

FAÇADE AND STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM
TOWN OF WINTHROP
JULY 2022



@TEN
THOUSAND
FLOWERS
PROJECT

Winthrop MA
Flowers 349-414

WOODSTOCK VT.

GIBSON '19

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Town has made a significant investment in public infrastructure in the Centralized Business District (CBD). It is considering a façade and storefront improvement program to leverage that investment into a coordinated effort to support local businesses and attract economic development to the town. This façade improvement program would focus on aesthetics – paint, signage, awnings, lighting, plantings, and minor repairs. If adopted, this program would be open to businesses throughout the town.

This document is a draft of a façade and storefront improvement program that could meet the Town’s needs. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) sponsored this planning process through the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI), which promotes the revitalization of downtowns and commercial areas throughout Massachusetts. As part of the program, MDI paired Innes Associates, a planning and design firm, with the Town of Winthrop to investigate the options for the façade and storefront improvement program and prepare this document for review and consideration by the Winthrop Town Council.

PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process included a meeting with local business owners, sponsored by the Winthrop Chamber of Commerce, on March 15, 2022, and a presentation to the Winthrop Economic Development Committee on April 4, 2022. The process also included two site walks, one on December 20, 2021, with Rachel Kelley, Town Planner, and a second on March 11, 2022, to photograph commercial areas throughout the town.

The process also included research on façade and storefront improvement programs in other towns, using the *Sign & Façade Rapid Recovery Program Toolkit*, developed as part of DHCD’s Rapid Recovery Program, as an initial resource.

FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Façade and storefront improvement programs are important tools in revitalizing downtowns and a component of a municipality’s overall economic development strategy. This program will help owners of small businesses in Winthrop and their landlords, thus increasing the town’s economic activity.

Façade and storefront improvement programs vary in scope and scale. Some programs address the beautification of an area, focusing on minor repairs to storefronts, repainting, and visual additions such as planters and coordinated outdoor

retail displays. Such programs may also address accessibility by providing ramps to address level changes between the sidewalk and the store entry.

Some programs add awnings and signage to the program to address awnings or signs that are outdated or in disrepair.

Other programs address the entire façade and include more significant repairs and upgrades. These programs may be layered with other grants that address energy efficiency, interior accessibility, or building renovation. These programs may establish more control over the final design, with design guidelines that have an impact on colors, materials, and consistency within a designated geographic area.

The focus of all options for a façade and storefront improvement programs is to promote economic development and the success of small businesses by increasing the safety and attractiveness of an area. Case studies¹ have shown that these programs positively impact local businesses and the value of the properties. The cost does not have to be significant to make a difference. Benefits include increasing the number of first-time customers, increasing sales for some businesses, increasing the property's value, and increasing sales for nearby businesses.²

This document will include case studies of some Massachusetts programs that provided models for the recommended program in this report.

NEED

The Town's goal is to create and reinforce a consistent sense of place to build on its investment in the public infrastructure. The consensus from the meetings is that parts of the Central Business District look tired. In addition, the small businesses in Winthrop's commercial areas are primarily retail, restaurant, and services – these are also the business types that have had the most negative effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the initial lockdowns, the difficulty of obtaining staff, and the changing patterns of consumption.

However, the need for improvements is not recent. In 2017, the Town undertook a study of the Centre Business District (the Centre Business District Master Plan). Led by Form + Place, including MassDevelopment and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the plan primarily studied redevelopment scenarios for the Middle School site. The project also reviewed conditions around the square itself and noted, "The CBD lacks consistency in commercial storefront appearance, including signage, materials, and façade transparency along key frontages."³

The pictures on pages 4 and 7, taken from the site walk in March 2022, show current storefront conditions in different commercial areas of Winthrop.

¹ <https://nmsc.connectedcommunity.org/blogs/hl-admin/2017/05/11/measuring-the-economic-impact-of-storefront-improvements>

² Bill Ryan, Amy Greil, and Dayna Server, "Downtown Economics: Ideas for Increasing the Vitality in Community Business Districts," University of Wisconsin Extension, Issue 180, March 2015, pp. 1-2.

³ Town of Winthrop, MassDevelopment, MAPC, Form + Place, Centre Business District Master Plan, March 2017, p. 7.



