



Downtown Brownsville Business Improvement & Growth (BIG) Programs Guidelines

A Joint Program of:
Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC)
The City of Brownsville
Main Street Brownsville

Contact Information:

BROWNSVILLE COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT CORPORATION



BIG Grant Programs:

Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC)
500 E. Saint Charles, Brownsville, TX 78520
Main Phone: (956) 545-0353
Website: <http://bcic.us>

- Cori Peña, Administrator of Grants and Contracts
Email: cpena@bcic.us | Phone: (956) 545-0438

City of Brownsville | Planning and Development Services Department

1034 E. Levee Street, 2nd Floor, Brownsville, TX 78520

Main Phone: (956) 548-6150

Website: <https://www.cob.us/360/Planning-and-Development-Services-Depart>

- Miriam C. Suarez, Downtown District Manager
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Downtown Brownsville Business Improvement & Growth (BIG) Programs

Thank you for your interest in the BIG Grant Programs. We encourage you to read the following guidelines thoroughly and contact Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC) and/or City of Brownsville's Downtown District Manager to set up an appointment to discuss your project and grant process. Contact information is located on the cover page.

I. ABOUT BIG PROGRAMS

The Downtown Brownsville Business Improvement and Growth (BIG) Grants is offered by the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC), in partnership with the City of Brownsville and Main Street Brownsville, to provide financial support to commercial property owners and tenants to make quality exterior and interior improvements to their commercial buildings and property in downtown Brownsville.

BIG Grants offers four (4) different financial *reimbursement assistance programs* to businesses that would like to expand their existing operations or want to relocate or expand their operations in the designated Downtown Brownsville corridor.

- Exterior Façade Improvement Grant
- Interior Capital Improvement Grant
- Sign Improvement Grant Program
- Downtown Brownsville Rent Subsidy Grant Program

II. DIFFERENT BIG PROGRAMS AND AMOUNTS

Please review the BIG Grant Program specifics and choose the appropriate program for your project.

A. Exterior Façade Improvement Grant: 50/50 match. Maximum grant amount \$15,000.

To provide financial assistance to property owners or business tenants within the designated BIG Grant corridor, seeking to improve the exterior of the building to make it more visually appealing, bring them back into productive use, and bring back original appearance when possible. Façade is defined as the front exterior of a building and other exteriors sides when they are emphasized.

Examples:

Removal or restoration of existing facades (front, back and other exterior sides), exterior lighting fixtures attached to structure, replacing roofing, flashing, windows, exterior doors, paint, cleaning and wall repairs, replacing and exposing transom windows, replacing drain spouts, replacement or removal of canopies or awnings, landscaping, banisters/balconies/posts, preservation of ghost signs.

Process:

A property owner or tenant with property owner's permission would submit an application for review to the BIG Advisory Committee and final approval by the BCIC Board. If approved, the applicant needs to go through the appropriate permit procedures and make the approved improvements to the building. After the improvements are completed and shown to match the original approved improvements, and proof of payment is provided, the property owner is reimbursed for the appropriate amount.

Additional items needed to assist in the decision to fund:

Pictures of the current exterior building and any historic photographs (if available); Drawings and/or renderings of proposed changes; Construction quotes that include itemized expenses for work to be completed.

Deadlines:

Applications are due at 12:00 p.m. on the last Friday of the month to be considered for review at the next scheduled BIG Advisory Committee meeting (second Thursday of each month). BCIC staff will then have two (2) weeks from the meeting date to notify applicant if there are concerns, questions and/or comments for changes, alternations, or adjustments to proposed project. If the advisory committee makes recommendations to approve application as is, the recommendation will be presented at the next scheduled BCIC board meeting to approve project funding. BCIC staff has two (2) weeks from the BCIC Board meeting date to notify Applicant of funding award. If denied, the applicant has 30 days to appeal the decision to the BCIC Board of Directors.

B. Interior Capital Improvement Grant: 50/50 match. Maximum grant amount \$15,000.

To provide financial assistance to property owners or business tenants within the designated BIG Grant corridor, seeking to bring building or property up to code and/or significant interior capital improvements.

Examples:

Replacing electrical wiring, plumbing, or other city and state codes, removal of false ceilings and other non-historic elements, masonry repair, foundation stabilization, asbestos and lead abatements, fire sprinkler or fire alarm system, ADA compliance, rehabilitation needed to restore or maintain structural stability of the building and other permanent interior fixtures.

Process:

A property owner or tenant with property owner's permission would submit an application for review to the BIG Advisory Committee and final approval by the BCIC Board. If approved, the applicant will then make the approved improvements to the building or property. After the improvements are completed and shown to match the original approved improvements, and proof of payment is provided, approval is given by City Inspector and/or Fire Marshall that the building is up to code, the property owner is reimbursed for the appropriate amount.

