Business Improvement Grant (BIG) Program Guidelines

Fiscal Year 2026/2027

I. INTRODUCTION

The City of Amarillo has established the competitive Business Improvement Grant Program (BIG Program), which will provide technical and financial assistance to property owners and/or business tenants seeking to renovate or restore their commercial building façades. This program is intended to serve as an economic development instrument, aimed at assisting property and business owners/tenants within established neighborhood plan areas and neighborhood empowerment zone commercial corridors. The program guidelines will support the utilization of funds that may be made available from additional sources for projects. These sources may be specific to certain neighborhoods and may create opportunities for owners to receive additional matching funds. City staff will continually evaluate and analyze the successes and areas in need of improvement and may adjust guidelines so that future efforts are more effectual and practical.

Additionally, the BIG Program is designed to support local businesses in improving their properties that promote the expansion and development of new and existing business enterprises while improving the appearance and visual character of the community. The BIG program is *not* designed to subsidize corrections to building code violations that prolong the life of a substandard commercial property. Any BIG Program project should strive toward increases in sales and/or revenue for the occupant or property owner.

The BIG Program will provide up to a fifty percent (50%) matching grant with a cap of $20,000 per grant (i.e. $40,000+ total project cost) for the funding of well-designed exterior improvements that create a more attractive storefront while creating, if necessary, an accessible entrance for the public. This may include, but is not necessarily limited to, the restoration of architectural details, improved windows and doors, well-proportioned signage, free-standing signage, lighting, and paint.

Applicants may also be eligible for additional incentives through the City's Neighborhood Empowerment Zone (NEZ) waiver and rebate program. Fees may be waived for sign permits, demolition, building permits, plan review, etc. Depending on the level of investment by the applicant, property tax abatements and sales tax rebates may also be available. Such incentives will be identified on a case-by-case basis by City staff and will require a separate application.

II. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The following criteria must be met for participation in the BIG Program:

1. Applicants must be commercial property owners or commercial tenants whose business is within the boundaries of the established neighborhood plan areas and/or the neighborhood empowerment zone commercial corridors. (see attached map)

2. Businesses may not utilize funds from this program to abate any conditions for which the City or State has already identified as a violation; likewise, funds from this program may not be utilized to meet any contractual obligations, such as developer obligations identified in a Chapter 380 agreement;

3. Tenants must have written approval from property owners to participate in the program. Such documentation shall be provided to the City;

4. Applicants wishing to pursue grant funds for a sign project must permanently remove any nonconforming signage on the property as part of the improvement;

5. Property owners must be up to date on all property and sales tax requirements prior to participation in the program;

6. Applicants must comply with all State and local laws and regulations pertaining to licensing, permits, building code and zoning requirements.

7. Understanding that the overall objective of the BIG Program is to improve the exterior, visibility, and presentation of a property, the City has the discretion to decline an application while suggesting enhancements that would enable future acceptance.

8. A property is eligible for only one grant under this program per year.

III. DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Improvements to be funded by the program must be compatible with the character and architecture of the individual building as well as meet city standards regarding construction and design. Buildings with significant architectural qualities are encouraged to restore and maintain these features. Improvements for buildings without such architectural features should still be carefully considered and seen as an opportunity to enhance the appearance of the buildings and their streetscapes.

Projects proposed for historic buildings and signs shall complete the work in such a manner that it meets the Secretary of the Interior Standards. For the purpose of this program, historic buildings and signs, are defined as those listed on the National Register of Historic Places, contribute to a National Register Historic District, or are identified as a medium or high priority through recent historic survey efforts.

A. Eligible Improvements/Expenses

Improvements should be oriented to the pedestrian and provide visual interest both day and night. Efforts should be made to facilitate access into the business and to create an identity unique to the respective neighborhood. The following improvements are encouraged:

1. Restoration of details in historic buildings and signs, and removal of elements which cover architectural details;
2. Exterior paint improvements;
3. Window display areas which are appropriately scaled;
4. Window replacement and window framing visible from the street which are appropriately scaled to the building.
5. Monument or freestanding signage, as defined in § 4-2-2 of the City of Amarillo Code of Ordinances;
6. Additional signage that is attractively integrated into the architecture of the building, awnings or canopies, and entryways;
7. Lighting that is visually appealing and appropriately illuminates signage, storefront window displays, and recessed areas of a building façade, as guided by § 4-2-9 of the City of Amarillo Code of Ordinances;
8. Awnings or canopies that can be both functional and visually appealing;
9. Curbing, irrigation, approved trees, landscaping beds (not including planting material) not to exceed twenty percent (20%) of the project budget;
10. Resurfacing and/or restriping of parking lots visible from street, not to exceed fifty percent (50%) of the total project budget;
11. New storefront construction, appropriately scaled within an existing building;
12. Removal of architectural barriers to public accessibility.

Other improvements beyond the above may be considered with written approval if they meet the objectives of the BIG Program.

B. Ineligible Improvements/Expenses:

1. Exterior improvements located on the sides or rear of the building not visible from a public right-of-way;
2. Interior improvements;

3. Playground or recreational equipment;
4. Structural changes;
5. Burglar bars;
6. Security Alarm System;
7. “In-Kind work”;
8. New construction;
9. Furniture;
10. Architectural or other professional fees;
11. Asbestos testing, removal, abatement, or remediation; or
12. Improvements for which insurance funds are received.

C. Prior Improvements

Alterations and improvements made prior to receiving a “Notice to Proceed with Improvements” are not eligible for reimbursement.

D. Alterations

The applicant must agree not to change or alter the improved façade without prior written approval from the City for five (5) years from the date of the rebate payment issued under the BIG Program, except in cases where routine maintenance (such as resurfacing a parking lot) is the original improvement. In cases involving historical preservation activities, the project may be subject to a preservation easement and/or additional stipulations assigned by the Texas Historical Commission.

IV. PROGRAM ASSISTANCE

A. Financial Assistance

Funding offered is a matching grant in which the BIG Program reimburses the applicant up to fifty percent (50%) of total project costs, up to a $20,000 maximum match (i.e. $40,000+ total project cost), for exterior improvements. Architectural design fees may not be included in the total cost of eligible improvements.

The applicant’s match may be in the form of other financial aid (i.e. grant or loan) received from other agencies, entities, or banks, but may not be “in-kind.” The BIG Program will only reimburse applicants after the applicant has paid his/her architect, contractor and vendor(s) in full and after the project is determined to have been completed in accordance with program guidelines by City staff. Projects receiving approval will have the authorized grant amount listed in the Notice to Proceed (NTP) letter. Should the approved project come in under budget, the grant amount may be

reduced to match the submitted project costs. However, projects coming in over budget will not have their grant amounts increased above the approved amount.

Exceptions to the reimbursement policy may be approved by the City Manager on a case-by-case basis. The City Manager may also approve payments to be made directly to an approved contractor. Such exceptions shall be made in writing and signed by all parties involved.

B. Technical Assistance

City staff can provide guidance on façade improvements specific to individual storefronts. The applicant may hire a licensed architect to work on the project from start to completion or request that city staff assist with the conceptual design of the façade. If the latter option is chosen, the applicant will still be expected to hire a licensed architect, if necessary, to carry forth this conceptual design to completion of construction. City staff will monitor progress of projects to ensure compliance with BIG Program guidelines and all applicable City Ordinances.

C. Application and Information

If you wish to participate in the BIG Program, please visit the Business Improvement Grant section of the City of Amarillo's website or contact the City of Amarillo economic development department at rachel.cook@amarillo.gov.

All applications will now be submitted and managed through CivicServe. This platform allows businesses to view program overview and submission guidelines, upload required documents, monitor application status, view timelines, and communicate with program administrators all in one convenient place. Paper and email submissions will no longer be accepted.

The economic development department is able to provide application assistance, should the applicant require reasonable accommodation. Please contact the economic development department for assistance.

The City of Amarillo reserves the right to make adjustments regarding conditions and parameters outlined in these guidelines.

V. TERMINATION

The City of Amarillo reserves the right to terminate any agreement under the BIG 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 receiving the NTP from City staff. If improvements, as presented in this application, are not completed within the stated timeline, the agreement is considered terminated and will result in the loss of granted funds.