



City of Cambridge Community Development Department **STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM** **FY23 GUIDELINES**

I. INTRODUCTION

The City of Cambridge Community Development Department (CDD) established the Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) to provide financial assistance to property owners or retail tenants seeking to remove architectural barriers, renovate the commercial building façade, and enhance exterior signage. The program's objectives are to improve accessibility and physical appearance of retail establishments and enhance commercial districts.

The program provides a matching grant, in the form of a reimbursement, for the funding of well-designed 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 well-proportioned signage and lighting. Past matching grants have ranged from \$2,500 to \$35,000 with **accessible design upgrades receiving 90% reimbursement** based on scope of work and available funds. Grants vary each year, so contact CDD for further information.

Applicants are responsible for hiring licensed architects, contractors, and sign fabricators. An eligible retail 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 City/CDD are not eligible for reimbursement and will not be considered.

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

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

1. Applicants must be property owners or commercial retail tenants whose storefronts face onto a Cambridge street.
2. Commercial retail tenants must offer goods or services that are open to the public.
3. Preference will be given to independent 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 retail 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 and only if program funds are not oversubscribed at the time of receiving a complete application. To be considered for access to funds before five (5) years, applicants must demonstrate one or more of the following:
 - The applicant has relocated and any previously funded items under the Storefront Improvement Program are unable to be re-used due to space constraints.
 - The applicant has opened an additional location in Cambridge and the additional location is requesting access to funds.
 - 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 program will not cover construction required to safely close the businesses such as boarding up windows or doors.

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

III. 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 Cambridge 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 their streetscapes.

As a retail business, you need to 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.

A. Eligible Storefront Improvements

The following improvements are encouraged:

1. Accessible* parking spaces and path of travel on private property for retail use (i.e., signage, curb ramps, paving, sidewalks, etc.) [* per M.G.L. c. 22, § 13A, of 521 CMR](#)
2. 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](#)
3. Restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings, and removal of elements which cover architectural details
4. 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
5. Signage that is attractively integrated into the architecture of the building, including the window area, awnings or canopies, and entryways
6. Lighting that is visually appealing and appropriately illuminates signage, storefront window displays, and recessed areas of a building façade
7. Awnings or canopies that can be both functional and visually appealing
8. Landscaping features attached to the building where appropriate, such as window

- boxes or planters
- 9. New entrance and storefront construction, appropriately scaled within an existing building
- 10. 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/racheck.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>.

B. 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 program manager 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 Storefront Improvement Program. Accessibility features, reimbursed under the Storefront Improvement Program, may not be removed without a planned replacement that CDD staff will review.

IV. PROGRAM INFORMATION

A. Financial Assistance

Funding offered is a matching grant in which the City would reimburse the applicant ninety percent (90%) for accessible storefront improvements, up to \$20,000.00, and fifty percent (50%) for other improvements, up to \$15,000.00. 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 program manager will not be considered as eligible for reimbursement.

B. Application and Information

If you wish to participate in the Storefront Improvement Program, please contact Christina DiLisio of CDD at (617) 349-4601 (voice) or cdilisio@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.

C. Procedures

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

1. Applicant meets with the program manager for initial project discussion and files an application. Additional meetings with program manager, 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 architect prepares design drawings and submits them to the program manager 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 Cambridge. 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, the program manager, selected contractor, project architect, and other City staff (as needed).
6. The program manager 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 thirty (30) days from the execution date of the contract to begin implementation of approved improvements. Applicant must provide the program manager 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. Inspectional Services Department, Community Development Department). It is up to the applicant to notify all the appropriate City

- staff of these changes in writing.
9. Applicant must notify the program manager immediately of any unforeseen issues that come up during construction which may alter the agreed upon final design. Site visits by the program manager and any other City staff (as needed) may be required before proceeding, particularly if accessibility will be affected.
 10. Applicant notifies program manager once project is completed.
 11. Program manager and City staff 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 the program manager acknowledging full payment by the applicant. The applicant must submit to the program manager copies of all paid invoices and copies of cancelled checks or credit card statements.
 13. Program manager submits invoices for City of Cambridge to issue rebate check.

The Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) reserves the right to make adjustments regarding conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines. City staff from the Community Development Department (CDD) 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.

V. TERMINATION

The City of Cambridge 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 Cambridge.