Additional items needed to assist in the decision to fund:

Pictures of code violations; Drawings and/or renderings of proposed changes; Construction quotes that include itemized expenses for work to be completed.

Deadlines:

Applications are due at 12:00 p.m. on the last Friday of the month to be considered for review at the next scheduled BIG Advisory Committee meeting (second Thursday of each month). BCIC staff will then have two (2) weeks from the meeting date to notify applicant if there are concerns, questions and/or comments for changes, alternations, or adjustments to proposed project. If the advisory committee makes recommendations to approve application as is, the recommendation will be presented at the next scheduled BCIC board meeting to approve project funding. BCIC staff has two (2) weeks from the BCIC Board meeting date to notify Applicant of funding award. If denied, the applicant has 30 days to appeal the decision to the BCIC Board of Directors.

C. Sign Improvement Grant Program: 50/50 match. Maximum grant amount \$2,500.

To provide financial assistance to property owners or business tenants within the designated BIG Grant corridor, seeking removal or replacement of signs the comply to City's ordinance, will be integrated into the architecture of the building, and additional signage on canopies, awnings, front entrances and windows.

Examples:

New signs and/or major renovations or removal of existing signs. Business logo & lettering on window area, doors, awnings or canopies, and entryways.

Process:

A property owner or tenant with property owner's permission would submit an application for review to the BIG Advisory Committee and final approval by the BCIC Board. If approved, the applicant needs to go through the appropriate permit procedures and make the approved improvements to the building. After the improvements are completed and shown to match the original approved improvements, and proof of payment is provided, the property owner is reimbursed for the appropriate amount.

Additional items needed to assist in the decision to fund:

Pictures of the current signage on the building; Drawings and/or renderings of proposed changes and includes sign dimensions and placement on the building according to ordinances/codes, etc.

Deadlines:

Applications are due at 12:00 p.m. on the last Friday of the month to be considered for review at the next scheduled BIG Advisory Committee meeting (second Thursday of each month). BCIC staff will then have two (2) weeks from the meeting date to notify applicant if there are concerns, questions and/or comments for changes, alternations, or adjustments to proposed project. If the advisory committee makes recommendations to approve

application as is, the recommendation will be presented at the next scheduled BCIC board meeting to approve project funding. BCIC staff has two (2) weeks from the BCIC Board meeting date to notify Applicant of funding award. If denied, the applicant has 30 days to appeal the decision to the BCIC Board of Directors.

- D. Downtown Brownsville Rent Subsidy Grant Program:** Maximum grant amount \$7,800. To provide rental *reimbursement assistance* for up to 12 months to key businesses that choose to locate or expand their gross rentable space to enhance economic growth and to help fill vacancies in in the designated Downtown Brownsville corridor.

Eligible Businesses:

Restaurants, cafes, specialty retail shops & food, visual and performing arts and galleries, home furnishings, electronics, bookstore, music store, entertainment, professional services, artisan shops (skilled craft).

How it works:

Up to 50% rental assistance for the first six (6) months, not to exceed \$800 per month and months seventh through 12, payments will be at 30%, not to exceed \$500 per month.

Process:

For a new business, applicants are required to submit a completed application form, a copy of an executed lease between the applicant and property owner, a business plan and a proposed budget, financials and marketing plan.

For the expansion of an existing business, the application for rental assistance should include a minimum a completed application form and profit and loss statement. Rental assistance application for a business not related or similar to the existing business is required to submit a full, new business application package.

Rental assistance will be reimbursed monthly directly to the tenant once proof of payment has been made and only after the business has received Use Permit. Reimbursement will be made within 10 business days once tenant submits proof of rent payment and includes a paid receipt from the landlord.

Additional requirements:

- a. A signed two- year lease agreement.
- b. Business open at least six (6) days a week, minimum of eight (8) hours a day and past 6:00 p.m.
- c. Arrange a meeting with the Small Business Development Center/Women’s Business Center/UTRGV Entrepreneurship and Commercialization Center to develop or review a business plan.
- d. Provide financial information related to the startup and operation of the business.
- e. Attend trainings and workshop opportunities that deal with a variety of topics that will help your business succeed.

Deadlines:

Applications are due at 12:00 p.m. on the last Friday of the month to be considered for review at the next scheduled BIG Advisory Committee meeting (second Thursday of each month). BCIC staff will then have two (2) weeks from the meeting date to notify applicant if there are concerns, questions and/or comments for changes, alternations, or adjustments to proposed project. If the advisory committee makes recommendations to approve application as is, the recommendation will be presented at the next scheduled BCIC board meeting to approve project funding. BCIC staff has two (2) weeks from the BCIC Board meeting date to notify Applicant of funding award. If denied, the applicant has 30 days to appeal the decision to the BCIC Board of Directors.

