements that will coordinate all the important features of the storefront into a more attractive image while creating, if necessary, an accessible entrance for the public. This may include the restoration of architectural details, better windows and doors, and well-proportioned signage and lighting. Past reimbursement grants have ranged from \$2,500 to \$35,000 based on scope of work and available funds. Reimbursement grant limits vary from year to year.

A consultant retained by the City will be available to provide assistance to applicants through the conceptual design stage at no cost to the applicants. Applicants, however, will be responsible to hire licensed architects and contractors to refine this conceptual design depending on the scope of work.

**Improvements made prior to a signed façade improvement contract will not be funded.**

### **II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA**

The following criteria must be met for participation in the Program:

1. Applicants must be property owners or commercial tenants whose storefronts face onto a Cambridge street;
2. Preference will be given to independent businesses not required by contractual arrangement to maintain standardized décor, architecture, signs or similar features.
3. Tenants must have written approval from property owners to participate in program;
4. Billboards on property, if applicable, must be permanently removed as part of the improvement;
5. Property owners must be up to date on all municipal taxes prior to participation in the program;
6. Properties requesting reimbursement for more than exterior signage, lighting, and awnings must provide handicap accessibility as required by State law. If such access is not feasible, an application for a variance must be filed with the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board with a letter of support from the Cambridge Commission for Persons with Disabilities; and
7. Applicants must comply with all State and local laws and regulations pertaining to licensing, permits, building code and zoning requirements.

### **III. DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES**

Improvements to be funded by the program must be compatible with the character and architecture of the individual building as well as, to the extent appropriate, with other buildings along the street on which the participating storefront is located. This principle is particularly important for historic buildings and streetscapes. 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 still be carefully considered and be seen as an opportunity to substantially enhance the appearance of the buildings and their streetscapes.

#### **A. Eligible Façade/Signage Improvements**

Storefronts should be oriented to the pedestrian and provide visual interest both day and night. Effort should be made to facilitate access into the store and to create a store identity unique to Cambridge and/or the respective neighborhood. The following improvements are encouraged:

1. Restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings, and removal of elements which cover architectural details;
2. Window display areas which are appropriately scaled and which facilitate night viewing;
3. Window replacement and window framing visible from the street which are appropriately scaled to the building;
4. Signage that is attractively integrated into the architecture of the building, including the window area, awnings or canopies, and entryways;
5. Lighting that is visually appealing and appropriately illuminates signage, storefront window displays, and recessed areas of a building façade;
6. Awnings or canopies that can be both functional and visually appealing;
7. Landscaping features attached to the building where appropriate, such as window boxes or planters;
8. Cleaning, repainting or residing of buildings;
9. Street grade entrances which contribute to the active edge along streets;
10. New storefront construction, appropriately scaled within an existing building; and
11. Removal of architectural barriers to public accessibility.

Other improvements can be made with written approval if they meet the objectives of the Façade Improvement Program.

## **B. Prior Improvements**

**Alterations and improvements made prior to receiving a “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” or a signed contract are not eligible for reimbursement.**

## **C. Alterations**

The applicant must agree not to change or alter the improved facade without prior written approval from CDD for five (5) years from the date of the rebate check issued under the Façade Improvement Program.

## **IV. PROGRAM ASSISTANCE**

### **A. Financial Assistance**

Funding offered is a matching grant in which would reimburse the applicant fifty percent (50%) of total project cost up to a maximum limit established at the beginning of the fiscal year. Any projects requesting reimbursement for more than exterior signage, lighting and awnings must have an accessible storefront. Architectural design fees may be included in the total cost of eligible improvements but cannot exceed \$5,000 of the total reimbursement.

Grant levels are determined at the beginning of the fiscal year based on program funding and vary from year to year. Past reimbursement grants have ranged from \$2,500 to \$35,000 based on scope of work and available funds. Please contact Chris Basler at (617) 349-4601 or [cbasler@cambridgema.gov](mailto:cbasler@cambridgema.gov) for information on available funds and reimbursement grant limits.

The applicant’s match may be in the form of other financial aid (grant or loan) received from other agencies and/or banks. The Program will only reimburse applicants after the applicant has paid his/her architect, contractor and vendor(s) in full and after the project is determined to have been completed in accordance with the contract between the City and applicant.

### **B. Technical Assistance**

Program staff can provide guidance on facade improvements specific to individual storefronts. The applicant will have a choice of hiring his/her own licensed architect to work on the project from start to completion or requesting that the City-hired architect assist first with the conceptual design of the facade. If the latter option is chosen, the applicant will still be expected to hire his/her own licensed architect, if necessary, to carry forth this conceptual design to completion of construction. **Early meetings with Program staff are necessary in order to help avoid misunderstanding as to the eligibility of proposals.**

### **C. Application and Information**

If you wish to participate in the Façade/Signage Improvement Program, please contact Chris Basler at CDD, (617) 349-4601 (voice) or 617-349-4621 (TTY), or e-mail at [cbasler@cambridgema.gov](mailto:cbasler@cambridgema.gov). The City of Cambridge will provide auxiliary aids and services, written materials in alternative formats, and reasonable modifications in policies and procedures to persons with disabilities upon request.