Draft Program

This draft program is recommended for the Town of Winthrop based on conversations with business owners and the Economic Development Committee and research into the precedents below. The program may be modified as the Town continues to discuss options. The recommended program is a grant program with a 50% match. While the Town has a preference for aesthetic improvements, the grant could support a larger project, such as addressing code violations, improving accessibility, or installing energy-efficient windows and doors.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this façade and storefront improvement program is to leverage the significant public investment the Town has made in the Central Business District by assisting property owners and businesses to enhance the appearance of the storefronts, address code violations, and improve accessibility and energy efficiency. The program is extended to all Winthrop businesses that meet the criteria. The primary goal of this program is to support Winthrop's businesses.

ELIGIBILITY

All Winthrop businesses with a storefront visible from the street or another public way are eligible to apply. Applicants must be either the property owner or a commercial tenant with written permission from the property owner.

- Applicants who have received funding within the five years before their application are not eligible to reapply.
- Applicants must be up-to-date with all taxes and fees owed to the Town.
- Applicants must have all relevant approvals and permits for the proposed work and comply with building code and zoning requirements.

COMPONENTS

Eligible improvements include the following:

- Addressing code violations
- Improvements to address accessibility
- Improvements to address energy efficiency
- Exterior signs
- Awnings
- Lighting
- Painting
- Planters and landscaping

FUNDING

Once approved, an applicant will receive a 50% matching grant up to an amount determined by the Town Council annually. The Applicant may undertake a larger project consistent with the components above, but the match will be limited to the approved amount.

Conditions

To receive the grant, the Applicant must meet the following conditions:

- The work cannot be started before the Town approves the grant.
- The Applicant must seek a minimum of three bids for the project and must select the lowest bid.
- Design fees can be no more than 10% of the total amount of the project.
- The Applicant must complete all work, complete any required inspections, and pay all contractors prior to submitting receipts to the Town for reimbursement.

PROCESS

The Town will accept applications on a first-come-first-serve basis by January 30 of each year. To apply for a façade and storefront improvement program, the Applicant must do the following:

1. Meet with program staff to discuss the project, requirements for application, and a list of required permits and approvals.
2. For projects that require a building permit, the Applicant may need to work with an architect or structural engineer to prepare the appropriate plans/elevations and budget.
3. For all projects, the Applicant must solicit three separate bids. 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. Required information for the application:
 - a. Completed Application.
 - b. Business Certificate from the Town or Articles of Organization.
 - c. Proof from the Town of Winthrop Treasurer's Office that there are no outstanding taxes or other liens on the property.
 - d. Description of the proposed project, including materials and colors, as appropriate.
 - e. The plans and elevations (if required).
 - f. Completed building permit application (if required).
 - g. Project budget.
 - h. Three or more bids from contractors.
 - i. "Before" photos of the building. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.
 - j. Signed and notarized letter from property owner giving permission for the work (if the Applicant is a tenant).

APPROVAL

The Town of Winthrop will have 60 days to approve the project, including the building permit (if required). Once approved, the Applicant must select the lowest bid and may start work.

POST-APPROVAL

The Applicant will have 90 days to complete the work after the project has been approved. Applicant must notify the Town of any changes in writing once work has started. Applicant must receive proof of final inspection by the Building Department/ Inspectional Services before notifying the Town that the project is complete.

REIMBURSEMENT

After the work is completed and inspected, the Applicant must submit all receipts and invoices showing that the architect, engineer, suppliers, and contractor (as applicable) have been paid in full to receive reimbursement and proof of final inspection for any project requiring a building permit. The Town will provide the funds within 60 days of receipt of the reimbursement request.

Applicants must submit “after” photos showing the work, with the request for reimbursement. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.

All requests for reimbursement must be received by September 30 of the year in which the Town approved the application.

REJECTION

Applications may be rejected for failure to provide the necessary documents, inability to get a building permit, outstanding taxes or liens on the property, or failure to follow building code and zoning regulations.

Reimbursement requests may be rejected for failure to fully document payment for all budget components and lack of proof of a final inspection for work requiring a building permit.

TERMINATION

The Town of Winthrop has the right to terminate any agreement under the Façade and Storefront Improvement Program if a participant violates any conditions outlined in these guidelines or if the project has been started before an executed agreement with the Town of Winthrop.

Funding Sources

OPTIONS FOR FUNDING STRATEGY

The Town of Ashland created its program with an initial appropriation from town funds in the first year and the creation of a revolving fund in the second year. Cambridge and Brookline support their programs with municipal funds. Woburn's program was initially a one-time strategy with significant investment in a few buildings.

ARPA Strategy

The Town of Winthrop could fund the first few years from ARPA funds (see below). The Town could fund the program from 2022 through 2026 by using a portion of its ARPA allocation. The immediate direct benefit would assist small businesses still struggling from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but the impact of this strategy would last beyond the 2026 deadline for fund expenditure.

