

Fountain Hills Downtown Façade Improvement Program

The Town is introducing a Façade Improvement Program to improve the aesthetics in Downtown Fountain Hills. With an initial budget of \$50,000, the program will provide matching reimbursement grants of up to \$10,000 per property to encourage visible, high-quality exterior improvements. The goal is to create a more welcoming, attractive downtown that reflects Fountain Hills' desert character, supports small businesses, and fosters new investment.

The program is designed to address aging or outdated façades and inconsistent aesthetics that currently limit the district's appeal. By lowering the cost barrier for property owners and tenants, the Town can stimulate private investment, improve safety and accessibility, and reinforce a sense of civic pride. Eligible projects include painting, masonry repair, windows, doors, awnings, signage, lighting, shade structures, and ADA upgrades. Applicants must hold an active Fountain Hills business license, be current on all tax obligations, remain free of code violations, and have no pending litigation against the Town.

To safeguard public funds, the program is structured as a reimbursement model with a required 50 percent private match, a five-year maintenance covenant, and a clawback provision if obligations are not met. These measures ensure compliance with Arizona's Gift Clause by demonstrating a clear public purpose, adequate consideration, and enforceable accountability. Applications will be reviewed through a transparent process that begins with a pre-application consultation, followed by committee evaluation and issuance of a Notice to Proceed. Projects must be completed within six months, with inspections at mid-point and completion before reimbursement is issued.

The program is funded as an ongoing \$50,000 expense from the Town's Downtown Fund. Town staff will evaluate the program year-by-year to determine the success of the program, which includes number of applicants and number of improved façade improvements.

In short, the Façade Improvement Program is a strategic, legally sound, and community-focused initiative that combines public investment with private commitment. It will deliver visible improvements, economic growth, and a stronger sense of place, positioning Fountain Hills' Downtown as a vibrant and welcoming destination for years to come.

1. Purpose Statement

The Downtown Façade Improvement Program is designed to catalyze visible, high-quality enhancements. By offering targeted financial investments and technical support, the program aims to reshape the downtown into a welcoming, economically vibrant corridor that serves residents and visitors alike.

1.1 Vision for Downtown

Create an inviting and cohesive environment for residents and visitors alike, where well-maintained storefronts, shade structures, and complementary design elements reflect Fountain Hills' character and climate. This vision supports a thriving mix of shops, eateries, and services anchored by an attractive public realm.

1.2 Program Rationale

Many buildings in the Downtown District exhibit aging façades, deferred maintenance, or inconsistent aesthetics that detract from the visitors' experience, visual appeal and economic activity. By lowering the cost barrier for property owners and tenants, the program addresses these conditions systematically and equitably.

1.3 Strategic Alignment

The Façade Improvement Program is intentionally designed to reinforce Fountain Hills' long-term planning and economic development goals. Rather than operating in isolation, it serves as a tactical extension of broader civic strategies that promote revitalization, resilience, and place-based identity. Specifically, the program aligns with the following initiatives:

- Advances goals in the Fountain Hills General Plan 2020 calling for downtown revitalization and enhanced public spaces
- Supports the Economic Development Strategy's objective to increase private investment and small-business resilience
- Reinforces placemaking priorities in the Town's branding initiative by showcasing Fountain Hills' desert heritage and community pride; and an
- Implementation strategy within the Council-approved Downtown Strategy

1.4 Expected Public Benefits

By investing in the visual and functional quality of downtown storefronts, the Façade Improvement Program delivers tangible returns not only to individual property owners, but to the broader Fountain Hills community. These benefits span economic, aesthetic, and civic dimensions, and include:

- Stimulated private capital investment that multiplies the impact of Town funds
- Enhanced pedestrian comfort and safety through improved lighting, shading, and accessibility
- Strengthened sense of place and civic identity as façades evolve in harmony with local design standards
- Measurable economic uplift via increased foot traffic, new business openings, and higher property values

2. Program Objectives

This program is built around four core objectives. Each objective includes targeted actions and measurable outcomes to ensure that façade improvements deliver lasting benefits for Fountain Hills' Downtown District.

Objective #1: Stimulate Private Investment

Encourage property owners and tenants to commit their own capital toward visible, high-quality façade work by reducing financial risk and highlighting return on investment.