## **V. PROCEDURES**

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

1. Applicant meets with Program staff for initial project discussion and files an application.
2. Applicant meets with Program architect and staff to discuss building program and design alternatives.
3. Program architect prepares and submits conceptual designs and budget estimates to applicant and Program staff for review. A meeting will be set up to discuss these plans.
4. If necessary, Applicant's architect prepares final design drawings and submits them to Program staff for review and final approval.
5. Upon approval of final designs by Program's Design Review Committee, the Applicant has sixty (60) days to solicit three written bids from the contractors necessary to complete the improvement scope of work. **Bids from each contractor must be itemized so that a cost is associated with each task or material to be installed.** (Copy the Program on all solicitations for bids.)
6. Upon approval of submitted bids by Program staff, the Applicant will enter into a contract for reimbursement with the City of Cambridge. The maximum funding amount indicated on the contract will be based upon the lowest bid for proposed improvement project and program grant limits established at the beginning of the fiscal year.
7. A pre-construction meeting takes place between the Applicant, Program staff, selected contractor, and project architect.
8. Program 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.**
9. Applicant has sixty (60) days from the execution date of the contract to begin implementation of approved improvements. Applicant must provide Program staff with copies of all building permits and certifications received for improvement project.
10. Contractor constructs project improvements as specified in the final design. Any changes previously agreed upon and contracted must have prior approval of Program staff. It is up to the applicant to notify the Program of these changes in writing.
11. Applicant notifies the Program staff once project is completed.
12. Architect and/or Program staff certifies that the improvements comply with the final drawings and specifications.
13. The architect and/or contractor(s) must submit letters to the Program staff acknowledging full payment by the applicant. The applicant must submit to the CDD copies of all paid invoices;
14. Program staff submits invoices for City of Cambridge to issue rebate check.

The Façade/Signage Improvement Program reserves the right to make adjustments regarding conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines.

## **VI. TERMINATION**

The City of Cambridge has the right to terminate any agreement under the Façade/Signage 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 Cambridge.

## **THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR'S STANDARD FOR REHABILITATION**

Listed below is the Secretary of the Interior's Standard for Rehabilitation, which would be applied to historic structures seeking tax credits. These standards may also be considered as a guide for projects of lesser historical significance or for projects not seeking tax credits.

1. Every reasonable effort shall be made to provide a compatible use for property that requires minimal alteration of the building, structure, or site and its environment, or to use a property for its originally intended purpose.
2. The distinguishing original qualities or character of a building, structure, or site and its environment shall not be destroyed. The removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features should be avoided when possible.
3. All buildings, structures, and sites shall be recognized as products of their own time. Alterations that have no historical basis and which seek to create an earlier appearance shall be discouraged.
4. Changes that may have taken place in the course of time are evidence of the history and development of a building, structure or site and its environment. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right, and this significance shall be recognized and respected.
5. Distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craftsmanship that characterized a building, structure, or site shall be treated with sensitivity.
6. Deteriorated architectural features shall be repaired rather than replaced, wherever possible. In the event replacement is necessary, the new material should match the material being replaced in composition, design, color, texture, and other visual qualities. Repair or replacement of missing architectural features should be based on accurate duplications of features, substantiated by historic, physical, or pictorial evidence rather than on conjectural design of the availability of different architectural elements from other building or structures.
7. The surface cleaning or structures shall be undertaken with the gentlest means possible, sandblasting and other cleaning methods that will damage the historic building materials shall not be undertaken.
8. Every reasonable effort shall be made to protect and preserve archeological resources affected by, or adjacent to, and project.
9. Contemporary design for alterations and additions to existing properties shall not be discouraged when such alterations and additions so not destroy significant historical, architectural or cultural material, and such design is compatible with the size, scale, color, material, and character of the property, neighborhood or environment.
10. Wherever possible, new additions or alterations to structures shall be done in such a manner that if such additions or alterations were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the structure would be unimpaired.

## **THE CAMBRIDGE ENERGY ALLIANCE**

The Cambridge Energy Alliance is a city-sponsored nonprofit group created to save you money on utility bills and maintenance expenses, while reducing Cambridge's carbon footprint and creating jobs in the city. The innovative CEA program offers practical solutions that will lead to comprehensive results. For more information about the CEA, please visit the Cambridge Energy Alliance web site at <http://www.cambridgeenergyalliance.org>

## **INVESTMENT TAX CREDITS**

Federal historic preservation tax incentives are available for any qualified project that the Secretary of the Interior designates as a certified rehabilitation of a certified historic structure.

The percentage of Investment Tax Credits (ITC) are 20% credit for rehabilitation of certified historic structures and a 10% credit for rehabilitations of other buildings first placed in service before 1936.

