

Façade Improvement Grant (FIG) Program

Terms & Conditions Effective June 27, 2025

Program Overview

The Baltimore Development Corporation offers a variety of Façade Improvement Grant (FIG) programs to assist businesses and property owners in funding building improvements that noticeably improve the look and feel of the surrounding commercial area. Businesses and commercial properties located in Baltimore City are eligible for this program.

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1. Applicant Eligibility

Eligible Applicants

- Businesses with signed leases and commercial property owners in Baltimore City.
- Owners of vacant property may apply for this program, with the understanding that no reimbursement will be issued by BDC until:
 - A signed lease for the first-floor commercial tenant has been submitted
- The first-floor business is open and operational
 - A Use & Occupancy permit is issued for the entire building
- **Applicants must be in compliance with all local, state, and federal regulations, including being in Good Standing with the State of Maryland.**
 - A BDC staff person can assist with determining the standing of your business at the time of application, and applicants can check their standing with the

state of Maryland at any time using this link:

<https://egov.maryland.gov/BusinessExpress/EntitySearch>

Ineligible Applicants

The FIG program is only available to businesses and commercial property owners. The following projects are NOT eligible for this program:

- Residential Properties
- New Construction (defined as a building erected within the last three years)
- Non-Profit Entities (except those that sell goods or services to the general public)
- Any application on behalf of a property owner whose building is actively listed for sale
- Any property that has received a FIG in the prior 12-month period
- Any applicant who has previously received a FIG but has not maintained the improvements in good repair, as required

NOTE: *The FIG program cannot be used for properties or improvements that are not in compliance with applicable zoning laws and urban renewal plans, unless the project brings the property into compliance.*

2. Eligible Improvements

Before planning your project, please review the [Property Improvement Inspiration Guide](#) for visual examples and design standards that guide eligible improvements and overall aesthetic expectations.

- The proposed improvement must make a **noticeable and significant** contribution to the revitalization of a commercial corridor and/or the look and feel of the building.
- The FIG program is available to businesses and commercial property owners who make more than one eligible improvement to the façade of their building. All projects must include at least one “Primary” improvement (detailed in the next section) and a second eligible improvement.
- Any application that includes an “Ineligible Improvement” will not be approved. The final grant amount will be calculated based on the total cost of eligible improvements, inclusive of required taxes and fees.

Eligible Primary Improvements

This grant prioritizes the following street-level improvements:

- Business Signage:

- Building-Mounted signs (including Channel Letter signs)
- Blade Signs
- Hand-painted Signs
- **NOTE:** All funded projects are required to have permanent business signage in place at the time of reimbursement, even if signage is not part of the approved scope of work.
- Exterior Painting
- Storefront windows, doors, and carpentry
- Exterior Lighting
- Awnings
- Window and door upgrades that demonstrate clear aesthetic improvement

Eligible Secondary Improvements

- Masonry and cornice work
- Upper floor building façade improvements
- Semi-permanent landscaping features (planter boxes, etc.)
- Murals (see Murals section for details)
- Interior-mounted door and window security features
- Window decal signage
- Window and door replacement with no clear aesthetic improvement

Signage-Only Projects

Businesses whose only outstanding façade-related need is commercial signage may still be eligible for a Façade Improvement Grant, even if they do not **meet the requirement of making more than one eligible improvement**. A signage-only FIG will be considered in the following cases:

- New business occupying an existing space that has, in the assessment of BDC, no additional need for exterior aesthetic improvement because the space already features new or high-quality doors, windows, lighting, painting, and related elements.
- New businesses occupying space in an existing shopping center, where the property owner places specific façade or signage conditions, requirements, and/ or restrictions on each business, and the shopping center is already maintained to the standard required under the Shopping Center FIG.

3. Ineligible Improvements

BDC will NOT approve a Façade Improvement Grant application that includes any of the improvements listed below.