Objective #2: Support Economic Development

Drive increased foot traffic, customer engagement, and business growth by elevating the street-level experience.

Objective #3: Address Safety and Code Compliance

Facilitate exterior upgrades that resolve hazardous conditions, improve accessibility, and ensure conformity with zoning and building codes.

3. Eligibility Criteria

To ensure that grant funds are directed toward projects with the greatest potential for public benefit, the grant program establishes specific eligibility requirements for grant applicants, properties, and proposed improvements. These criteria help maintain fairness, legal compliance, and alignment with the Town's revitalization goals:

3.1 Geographic Boundaries

- Properties must front the public right-of-way within Downtown District.
- All façades facing streets, plazas, or pedestrian pathways in that zone are eligible.

3.2 Grant Applicant Pre-Qualifications

- Property owners in good standing (no unpaid fees).
- Long-term tenants (minimum 12-month lease remaining) with written owner consent.
- Ineligible applicants include Town employees, Council members and their immediate family members, and those involved in pending litigation against the Town.

3.3 Property & Project Eligibility

- Commercial or mixed-use buildings—ground-floor retail, restaurants, offices, and service providers.
- Must involve a visible, exterior improvement: painting, signage, windows/doors, lighting, awnings, masonry repair, ADA enhancements.
- Work must be permanent (no seasonal/pop-up elements) and comply with zoning Chapter 19.04.
- Owners of older buildings with aging façade elements are encouraged to apply.
- Leaseholders must provide proof of owner approval.

3.4 Requirements for Selected Applicants

Applicants who have been selected to receive funding must:

- Be without outstanding code violations or open enforcement actions.
- Have no pending litigation against the Town of Fountain Hills
- Be current on all utility accounts and Town fees.
- Attend a mandatory pre-application meeting with Planning staff to discuss the subsequent Design Review process and confirm scope.

3.5 Ineligible Uses

- Architectural design or engineering expenses
- Interior remodels or roof replacements not tied directly to façade work.
- New building construction or additions.
- Infrastructure upgrades (streetscape, parking lot repaving) unless part of a publicly visible façade element.
- Tools and equipment used for the project
- Commercial messaging or signage of any type or style
- Murals
- Landscape and planter installations that not intended to be permanent installations.

3.6 Required Documentation

Applicants submit the following with their application packet:

- Completed application
- Proof of an active Town-issued business license
- Proof of property tax payment and code-compliance clearance.
- Owner-tenant consent form (if tenant applies).
- Recent color photographs of existing façades.
- Elevations, material samples, and color boards
- Detailed cost estimate from a licensed contractor.

4. Funding Structure

This section details how façade grants are budgeted, awarded, and disbursed, plus the financial safeguards that protect Town funds.

4.1 Program Budget & Funding Source

The program is funded with \$50,000 from the Town's Downtown Fund. Town staff will evaluate the program year-by-year to determine the success of the program, which includes number of applicants and number of improved façade improvements.

4.2 Grant Amount & Match Requirement

- **Matching Rate:** 50% reimbursement of eligible project costs.
- **Maximum Award:** \$10,000 per individual property; Minimum grant of \$1,500 to ensure administrative efficiency.
- **Combined Leverage Goal:** Every \$1 of public grant should spur at least \$1 of private investment.

4.3 Disbursement & Reimbursement Process

1. **Notice to Proceed:** Issued when the grant agreement is fully executed.
2. **Design Review Approval and Building Permits, if necessary:** Applicant selected to receive grant must file for Design Review by Planning staff and obtain building permits obtain.
3. **Project Completion:** Work must finish by March 31, 2026 of Notice to Proceed.
4. **Submission of Documentation:** Applicant delivers paid invoices, lien waivers, proof of payment, and before/after photos.
5. **Final Inspection:** Staff planners to verify compliance with approved scope and design guidelines. Building official and inspectors may be consulted as necessary
6. **Reimbursement Payment:** Processed within 30 days of inspection.

4.4 Grant Application Review Timeline and Applicant Priority

- **April 2026:** Program announcement.
- **May 2026:** Applications due.
- **June 2026.** Panel review and applicant selection.
- **July 2026 through March 2027:** Program implementation.
- Business establishments that generate more foot traffic, such as eateries and retail stores, will be given priority over office facilities.
- Older buildings with deteriorating façades will be given priority over newer properties with recent façade treatments.

