

From drab to fab: City of San Diego wants to help businesses redesign storefronts

By Natallie Rocha

The city of San Diego wants to help local businesses revamp and revive their storefronts by offering money and no-cost design assistance.

The city's [Storefront Improvement Program](#) provides rebates and free design assistance to business owners who are looking to give their buildings a face-lift. For the upcoming fiscal year, the city has allocated \$150,000 for rebates through this program.

In the past, the program helped a restaurant in La Jolla get new windows, doors and construct a sidewalk patio. Another year, it revamped multiple storefronts on a corner of Barrio Logan with modern, wood-paneled awnings, new windows and landscaping.

Christina Bibler, director of the city's economic development department said this program helps offset the cost of making San Diego's businesses look nicer and it's transformed more than 100 small businesses throughout the past decade.

The long-running program, which was established in 1986, offers this financial incentive for businesses to make an investment that ultimately benefits the local economy. Businesses can get help with decorative elements like a fresh coat of paint, new windows or lighting as well as practical design help for a sidewalk cafe.

"The Storefront Improvement Program is one of the most effective and straightforward ways the city can help small businesses by putting improvement dollars back in the hands of the owner," Bibler said.

For street-level, street-facing small businesses with no more than 25 employees, applicants can access 10 hours of design time with a licensed professional and reimbursement of half the project cost up to \$8,000.

Property owners can also apply if their building has three or more street-level, street-facing small-business tenants. This rebate covers half the cost of the project with a maximum of \$16,000. Additionally, there is an incentive to restore historic property facades that covers two-thirds of the total project cost up to \$12,000.

"There's a variety of reasons why people would like to improve their business," Bibler said, such as attracting customers and increasing visibility. "But from the city standpoint, we're willing to invest in that just to ensure that business owners keep the condition of their building and their facade fresh."

There is an added benefit to businesses located in the San Diego Promise Zone, a federally

designated area of the city that encompasses the communities of Encanto, Barrio Logan, a portion of East Village and southeastern San Diego. Business applicants in this region qualify for an additional investment by the city — a 30 percent increase of \$10,400 in project costs.

This Storefront Improvement Program is not for national franchises, chains or large commercial buildings. It also excludes nonprofits, government-owned buildings, banks, residential rental buildings and religious institutions.

For businesses located within the city of San Diego, a couple of key things to have before applying include a valid business tax certificate and if you are not the owner of the building, approval from the property owner for the facade improvements.

Applications are accepted on a rolling basis and can be [found here on the program website](#). If a business is not selected for the program, there's no need to reapply — the applications roll over to the next fiscal year for consideration, Bibler said.

The city's program administrator can help business owners who have specific questions about the program (that are not answered in the FAQ) or who need language assistance to apply. The Economic Development Department can be reached at sdbusiness@sandiego.gov or 619-236-6700.