



City of Cambridge

Community Development Department

STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

FY24 GUIDELINES

I. INTRODUCTION

The Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) helps property owners and business tenants improve the front of their commercial building by paying for a portion of select construction or rehabilitation costs. SIP funds are paid in the form of a reimbursement check, upon project completion. SIP funds are a grant, not a loan, and are not considered taxable income.

Past SIP funds have been reimbursed to projects that:

- Create more accessible* front entrances by installing new ramps, walkways, and/or automatic doors with push buttons. * [per M.G.L. c. 22, § 13A, of 521 CMR](#)
- Improve energy efficiency of first floor spaces through new doors and windows as well as other mitigation treatments like awnings.
- Restore historic elements or add new design elements that improve the overall look of the building.
- Increase the visibility of the storefront by installing new signage, including blade signs and window graphics.
- Add exterior lighting, permanent planter boxes, new paint, or other fixtures that elevate a storefront appearance.

To qualify for reimbursement funds, interested property owners and business tenants must complete an SIP application, provide quotes and designs from contractors/vendors, and be approved by the SIP manager to enter into a contract with the City of Cambridge.

Approved projects are now eligible for **up to \$50,000 in reimbursement funds**. Approved accessibility costs are reimbursed at a rate of 90% (up to \$25,000) and all other approved costs are reimbursed at a rate of 50% (up to \$25,000).

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The following criteria apply to all SIP applicants and prospective projects:

- 1. Construction, rehabilitation, or sign installation started before executing a contract with the City of Cambridge is not eligible for reimbursement funds.**
2. Applicants must be property owners or commercial retail tenants whose storefront faces onto a Cambridge Street.
3. 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 creative for-profit businesses.
4. 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.
5. 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).

6. Proposed improvements to the first floor of a commercial space are eligible for reimbursement but not improvements to the second, or higher, floors.
7. Property owners must be up to date on all municipal taxes prior to participation in the program.
8. Applicants must comply with all federal, state, and local laws and regulations pertaining to licensing, permits, building code, accessibility regulations, and zoning requirements. 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. Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) specifications can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/aab-rules-and-regulations>.
9. Past participants of SIP, who have completed awarded projects and been reimbursed per the terms of their contract, may apply to the program again after three (3) years from the date of first grant contract though first-time applicants will be prioritized in any fiscal year based on available funds. The SIP manager may award reimbursement funds to the same applicant or commercial building address before the three-year period if:
 - The applicant has relocated and any previously funded items under SIP 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.

III. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Preference will be given to independent businesses not required by contractual arrangement to maintain standardized décor, architecture, signs, or similar features.
2. 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).
3. Preference will be given to commercial retail tenants in a commercial district or corridor.

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

IV. PROGRAM INFORMATION

A. Financial Assistance

Funding offered is a grant in which the City would reimburse the applicant ninety percent (90%) for accessible storefront improvements, up to \$25,000.00, and fifty percent (50%) for other improvements, up to \$25,000.00. Architectural design fees may be included but cannot exceed \$5,000 of the total reimbursement.

Projects requesting reimbursement for more than \$2,500.00 must have an accessible storefront or be willing to create one through SIP. Funding over \$2,500.00 will not be provided unless, and until, the property has an accessible entrance per federal and state regulations. SIP funds are released when the project has been completely paid for and determined to comply with contract terms.

B. 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 the 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. Applicant submits three written bids (or quotes) from prospective contractors. **Bids from each contractor must be on contractor letterhead and itemized.**
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. Once contract is signed by all parties, the program manager sends applicant a "Notice to Proceed with Improvements" notice and a copy of the signed contract. **Any work completed prior to receiving the "Notice to Proceed with Improvements" or signed contract will not be reimbursed.**
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. Applicant notifies program manager once project is completed.
9. Program manager and City staff certify 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.
10. 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.
11. Program manager submits invoices for City of Cambridge to issue rebate check.

SIP reserves the right to adjust conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines. SIP manager 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.

To apply, contact Christina DiLisio at (617) 349-4601 or cdilisio@cambridgema.gov