- Exterior roll-down security doors (must be see-through)
- Electronic scroll signs
- Lightbox (back-lit) signs
- Banners or vinyl signs
- Non-ornamental flood lighting
- Window-mounted LED lights
- Barbed wire
- Improvements that conflict with the zoning code or the area's Urban Renewal Plan (URP). Your BDC representative can help you determine if zoning or a URP will disqualify any of the elements in your scope of work.
 - More info on Baltimore's URPs can be found here:
<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/planning-plans/urban-renewal>

Other Ineligible Expenses

Some projects include expenses that BDC does not consider eligible expenses for the purposes of a Façade Improvement Grant. However, an applicant may proceed with the following improvements at their own cost without jeopardizing the Façade Improvement Grant for other eligible items:

- Deferred maintenance
- Roof work
- Structural repairs
- Security systems and cameras
- Wheelchair ramps or similar improvements required by law
- Permit Fees
- Landscaping materials like planters, plants, mulch, etc.*
- Outdoor seating areas*
- Improvements not permanently affixed to the building*
- Rear or service alley-facing building work*

***NOTE:** Expenses marked with an asterisk above are ineligible for the FIG program but may be eligible expenses under the BDC's Outdoor Spaces Grant. Please contact your BDC representative for more information.

4. Special Considerations

Architectural/Design Services

- Architectural and design services are considered a valid expense, but their total **must not exceed 15% of the total project cost.**
- ***Only one estimate for architectural/design services will be required.***
- ***If the FIG application is approved, architectural and design costs incurred before the date of approval may still be reimbursed. These are the only reimbursable costs that can be incurred prior to grant approval.***

Murals

- Murals can provide a unique, attractive addition to a FIG project. A maximum of 25% of the total project cost may be dedicated to this element.
- ***Only one estimate for a mural will be required.***

Custom/Specialty Elements

- Due to their unique nature, custom or specialty construction elements for which it is difficult or impossible to procure two estimates will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- A maximum of 25% of the total project cost may be dedicated to this element.
- ***Approved elements will require only one estimate***

5. Description of Available Façade Improvement Grants

All FIGs are reimbursement-based. Applicants must complete and pay for the entire project before receiving funds.

Except for the Shopping Center FIG, all FIG awards are structured as a 1:1 match of the applicant's investment up to the maximum award amount. For example, if an applicant is awarded a grant with a maximum award of \$7,500, they must invest at least \$15,000 to receive the full amount. If they invest \$4,000, they will receive a \$2,000 award.

Several FIG options exist to support different property types and contexts, each with its own eligibility requirements and award maximums. All these options are described in detail below, and your BDC representative can help you determine which is the best fit for your project:

Overview

FIG Type	Maximum Award	Award Details
Citywide FIG	\$7,500	50% of the total cost of eligible improvements.
Corner Property FIG	\$15,000	50% of the total cost of eligible improvements. \$50,000 minimum investment required
Vacant Building FIG	\$15,000	50% of the total cost of eligible improvements. \$50,000 minimum investment required
Industrial FIG	\$15,000	50% of the total cost of eligible improvements.
Shopping Center FIG	\$50,000	Covers 10% of total project costs \$100,000 minimum investment required

City-Wide FIG:

The most used and applicable FIG program. Provides up to \$7,500 in matching funds reimbursement for façade improvements to any commercial property in Baltimore City.

Corner Property FIG:

Provides up to \$15,000 in matching funds reimbursement for façade improvements to a commercial property located at an intersection. The purpose of this grant is to address two facades that are within view of public right of way corridors. The following requirements and details apply:

- The overall project must involve at least \$50,000 in total investment for interior and exterior improvements.
- Properties must be corner commercial buildings sited at the intersection of two streets receiving vehicular traffic.

- Abutment of alleys or other service corridors does not qualify a building as a Corner Property.
- Demolition of adjacent properties does not “cause” the existence of a Corner Property
- The project must result in a first-floor commercial tenant upon completion
- The reimbursement amount is calculated solely on the eligible façade work, up to the \$15,000 maximum.

Vacant Building FIG:

Provides up to \$15,000 in matching funds reimbursement for façade improvements to a commercial building that is presently in need of a major, full building overhaul, is uninhabitable, and unable to obtain a legal Use & Occupancy Permit.

- The overall project must involve at least \$50,000 in total investment for interior and exterior improvements.
- The project must result in a first-floor commercial tenant upon completion.
Reimbursement will not be issued until:
 - A lease is signed by a first-floor commercial tenant and that business is open
 - A Use & Occupancy permit is issued for the entire building
- The reimbursement amount is calculated solely on the eligible façade work, up to the \$15,000 maximum.