4.5 Financial Safeguards

- All grants require a **matching fund deposit** or proof of financing before work begins.
- A **maintenance covenant** ensures improvements remain in good condition for at least five years.
- A **clawback provision** recovers Town funds if obligations (e.g., maintenance, project completion) are not met.

5. Design Guidelines

This section defines the aesthetic guidelines and technical standards for all façade improvements within the Downtown District. Designs should honor Fountain Hills’ unique character, enhance the visitors’ experience and promote long-term durability. At a minimum, all architectural review standards must comply with Chapter 19 (Architectural Review Standards) of the Fountain Hills Zoning Ordinance.

5.1 Overarching Principles

Façade work must do one or more of the following:

- Complement adjacent buildings in scale, rhythm, and proportion
- Prioritize transparency at street level (windows, display areas)
- Provide human-scale elements (recessed entries, seating niches)
- Create shade and shelter through canopies or overhangs

5.2 Architectural Style & Materials

Approved materials include:

- Masonry (brick, stone, concrete block)
- Smooth or textured stucco
- Metal panels (aluminum, steel) with matte or low-sheen finishes
- Wood or composite in natural or muted tones for design accents
- High-performance glazing (low-e, tinted)

Avoid synthetic veneers, highly reflective metals, or vinyl spandrel panels.

5.3 Color Palette & Finishes

- Limit each façade to a maximum of three primary colors (body, trim, accent)
- Earth tones and muted pastels that reflect desert landscapes
- Coordinated accent hues for doors, window frames, and awnings
- Low-gloss or matte paint to reduce glare

5.4 Awnings, Canopies & Outdoor Structures

- Canvas awnings on metal frames, with straight or gently curved profiles
- Fixed metal canopies with integrated drainage and underside lighting
- Extended height limited to upper edge of second-story windows
- No more than 30 percent transparent panels on canopy undersides

5.5 Lighting

- Wall-mounted fixtures that direct light downward (full cut-off)
- Pedestrian-scale sconces flanking entries and display windows
- Accent lighting to highlight architectural details, not flood the streetscape
- Use of LED bulbs rated for 50,000-hour service life
- Must comply with Zoning Ordinance Chapter 8, Outdoor Lighting Control Ordinance

5.6 Accessibility & Safety

As needed, improvements on all properties must:

- Comply with ADA requirements for ramps, thresholds, handrails, and path widths
- Provide clear signage and tactile ground-surface indicators at entrances
- Ensure exterior finishes are slip-resistant in wet conditions
- Incorporate security glazing or laminated glass in high-traffic areas

5.7 Sustainability & Energy Efficiency

The Town encourages:

- Materials with recycled or locally sourced content
- High-efficiency doors and windows (ENERGY STAR rated)
- Rain-capturing planters at storefront bases
- Solar shading devices (perforated metal screens, louvers)

5.8 Compliance Review & Deviations

- Applicants submit detailed elevations, material samples, and color boards.
- Staff performs an administrative review for basic compliance.
- Significant departures or alternative materials require Design Review body approval.
- Minor adjustments (up to 10 percent change in color or material) may be approved administratively upon written request.

6. Review Process for Successful Grant Applicants

A clear, step-by-step workflow ensures transparency, timeliness, and accountability from initial inquiry through final reimbursement.

6.1 Overview

Successful applicants must move through five main phases:

1. Design Review pre-application consultation
2. Formal Submission for Design Review & Completeness Check
3. Design Review completion by staff.
4. Notice to Proceed & Grant Agreement
5. Project Implementation, Final Inspection & Reimbursement

6.2 Pre-Application Consultation

Before applying, every applicant must meet with Planning staff to:

- Review project scope and eligibility
- Discuss architectural design review and zoning requirements
- Identify required supporting materials as needed
- Obtain a signed “Pre-App” form to include with the submission

Pre-application meetings help reduce incomplete applications and costly redesigns later.