III. BIG PROGRAM GOALS

- Encourage property investment that directly relates to improving the aesthetics of building and places in Downtown Brownsville;
- Expand business and employment opportunities in existing and deteriorated structures;
- Enhance the visitors experience at our downtown attractions;
- Help new and existing businesses succeed by enhancing their curb appeal; and
- Increase commercial property values.

The Brownsville BIG Grants is a three (3) year pilot program*. In 2021, the program may either be renewed or discontinued.

IV. GUIDELINES

Please read carefully the following guidelines and keep for your records.

1. A property owner or tenant may apply for multiple grants in any given year (i.e. property owner/tenant can receive funding for work on the exterior of the building, and also receive funding on the same application that replaces a sign or does interior work to the same building). Rent subsidy assistance application must be applied on a separate application but can apply during the same time or year with the other grant opportunities.
2. A project funded in a particular category may not re-apply for the same grant for five (5) years.
3. Grant applicants are considered per legal parcel as identified by Cameron County Tax Assessor-Collector. Consideration will be given if a tenant is applying for grant that is a part of one building and/or the property owner is renovating a large building. It is recommended to schedule an appointment with BCIC to discuss project scope prior to applying.
4. Façade is defined as the front exterior or back exterior of a building and other exterior sides when they are emphasized.

5. No grant will be awarded for work that has already been initiated or completed. Building or business owners must apply for the grant before work has begun.
6. All design plans (e.g. paint color, sign size, colors, shape, and proposed placement, materials, etc.) must be approved by the BIG Advisory Committee during the application process.
7. Any alterations to the building, including signage, façade, paint, awning, must meet the historic character of downtown and will be submitted to the Brownsville's Historic Preservation Officer for their review.
8. The applicant may be invited to attend a review meeting to be available for questions and answers pertaining the application and/or project.
9. Construction quotes/bids are required for the review of the application. All construction bids submitted by an Applicant must be current and must be dated no earlier than ninety (90) days prior to the Application request. Bids shall be submitted on the contractor's or project architect's letterhead and shall contain the contractors name, address, telephone number and shall itemize the bid in a manner that allows the BIG Advisory Committee to determine the bid components and authenticity of the bid.
10. Applicants whose project is determined to be a historically designated building or located within the City of Brownsville Historic District must first obtain written certification and/or Administrative Review Approval of the project from the City of Brownsville Historic Preservation office. Office contact information: Juan M. Velez, 1034 E. Levee St., 2nd Floor, Brownsville; Phone: (956) 548-6142; Email: juan.velez@cob.us.
11. Applicant shall commence construction described within the Application within 30 days from the date the grant is awarded by the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation Board. All Applicants must complete the construction described in the Application within six (6) months from the date the grant is approved by the BCIC Board.
12. If the Applicant is unable to commence construction within 30 days from the date the grant is approved or complete construction within six (6) months from the date the grant is approved, the Applicant may submit a written request for an extension for the commencement date or completion date provided the extension request is made prior to the 30 days or six (6) month time limit. The BCIC Board shall not be obligated to allow extensions but may do so for good cause determined solely by the BCIC Board. The extensions, if granted, shall be for the term and for the conditions determined exclusively by the BCIC Board. An extension denial cannot be appealed and shall be final with the BCIC Board.
13. The applicant must not be involved in any litigation, owe taxes, or have liens filed that would affect the property for which the grant is intended.
14. The applicant must agree to allow the City of Brownsville, Main Street Brownsville and BCIC to promote the project and property including, but not limited to, using photographs and descriptions of the project and property in printed promotional materials, press releases, websites, and social media outlets.