Industrial FIG:

Provides up to \$15,000 in matching funds reimbursement for façade improvements to any industrially zoned business with a total square footage of over 10,000.

- This grant is intended for the improvement of an entire industrially zoned building. It is not intended for use on single elements, localized repairs, or other modifications that do not constitute a full building overhaul.

Shopping Center FIG:

Provides a grant of up to 10% of total project costs – with a maximum reimbursement of \$50,000 – for façade improvements to shopping centers undergoing comprehensive improvements. To qualify for this program, shopping centers must:

- Make a minimum investment of \$100,000
- Produce a 5-year maintenance plan
- Make all the following improvements:

- Improved/adequate lighting
- Well-maintained parking lot
- New landscaping (trees, bushes, flowers, etc.)
- Consistent high-quality signage for all shopping center tenants
- Prepare a signage plan for future tenants

NOTE: A shopping center is defined as a commercial property comprising two or more retail or service businesses located on the same site and designed to function as a unified commercial destination, typically with shared access, circulation, or parking areas, and under common ownership or coordinated management.

6. Project Requirements & Compliance

Estimates

- Each aspect of the project must have two separate quotes from licensed contractors that are in good standing with the State of Maryland and not affiliated with the applicant. For example, if a project were to include painting, signage, and new windows, applicants must procure:
 - Two (2) estimates from two general contractors capable of handling all of the work
- OR**
- Two (2) estimates for painting; two (2) estimates for signage, and two (2) estimates for windows
- The final grant reimbursement amount will be based on the lowest bids for each component of the project.
- Applicants who are licensed contractors are allowed to bid on and perform the work, but two additional quotes from licensed contractors that are not affiliated with the Applicant are still required.
- All Contractors, Sign Fabricators, or tradespeople must also hold the proper construction licensure per their businesses and or trade for their bid to be considered.
- **TIP:** *It is strongly recommended that applicants request itemized estimates from contractors as they are soliciting bids.*

Renderings

- Applicants must provide a visual representation of the proposed improvements sufficient to illustrate the planned changes and the placement of those improvements.
- Acceptable materials may include hand-drawn sketches, annotated photographs, or other visual tools that demonstrate the proposed improvements. Renderings do not need to be professionally created; however, they must clearly convey the scope, design intent, and location of the proposed work so that BDC can accurately assess the project.
- Applicants with questions about what is required or how to prepare suitable renderings should consult their assigned BDC representative prior to submission.

Timeframe

- **DO NOT BEGIN WORK PRIOR TO APPROVAL.** Work completed prior to the grant award is not eligible for reimbursement.
- Construction must be completed within 120 days of the award letter, unless otherwise approved in writing.

Extension Requests

BDC must receive all extension requests in writing (e-mail is acceptable). Approval of extension requests will be emailed.

Change in Project Proposal

- BDC must approve all changes to an approved scope of work **PRIOR** to those changes being undertaken.
- Changes that reduce the project scope and cost will reduce the grant amount.
- Changes that expand the scope of work may increase the grant amount, subject to BDC's review and approval of the expanded scope.
- If changes to the scope of work are performed without BDC approval, BDC reserves the right to terminate the grant in its entirety.

Maintenance of Improvements

As part of the grant acceptance process, the applicant agrees to maintain all improvements made per the approved plans in their finished state for a period of five (5) years.

Permitting and Code Requirements

- **Contractors must secure required building permits and minor privilege permits (if necessary), and complete the project in accordance with all applicable codes, ordinances, and standard engineering practices.**
- Contractors must be properly registered, licensed, insured, and pass a debarment check as required by law.
- Approval of a FIG by BDC does not replace or imply approval from other City agencies. Applicants and their contractors are solely responsible for obtaining all necessary permits and ensuring full compliance with local codes and regulations prior to commencing work.
- **NOTE: Permit fees are NOT eligible for reimbursement.**

Use & Occupancy Permit Requirement

- If you do not have a use/occupancy permit at the time of application, you must present one prior to reimbursement.
- No FIG project will be reimbursed without a Use & Occupancy permit for the improved commercial space.