6.3 Formal Submission & Completeness Check

Applicants submit a packet via online portal, including:

- Completed online application for Design Review and associated fees
- Owner-tenant consent (if tenant applies)
- Scaled elevation drawings, material/color samples, and site photos
- Detailed cost estimate and contractor license information

Within 10 business days of receipt, staff conducts a completeness check:

- Acceptable: all items present → forward to staff reviewers
- Incomplete: missing or unclear items → notify applicant to revise within 15 days

6.4 Grant Application Review Committee Evaluation

A standing internal Committee (3–5 members: Planning, Public Works and Economic Development staff) will meet in June 2026 to score grant applications using a published rubric:

Criteria	Weight	Description
Visual Impact	30%	Alignment with guidelines; before/after comparison
Economic Benefit	20%	Foot-traffic potential; business viability
Community Identity	20%	Use of local materials, colors, public art
Feasibility & Readiness	20%	Permits secured; realistic timeline
Gift Clause Safeguards	10%	Match, covenant, clawback compliance

Decisions:

- **Approve** as submitted
- **Approve with Conditions** (e.g., adjust color, add signage)
- **Defer** (applicant to submit revisions)
- **Deny** (does not meet objectives or guidelines)

Committee issues its decision and written feedback within 5 business days of meeting.

6.5 Notice to Proceed & Grant Agreement

Once approved:

- Applicant signs Grant Agreement outlining scope, timeline, maintenance covenant, and clawback terms
- Town issues “Notice to Proceed” valid for 60 days
- Applicant provides proof of match funding or deposit
- Applicant files for Design Review and building permits (as needed)

All work must start within the Notice period or risk forfeiture.

6.6 Project Implementation & Site Inspections

During construction:

- Applicant updates staff on milestones (e.g., demolition complete, painting started)
- Planning staff conduct at least two site inspections:
 - **Mid-Project Check:** confirm work aligns with approved plans
 - **Pre-Final Walk-Through:** identify any punch-list items

Applicants may request one written modification (e.g., minor color change) subject to administrative approval.

6.7 Final Inspection & Reimbursement

Upon completion:

- Applicant submits paid invoices, lien waivers, and high-resolution before/after photos
- Staff performs final inspection to certify work matches approved scope
- Finance processes reimbursement within 30 days, issuing up to the grant cap

Reimbursements are pro-rated if costs exceed estimates; unused contingency remains with the Town.

6.8 Appeals & Amendments

If an applicant disagrees with a denial or condition:

- Submit written Appeal Request to the Town Manager or designee within 10 business days of decision
- Town Manager or designee issues a final determination within 20 business days

Amendments during the project (scope or cost changes exceeding 15%) require Committee re-review.

7. Program Evaluation

Town staff will review the program annually to determine success of the program. Staff will discuss successes, challenges, and incorporate feedback from applicants to review the following:

- Public value and possible continued funding
- Strengths, weaknesses, and equity gaps
- Discuss possibilities for renewal, modification, or termination of the program
- Prepare to discuss results to stakeholders and the community

7.1 Key Performance Indicators

Metric Category	Metric	Data Source	Responsible Party
Program Uptake	Applications submitted; approvals granted	Program database; online portal records	Planning Department
Investment Leverage	Private-to-public investment ratio	Applicant financial reports; grants ledger	Finance Department
Visual Impact	Façade area improved (sq. ft.); design score	Before/after photo archive; Design Review records	Planning Staff
Economic Outcomes	Foot traffic; vacancy rate	Feedback from grant recipients; property records	Economic Development Department
Process Efficiency	Time from application to Notice to Proceed	Program tracking log	Planning Department

7.2 Reporting & Continuous Improvement

Staff will incorporate evaluation results into the annual progress report to the Council, which will also summarize key metrics, notable successes, and lessons learned. By systematically tracking these metrics, Fountain Hills will ensure that the Downtown Façade Improvement Program delivers measurable benefits, adapts to changing needs, and remains a cornerstone of the Downtown District’s revitalization strategy.

8. Outreach & Support

To ensure property owners and tenants are aware of the program and feel confident navigating the application process, the Town will implement a focused outreach and support strategy using existing communication channels and scalable tools.

8.1 Outreach Strategy

The Town will announce the program through a press release, website update, and email notifications to Downtown District property owners and business license holders. Basic program information will also be shared via social media and the Chamber of Commerce.

8.2 Support Services

Planning staff will offer one-on-one consultations by appointment. An online application guide, sample design materials, and FAQ page will be available online to assist applicants.

8.3 Communication Tools

Program materials—including brochures, eligibility maps, and contact information—will be available at Town Hall and online. A dedicated webpage will host all forms, deadlines, and updates.