Local Bank Strategy

The Town could make this a permanent strategy. One option would be to partner with local banks (see note below) to provide the funds while the Town administers the program. Administration of the program would include determining eligibility, considering applications, and awarding the loan.

University of Wisconsin researchers found that funding for façade and storefront improvement programs required multiple sources, including the owner's investment, local incentive grant or loan programs, traditional bank loans, and, in a few cases, historic tax credits.⁴ The case studies in the next section include the funding sources.

⁴ Bill Ryan, Amy Greil, and Dayna Server, "Downtown Economics: Ideas for Increasing the Vitality in Community Business Districts," University of Wisconsin Extension, Issue 180, March 2015, pp. 1-2.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

<https://www.mainstreet.org/ourwork/projects/spotlight/facadeimprovements/npsgrant>

Main Street America: Façade Improvement Grant

Main Street America's façade improvement grant program is an example of using historic preservation funds, such as CPA funds, to create a façade improvement program that would address the historic buildings in a target area. This may be a useful model for a local program.

The site provides a link to each of the communities chosen for this program. The awards are expected to be \$25,000 per project, and the site includes preservation covenants, grant agreements, and two webinars which may be informative.

<https://www.t-mobile.com/brand/hometown-grants>

T-Mobile's Hometown America Grant

T-Mobile is giving a total of \$25 million to small towns across the United States over a 5-year period. The most recent group of 25 towns was announced in March 2022, the second year of the program. Funds can be used for downtown improvements.

ARPA Funds

Funds from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) are available to support small businesses that have been harmed by the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government allocated these funds to each community; the funds must be committed by December 31, 2024, and expended by December 31, 2026. A façade and sign improvement program is an effective method of supporting small, local businesses.

Local Banks

Local banks are often willing to work with municipalities to provide low- or no-cost loans for façade and storefront improvement programs to support their community. Winthrop has three banks: Bank of America, Citizens Bank, and Rockland Trust. All have programs targeted at small businesses, and local representatives may be interested in discussing this program.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

Many communities eligible for CDBG funds use these for façade and storefront improvement programs. For projects that include construction, the David-Bacon Act may apply, and the Town of Winthrop may need to address compliance in reporting how the grant funds are allocated.

Municipal Operating Funds

In the case studies below, some communities, such as Ashland and Cambridge, use municipal funds for the façade and storefront improvement programs. The Town of Ashland first appropriated funds for a single year to begin its program. The following year, the Town used a home rule petition to set up a revolving fund for a more permanent program.

Case Studies

<https://www.ashlandmass.com/669/Business-Incentive-Programs>

The link includes a description of the program and the application form.

TOWN OF ASHLAND

Sponsor

Town of Ashland Economic Development Incentive Program

Funding

Town of Ashland: Initial appropriation and revolving fund

Components

The property/business owner must get a minimum of three bids and select the lowest price.

The grant is paid when work is complete, and the applicant submits the receipts for approval.

Grant Structure

Grant of up to 50% of the cost with a cap of \$5,000.

Application and Grant Period

No specific period for application.

Eligible Improvements

- Improvements to address accessibility
- Exterior signs
- Awnings
- Lighting
- Energy-efficient windows and doors
- Painting
- Surface parking lots
- Planters and landscaping
- Addressing code violations

Eligibility

- All businesses in Ashland.
- Targeted to properties in visible or high-traffic areas.
- Property owners must provide written approval to tenants.
- Applicants must comply with all state and local codes and regulations and with licensing and permitting requirements.

TOWN OF BROOKLINE

<https://www.brooklinema.gov/1564/Facade-Loan-Program>

The link provides before-and-after photographs and project details.

Sponsor

Town of Brookline Planning and Community Development Department

Funding

Municipal funds

Components

- The loan is repayable in 4 equal annual installments, starting the year after the funds were disbursed.
- The recipient must pay a 1% administration fee when the loan is approved.
- Design fees cannot exceed 10% of the total project costs.

Grant Structure

This is a loan program rather than a grant program. The maximum is \$10,000 for a no-interest loan.

Application and Grant Period

Rolling application period.

Eligible Improvements

- Priority for energy efficiency upgrades and accessibility
- Exterior painting
- Signage
- Awnings
- Lighting
- Windows/door replacement or modification
- Buildings/storefront/façade restoration
- Minor landscaping

Eligibility

- Property owners or commercial tenants with written permission from the property owner.
- Applications are taken on a rolling basis and received a weighted score: 40% for Streetscape Enhancement and 60% for Creating Positive Lasting Community Impacts.
- The score reduces the amount of funding the applicant will receive. A score of 25% or less does not qualify for funding.