Reimbursement

- To qualify for reimbursement, grantees must submit the following to their BDC Representative:
 - A completed Reimbursement Request Form, provided by the BDC Representative
 - Two (2) photos of the completed work that show the entire improvement,
 - Copies of ALL payments to contractors and vendors. These proofs of payment can include the following, and should include the names of the applicant and the vendor name, as well as the date of payment:
 - Cashed checks obtained from the applicant's bank. The payee should match the estimates included with the application, or be accompanied by associated invoices
 - Invoices marked paid. Invoices should indicate what work was completed.
 - Receipts that include the products purchased, itemized costs
- Properties are eligible for reimbursement only when they have received a full building certificate of occupancy AND a first-floor commercial tenant is in place

- Properties must have clearly visible, permanent business signage installed prior to reimbursement. Signage does not need to be part of the approved scope of work, but a building without installed business signage at the time of project completion will not be eligible for reimbursement. If signage is removed or damaged during the project, it must be reinstalled or replaced before closeout.
- **NOTE:** If the final project cost is lower than the project costs provided to BDC at the time of application and approval, BDC will reduce the grant amount to maintain the required matching ratio (1:1).

Aesthetic Considerations

All BDC Façade Improvement Grants programs **are discretionary in nature, and awards are not guaranteed**. Applications are reviewed by an internal committee and may require significant revisions to gain approval.

If a building's surrounding area is pedestrian-friendly, proposed project designs should be in harmony with the area's character. If the surrounding district is not pedestrian-friendly, proposals should prioritize improvements designed to appeal to pedestrians, aiming to transform the area.

The distinguishing original qualities and character of the building shall be preserved; removal of historical or distinctive architectural features may disqualify a project. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced. If replacement is necessary, new materials should match the original materials in terms of design, color, texture, and other visual qualities.

Contemporary design alterations to existing properties are acceptable if they do not compromise the significant historical, architectural, and cultural elements of the building and if the design is compatible with the size, scale, color, material, and character of the property and its adjacent buildings. For additional guidance, please refer to the Property Improvement Inspiration document linked here: <https://bit.ly/FIGinspiration>

Applicants in a Baltimore City Historic District (CHAP)

Applicants within a designated CHAP Historic Districts must receive an Authorization to Proceed from CHAP before commencing work, and the scope of work must adhere to the rules, regulations, and design guidance from CHAP. It is not necessary to obtain this approval prior to applying, as the project's scope of work may change pending BDC's review and approval of this grant

- More information about how to obtain this authorization can be found here: <https://chap.baltimorecity.gov/applications-procedures-guidelines>
- A list of Baltimore City Historic (CHAP) Districts can be found here: <https://chap.baltimorecity.gov/historic-districts/maps>
- CHAP Rules & Regulations and Design Guidelines can be found here: <https://chap.baltimorecity.gov/rules-regulations-and-design-guidelines>

Applicants in a Baltimore City Main Street District

Properties located in Belair-Edison, Federal Hill, Fells Point, Hamilton-Lauraville, Highlandtown, Pennsylvania Avenue, Pigtown, and Waverly may need to submit this application to the local Main Streets Design Review Committee. A BDC staff person will advise.

More information about the Baltimore Mains Streets program can be found here: <https://smba-d.baltimorecity.gov/mwboo/baltimore-main-streets>

7. Application

To begin the process, request an application through the BDC's website and it will be email to you. The application request form can be found here:

<https://www.baltimoredevelopment.com/doing-business/facade-improvement-grant>.

Please note that you will have to meet with a BDC representative at the project site prior to submitting an application, and that work completed prior to an application's approval is NOT eligible for reimbursement.

Application Submission Checklist (For Applicant Use)

Use this checklist to confirm that your application package is complete before submitting:

- All Fields of Application Complete (including signature of applicant and, if applicable, landlord)
- W-9 of Applicant
- Two pictures of the project property in its current state
- Conceptual drawings, renderings, or plans of proposed work
- Two (2) Contractor estimates for any/all work to be performed
- Signed lease, letter of intent, or other proof of commercial occupancy of the property

8. Closeout

If your project is awarded a FIG, you will need to submit the following items during the closeout process. Keep these requirements in mind as you complete your project:

- At least 2 after photos that show the entire completed scope of work and the business signage
- Copies of ALL payments to Contractors for eligible work completed (see the reimbursement section above)
 - Proof of contractor payments should add up to the “Final Total Project Cost” amount, above.
- A completed and signed Reimbursement Request Form. You can request this form from your BDC representative at any time.