You may be eligible for ITC if your commercial or income producing property is listed individually, qualified to be listed, or is a contributing building within districts in the National Register of Historic Places.

To qualify for the tax incentives and prior to beginning work on the property, property owners must complete a Historic Preservation Certification Application available from Massachusetts Historical Commission. The Massachusetts Historical Commission will review your application and submit it to the National Parks Service. A detailed description of the proposed rehabilitation work is part of the application. All rehab work must be done according to the Secretary of the Interiors Standard for Rehabilitation with Guidelines for Rehabilitation Historic Buildings. The underlying concern expressed in the Standards is the preservation of significant historic materials and features of a building in the process of rehabilitation. Certification is based on whether the overall project meets the Standards.

Upon completion of the rehabilitation the owner must submit a Request for Certification of Completed Work. A project does not become eligible for tax incentives until it is completed and designated by the National Parks Service.

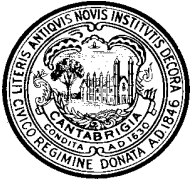
For further information call the Massachusetts Historical Commission at (617) 727-8470.

## **DISABLED ACCESS TAX CREDIT**

The 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act created a federal income tax credit for small businesses to help offset the costs of modifying buildings in order to comply with the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The credit will cover 50% of eligible cost that exceed \$250, but do not exceed \$10,250. An eligible small business is one whose gross receipts do not exceed \$1,000,000 or whose workforce does not consist of more than 30 full-time workers. Examples of eligible access expenditures include the necessary and reasonable cost of removing barriers, providing auxiliary aids, and acquiring or modifying equipment or devices.

The Internal Revenue Code also allows a deduction of up to \$15,000 per year for expenses associated with the removal of qualified architectural and transportation barriers.

For further information contact the Internal Revenue Service by visiting their website at [www.IRS.gov](http://www.IRS.gov) or by calling (800) 829-4933. Additional information can be found by visiting the American with Disabilities Act website at [www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov) or calling the ADA Information Line at (800) 514-0301 or TTY (800) 514-0383.



**City of Cambridge  
Community Development Department  
FAÇADE/SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM  
APPLICATION FORM**

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I. APPLICANT INFORMATION**

1. Applicant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone Number(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
 Fax Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ Web Site: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Business Organization of Applicant:  
 Corporation (d/b/a)    or     Partnership    or     Sole Proprietorship  
 Business Name: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Relationship of Applicant to the storefront to be renovated:  
 Owner:    Attach copy of latest tax bill and proof of payment.  
 Tenant:    a) Attach copy of Cambridge Business Certificate, and  
                   b) Attach written permission from building owner to participate in Facade Improvement Program, including expiration date of present lease.

**II. PROPOSED PROJECT INFORMATION**

1. Description of Building to be rehabilitated:  
 Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Building Dimensions:  
 Frontage \_\_\_\_\_ feet ~ Depth \_\_\_\_\_ feet ~ Height \_\_\_\_\_ feet ~ # of Floors \_\_\_\_\_  
 Does building contain residential units?     Yes     No    (If yes, how many? \_\_\_\_\_)
2. Describe the scope of work you want for this proposed façade/signage improvement project. (Check all that apply and/or describe improvement ideas.)
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Exterior Signage	<input type="checkbox"/> Exterior Lighting	<input type="checkbox"/> Exterior Painting
<input type="checkbox"/> Restoration of Arch. Details	<input type="checkbox"/> Storefront Windows	<input type="checkbox"/> Storefront Door
<input type="checkbox"/> Metal/Wood Storefront System	<input type="checkbox"/> Exterior Paneling/Siding	<input type="checkbox"/> Awning/Canopy
<input type="checkbox"/> Accessible Entrance	<input type="checkbox"/> Add Architectural Details	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:

3. *If known*, please indicate the estimated project cost or the total amount budgeted for improvements. The City's consulting architect takes into account the project budget when creating the designs.

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **Total Project Cost or Total Budget**

4. *If known*, please provide information on the architect responsible for your drawings, plans, and permits:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ Website: \_\_\_\_\_

### **CERTIFICATION**

The undersigned hereby represents and certifies to the best of his/her knowledge and belief that the information contained on this statement and any exhibits or attachments hereto are true and complete and accurately describe the proposed project, and the undersigned agrees to promptly inform the City of Cambridge Community Development Department of any changes in the proposed project which may occur.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Building Owner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commercial Tenant (if Applicant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

Social Security #: \_\_\_\_\_

Tax ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

### **RETURN COMPLETED APPLICATION**

Deliver, Mail, E-mail or Fax Completed Application to:

Christopher Basler, Associate Planner

Economic Development Division

City Hall Annex, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor

Telephone: (617) 349-4601

E-mail: [cbasler@cambridgema.gov](mailto:cbasler@cambridgema.gov)

Cambridge Community Development Department

344 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139

FAX: (617) 349-4638

Web: [www.cambridgema.gov/CDD](http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD)