



Storefront Improvement Program Frequently Asked Questions

What is this program all about?

The Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) provides design assistance and financial incentives to small business owners who wish to make a creative change to and improve the curb appeal of their storefronts. This program is not about providing funding for regular maintenance of a building.

How long does the program take?

This depends on how quickly it takes you to complete the construction of your project. The design phase takes approximately four weeks. You have six months from the time you are accepted into the program to approve a final design rendering. You then have one year from the date the final design is approved to incur expenses and submit reimbursement requests for eligible project-related costs.

Am I accepted into the program as soon as I submit my application?

No. Once the program staff receives an application, it will be reviewed in approximately seven business days. Program staff will reach out with any requests for further information and inform you of your status. You will be notified by an email that announces official acceptance into the program.

The application asks for my City of San Diego Business Tax Certificate. Where can I find that?

The City of San Diego requires all businesses to have an active Business Tax Certificate (BTC). The BTC is different from your [IRS Employment Identification Number](#) (EIN) and [California Sellers Permit](#). You can [learn more here](#) as well as contact the Office of the City Treasurer to find your business tax certificate number or apply for one online. Your application will stay on our waiting list until your BTC is current and paid in full.

I only rent my storefront; does my landlord need to apply for the program?

No. Business tenants are welcome to apply but if you are not the property owner, please note that you will need to provide proof that the property owner approves of the final design rendering.

Can a property owner apply for the program?

The property owner must be a commercial occupant of the subject property to be eligible to participate. A BTC dated prior to the application date can be used as proof of occupancy.

Are all commercial buildings eligible?

No. Only those with customer entrances onto the public right-of-way are eligible.

How does the deposit work?

Deposits are collected at the first design meeting and returned upon proper completion of the project.

Can I choose my own architect?

No and yes. The program incentive provides free concept design services with architects that have a current contract with the program and these are assigned based on a rotation that balances distribution of tasks and availability of the architects. However, if there is a waiting list to meet with a contracted architect and you would like to avoid the wait or if you have a preferred architect, you may hire a California-licensed architect to create the design rendering. Please contact our program staff before taking this step.

Can I qualify for the storefront improvement program without getting an architect rendering?

No. All projects must have a design rendering created by a California-licensed architect on file before any expenses are incurred.

What is the difference between a mural and a sign?

A mural is painted, mosaic or any other graphic artwork applied to a wall or fence. When painted graphics contain copy, advertising symbols, lettering, trademarks, or other references to the business, products, or services provided on the premises, the copy area is considered sign area and must comply with sign code regulations per the San Diego Municipal Code §142.1210.

Are funds distributed before or after construction?

This is a reimbursement-based program, which means that funds are only distributed after the project is completed. In addition, the final project must look like the on-file design plan was followed.

Can I get reimbursed for work that has been started or completed before applying?

No. Prior to doing any of the work on your storefront, you must apply for the program, have a design rendering completed by a California-licensed architect and have the rendering approved by the Storefront Improvement Program Manager.

Can I do the work on my storefront myself?

Yes. Any work that is completed is required to be up to San Diego Municipal Code standards and permitted, if required. Applicants may only request reimbursement for labor costs if it is done by a California-licensed contractor with an active City of San Diego Business Tax Certificate.

I'm making improvements to my entire building; does this program cover more than the storefront?

No. Eligible expenses are only those that are along the street-facing portion of the building. For example, the costs of painting the back of the building or the inside of your business are not eligible.

Does a project have to be very expensive?

No! We are excited to think about inexpensive solutions to help your business thrive. For example, paint can be amazingly transformative - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEiEK52Ahug>

How long does it take to receive my reimbursement?

It takes approximately 30-45 days to receive your reimbursement from the time you submit the request form, receipts and proofs of payment. At least two of the proposed improvement components must be completed prior to requesting reimbursement.

For further questions, please contact program staff:

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