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/econdev/smallbusinessassistance/smallbusinessprograms/storefront>

The link includes the following:

- Guidelines, application form, descriptions of and links to other grants that can be leveraged with the City's program for improvements.
- Interactive map of storefronts improved under the program.

Sponsor

City of Cambridge Community Development Department

Funding

Municipal funds

Unique Components

New focus on accessibility (Storefronts-for-All)

Grant Structure

- 90% matching grant up to \$20,000 for ADA improvements to the entrance.
- 50% matching grant up to \$15,000 for other façade improvements.
- 50% matching grant up to \$2,500 for signage, lighting, and awning improvements.

Application and Grant Period

- Grants vary annually.
- No specific period for application.

Eligible Improvements

- Replacement of doors and window systems to address restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ADA compliant access, including signage, ramps, door hardware, lifts, and accessible parking.
- Architectural elements such as improved windows, paneling, architectural details, and restoration of historic features.
- Improvements to signage, lighting, and awnings.

Eligibility

- Property owners or commercial retail tenants, with goods or services open to the public.
- Storefronts must face onto a street in Cambridge.
- Proposed improvements must be permanent.
- Property owners must provide written approval to tenants.
- Property owners must be current with all municipal taxes.
- Applicants must comply with all state and local codes and regulations and with licensing and permitting requirements.
- Preferences for business types and locations.
- Restrictions on applicants who have received grants within the previous five years.

CITY OF WOBURN

<https://www.woburnma.gov/government/woburn-redevelopment-authority/storefront-improvement-program-2/>

The link includes the following:

- Program Guidelines
- Eligibility Area Map
- Checklist
- Application Form
- Sample Agreement

Sponsor

Woburn Redevelopment Authority

Funding

Woburn Development and Financial Corporation

Unique Components

- Phase 1: Initial renovation of four façades in downtown Woburn.
- Phase 2: ~36 businesses and property owners over four years at an investment of over \$87,000. This represents an average of about \$2,400 per business.
- Phase 3: This is the current phase.

Grant Structure

- Signage improvements: Matching grants of up to \$2,000
- Façade improvements: Matching grants of up to \$15,000
- Matching: 1:1 basis by the property owner or tenant

Application and Grant Period

Rolling basis until funds are fully expended

Eligible Improvements

- Fabrication and installation of new signage and awnings
- Repairs to existing signage and awnings
- Painting exterior building façades and trim
- Repointing/cleaning brick or stonework
- Refurbishment of storefront lighting
- Replacement of doors and windows

Eligibility

- Small business owners, non-profits, charitable groups, and community organizations located within the Downtown Business District
- Property owners must provide written approval to tenants.
- Property owners must be current with real estate and personal property taxes and water and sewer charges.
- Applicants must comply with all state and local codes and regulations and with licensing and permitting requirements.

Application

Town of Winthrop Façade and Storefront Improvement Program Application

Cover Page

Name of Business

Business Address

Contact Name:

Contact Phone:

Contact Email:

Type of Business:

Is this a new business?

Yes

No

Certification and Signature.

I have read and understand the guidelines of the Town of Winthrop's Sign and Façade Improvements Program. I understand that approval for funds is based on the approval of the Town Council and subject to the availability of funds. I hereby certify that the information in this application, including the attached documents, is true and complete.

Signature: _____ Date _____

The completion and submission of this application does not guarantee funding or award in whole or in part. Said funding or award shall be determined based upon the criteria and qualifications and availability of funding as determined by the Town Council.

For use of the Town of Winthrop

Application Complete
 Application Complete
 Application Approved
 Application Rejected

Project terminated
before completion

Final inspection completed
 "After" photos received
 Receipts received
 Final funds dispersed

Description of the Proposed Project

Attach more pages if needed.

Project budget.

Attach more pages if needed.

Item	Cost
Total Cost	

Checklist of Attachments

- Attachment 1: Business Certificate from the Town of Winthrop or Articles of Incorporation from the Secretary of State.
- Attachment 2: Proof from the Town of Winthrop Treasurer’s Office that there are no outstanding taxes or other liens on the property.
- Attachment 3: Plans and elevations (if required)
- Attachment 4: Completed building permit application (if required).
- Attachment 5: Three or more bids from contractors.
- Attachment 6: “Before” photos of the building. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.
- Attachment 7: Signed and notarized letter from property owner giving permission for the work (if the Applicant is a tenant).

