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## *Downtowns & Main Streets*

# How Façade Improvement Programs Can Benefit Your Community

by Amy Facca

**The revitalization of a neglected commercial district or residential neighborhood often begins with improvements to a single building or storefront.**

Even simple changes such as the removal of non-historic materials, repairs, or a new paint job that calls attention to the building's original architectural details signal positive change and often stimulate similar improvements in neighboring buildings.

While this process sometimes begins spontaneously through the work of individual property or business owners, it can be accelerated when a community creates a façade improvement program. **As a result, such programs are frequently**



**among the implementing actions of comprehensive plans, downtown revitalization strategies, and historic preservation plans.**

Façade improvement programs are incentive programs created to encourage property owners and businesses to improve the exterior appearance of their buildings and storefronts. They focus on either commercial or residential properties in historic or non-historic areas and provide financial incentives such as a matching grant or loan, a tax incentive, and design assistance.

Although it may seem to be a minor aspect of an improvement program, **design assistance** enables and helps ensure that building modifications comply with any historic district guidelines or other design guidelines developed specifically to enhance buildings in the target area.

Improvements to this small building in Hamilton, New York, included a new sign, reduction of unsightly signage, a bold new paint scheme highlighting the building's historic character, and a new cornice for the roof gable. The dark paint was used to make non-historic building elements such as the garage door less obvious. All photos by Amy Facca unless otherwise noted.

## **Economic Benefits of Façade Improvements:**

**Façade improvement programs produce many benefits — including strengthening locally owned businesses, which helps keep dollars in the local economy.**



Also in Hamilton, New York, the Nicols-Beal building. In addition to cleaning the brick masonry facade, paint was cleverly used to call attention to the turret cornice and minimize modern window elements in the storefront and upper floors; a new awning was also used to call attention to the storefront and conceal the modern, non-historic aluminum windows in the storefront.

A report in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Dollar & Sense series <sup>1</sup> also found that:

- **Commercial building improvements resulted in an increase in sales in the year after the improvements were made,**
- **Sales improvements were sustained for several years,**
- **Sales increases exceeded increases in local taxes,**
- **The improvements attracted new businesses and shoppers to the target area,**
- **Participants were often motivated to make additional improvements (such as to interior spaces or product lines), and**
- **Owners/tenants of properties and businesses in surrounding areas were motivated to make improvements**

Façade improvement programs, and closely related building rehabilitation programs, are usually developed and managed by organizations with a vested interest in civic improvement.

Programs focused on commercial properties are usually administered and staffed by a municipality's planning, community development, or economic development office; a Main Street organization; a business improvement district; or other government-affiliated entities.

Residential programs are usually carried out by a government or non-profit housing agency or a nonprofit community or neighborhood development organization.

Other entities which may carry out façade improvement programs include institutions such as colleges or hospitals. Their programs are often designed to encourage reinvestment in the commercial or residential neighborhoods surrounding their campuses. Sometimes programs are organized by a blended team made up of local government, an institution such as a college or university, and a nonprofit community or economic development organization.

**The big “carrot” that makes a façade improvement program successful is, of course, the incentives the program offers.** While larger business improvement districts may be able to raise funds through the annual tax levy, funding is usually obtained from a combination of sources. The most common sources are federal and state grants for community and economic development, housing, and downtown revitalization; and municipal revenue. It is not uncommon for a municipality or organization to work with a consortium of local banks that contribute equally to the funding pool to share investment risks.

Application fees and interest income generated by façade improvement loans are also sometimes used to keep funding available and circulating in the target area.

## **Some Key Aspects of Façade Improvement**

## Programs:

- **A formal purpose statement that explains why the program was established.** For example, San Diego, California's façade improvement program "Focus on Downtown," was created "... as part of an overall redevelopment program to improve the quality of life Downtown. The Program is designed to assist property and business owners in rehabilitating the commercial façades of their properties for the purpose of creating a positive visual impact, stimulating private investment, and complementing other community development efforts."

Knoxville, Tennessee established their façade improvement program "to improve the façades of certain types of buildings within targeted redevelopment areas. By bettering the appearance of building facades, the program serves to improve the economic vitality of these areas. Better aesthetics increase property values, improve the marketability of space within the buildings and draw business and residents to the area."

- **A well-defined target area shown on a map or spelled out in clear language.** Successful façade improvement programs focus on concentrated areas where their investment can have an obvious, meaningful and lasting impact to attract other investment.
- **Eligibility criteria and terms for participation which indicate who may participate in the façade improvement program** (e.g. property owners or tenants with written permission from the property owner). This material also describes the type(s) of incentives and any related requirements, such as the minimum and maximum amount of the grant or loan, any requirements for participants to match the grant or loan, whether loans will be forgiven after a certain period of time, interest rates, and repayment terms for the loan.
- **A list or description of eligible (and ineligible) activities.** Depending on the needs of the target area, eligible activities could be historic rehabilitation, storefront improvements, or (in some cases) even new construction on vacant land to eliminate gaps within the area. The range of work generally includes anything related to improvement of the building exterior or visible from the street such as masonry repairs and pointing; façade painting, repair, reconstruction or replacement of historic features; awnings or canopies; signage and exterior lighting; gutters and downspouts; handicap accessibility; and window and door repair or replacement. Interior work, landscaping, and parking are often ineligible, but may be covered by other local incentive programs.
- **An emphasis on good design.** Improving the physical appearance of properties is usually a priority of façade programs and these programs are often capitalized by

federal or state grant funding. As a result, facade improvement projects are often subject to some type of formal design review and approval.

If the program's target area is not in a designated historic district, it may have to comply with design standards established in a municipal planning document for that area.

If it is within a locally-designated historic district and the community has a local historic preservation ordinance, all projects will have to comply with any design guidelines established by the historic district review commission and adopted as part of the local ordinance.

When no local historic district design guidelines exist, the commission will likely rely on the Secretary of Interior's standards for

rehabilitation which will also apply if the target area or property has been listed in the National and State Register of Historic Places.

Because of these design requirements, many façade programs include some form of design assistance, which is usually provided by a staff architect, an architect under contract to the program, or the community's historic district review commission. In communities that have established Main Street programs, a design committee composed of community volunteers will often provide design assistance.



This underutilized pair of commercial buildings in Hamilton, New York, was updated with a whole new color and look, including a new cornice, siding, windows, doors, awning, detailing and other signage. New tenants included offices for a local initiative and a Chinese restaurant relocated from a nearby space.

- **An application and selection process.** Applications collect information about the prospective participant and usually include photographs and a brief description of the type of work the applicant would like to have completed. All applications are reviewed by program staff and participants are often chosen by a selection committee. The selection process varies depending on whether applications are accepted on a first come, first served basis or as part of a group of applications submitted by a deadline established by the façade program.

## Where to Find Information:

Not surprisingly façade improvement programs vary considerably from place to place. If you're interested in learning more, you should research other programs on the internet and talk to program staff in other communities. While you should investigate and familiarize yourself with a wide variety of communities, be sure to focus particularly on programs in communities or situations that most closely match your own.

Many municipalities and civic organizations with façade improvement programs have posted program descriptions, design guidelines, “before and after” photographs and a full range of related materials on their web sites. They're also usually happy to tell you about their programs and experiences and offer advice about starting your own program. The [National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Center](#) is also an excellent source of information and has developed extensive reference material related to design review and building rehabilitation.

State community and economic development agency staff (including statewide Main Street programs) can also be helpful and should be able to direct you to other resources, communities, or agencies with successful programs, and sources of funding.

**Amy Facca is a historic preservation planner, architectural historian, and grant writer with a strong interest in cultural economic development. Facca has joined the PlannersWeb as a contributing writer. Her columns are listed in the left-hand sidebar of this page.**

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Notes:

1. NTHP Dollars & Sense #12: An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Physical Improvements on Retail Sales (based on Brenda R. Spencer's Master of

Architecture thesis from Kansas State University in 1995) ↩

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