



City of Cambridge Community Development Department STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM FY25 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.

NOTE: If your business received a grant from the City of Cambridge in the past, such as an emergency COVID-19 grant that helped pay for past due rent, utilities, or payroll, stop and contact staff in the Economic Opportunity & Development Division. This SIP grant works differently than other grants you may have received. SIP only pays for future work that you have not yet performed or paid for. Projects already completed or paid for are automatically ineligible for SIP funds. No exceptions can be made.

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. Projects without a contract are ineligible for reimbursement.

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).

Please see the next page for eligibility criteria.

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

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

- 1. Work 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 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 SIP again for work at the same location after three (3) years from the date of the first grant contract. Exceptions may occur at the discretion of the SIP manager and availability of funds.
10. Property owners or business entities must close out, and be reimbursed for, any existing SIP grants before applying for an SIP grant at a second or additional location.
11. The soonest a property owner or business entity could apply for an SIP grant at a second or additional location is in the following Fiscal Year from the year when the previous SIP grant was closed out and reimbursed, subject to SIP manager discretion and availability of funds.

III. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Preference will be given to first-time applicants.
2. Preference will be given to independent businesses not required by contractual arrangement to maintain standardized décor, architecture, signs, or similar features.
3. 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).
4. 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 matching 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 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.

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

1. Applicant meets with the SIP manager for initial project discussion and files an application. Additional meetings with the SIP manager, and other City staff, may be necessary to discuss program as well as the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) Variance process and design alternatives, depending on proposed scope of work.
2. Applicant solicits 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.**
3. 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.
4. A pre-construction meeting takes place between the applicant, the SIP manager, selected contractor, project architect, and other City staff (as needed).
5. The SIP 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.**
6. Applicant must provide the SIP manager with copies of all building permits, sign permits, and certifications required by other City Departments that are separate from any SIP grant approvals.
7. Applicant must notify the SIP manager immediately of any unforeseen issues that come up during construction which may alter the agreed upon final design or costs. Site visits by the SIP manager and any other City staff (as needed) may be required before proceeding, particularly if accessibility will be affected. It is up to the applicant to notify all the appropriate City staff of these changes in writing.
8. Applicant notifies SIP manager once project is completed.
9. SIP 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 applicant submits to the SIP manager copies of all paid invoices and copies of cancelled checks or credit card statements.
11. SIP 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.