15. Building owners and business owners agree to have a sign / banner placed on their building during the project and for up to 30 days after the completion of the project to acknowledge the BIG Grant Program. The sign will be provided by BCIC.
16. The project must conform to City of Brownsville codes, ordinances and comprehensive plans.
17. In-kind contributions to the improvements by the applicant will not be considered as an expenditure by the applicant. Only cash expenditures by the applicant may be used in calculating the cost of improvements.
18. The applicant must notify the BIG Advisory Committee in writing if the applicant makes any changes in the plans submitted to the committee with the original application. The committee reserves the right to reconsider the application based on the changes to the original plan.
19. A one (1)-year preservation period will be in effect after completion. During this period, alterations to the awarded project that are not approved by the BIG Advisory Committee will result in reimbursement to the BIG Grant Program of the awarded funds.
20. Appeals to the approval will go before Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation Board. The board's decisions on all appeals will be final.
21. Approval of all applications shall be with the understanding and agreement that, in the event the business (applicant) fails to remain open, or the business or property is sold or transferred and subsequently closes, within twelve (12) months after the funding of the grant, the applicant shall be considered in default of its obligations under the grant, and shall be required to reimburse the BCIC the grant money received.
22. The applicant must agree that, in the event of default of its obligations, the applicant shall repay to the BCIC the amount of grant funds it has received, with interest, at the rate of 10% per annum, within thirty (30) days after the BCIC notifies the applicant of the default. The form of such payment shall be a cashier's check or money order, made payable to the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation.
23. The applicant must certify that the applicant does not employ nor will it employ any undocumented workers (an individual who, at the time of employment, is not lawfully admitted for permanent residence to the United States or authorized under law to be employed in that manner in the United States). The applicant must agree that if, after receiving grant funds, it is convicted of a violation under 8 U.S.C. Section 1324a(f), the applicant shall repay the amount of the grant funds received by the applicant, with interest, at the rate of 10% per annum, within thirty (30) days after the BCIC notifies the applicant of the violation.
24. The BCIC shall have the authority to bring a civil action to recover any amounts that the applicant must repay to the BCIC under paragraph 22, 23, and 24 of this Section, and in such action may recover court costs and reasonable attorney's fees.

V. ELIGIBLE APPLICANT CRITERIA

1. The application may come from the property owner or the tenant. If the application comes from the tenant, the tenant must include a letter from the property owner supporting the application and agreeing to the conditions of the grant. The tenant must produce a lease or other documentation showing the term of the lease.
2. Must actively pay property taxes on proposed project's property maintaining a current account status. Note: For property owners with property tax exemption status, provide tax exemption certificate and/or document.
3. Must obtain and provide proof of no current code enforcement actions pending against the property that would not be mitigated by the BIG grant.

VI. APPLICATION PROCESS

A. Application Submission

1. The BIG Program application forms are being accepted online using the BCIC grant application portal <http://bcic.us>. Visit the funding section in the menu selection. Click apply now. It is highly recommended to submit the grant application online.
2. Applications are also available to download and submitted via email to Cori Peña at cpena@bcic.us or delivered on a USB drive with one (1) printed copy to the BCIC office (location listed on the cover page of this document). Application can be downloaded at the BCIC website <http://bcic.us> under funding. Handwritten applications will not be accepted.
3. The application must be completed in its entirety and include all requested documentation listed on the application including but not limited:
 - a) Copy of the lease agreement;
 - b) Proof of ownership (property owner as applicant) or property owner giving consent for improvements (tenant only);
 - c) Certified Tax Certificate;
 - d) Conceptual rendering and/or construction drawing;
 - e) Estimates of proposed improvements (itemized work estimates) with construction quotes;
 - f) Approved color samples of paint, fabric, sign materials, etc.; and

- g) Digital photos of the property and the areas that needs improvements.
- 4. Applicant may apply for exterior, interior and sign improvements in their single application.
- 5. Applications are accepted monthly. The deadline to apply is 12:00 p.m. the last Friday of each month to be reviewed at the next scheduled BIG Advisory Committee meeting (typically held monthly every 2nd Thursday at 12 p.m. in at the BCIC office). Applications received after the due date, will be reviewed the following month's meeting.

B. Application Review

1. The BIG Advisory Committee will review submitted applications on a monthly basis and make recommendations for approval or rejection to the BCIC Board of Directors at the next scheduled monthly BCIC meeting.
2. The BIG Advisory Committee will review the grant applications based on criteria including, but not limited to, the following:
 - Is the project in the designated BIG corridor?
 - Does the project rehabilitate a historic building?
 - What will be the overall improvement of the building?
 - What is the general condition of the building? That is, how much of an improvement will the façade grant make to the building?
 - What contribution will the project make to the historic character or aesthetics of the downtown area?
 - Is the lighting, placement and design of the proposed signs appropriate to the location?
 - Does the plan exhibit professionalism of design?
 - What is the overall impact on the public, such as public access or visual impacts and the effect on the gateways to the downtown area?
3. The committee is comprised of BCIC Board members, Main Street Advisory Board members, Historic Preservation & Design Review Board members, Historic Preservation Officer, Downtown District Manager, Building Permits Officer, and one BCIC staff member.
4. The committee will make their recommendations decision and present the application to the BCIC Board for final approval determination. The BCIC Board has discretion to approve, modify, or reject the application and is not bound by any committee recommendation. The BCIC Board typically meets every 4th Thursday of the month at the City Commission Chambers, 1001. Elizabeth St, 2nd floor at 12:00 p.m.

5. Applicant will be notified in writing as to the status of the application, approved, amended, or rejected. BCIC reserves the right to postpone the decision.
6. If approved, applicant will go through the appropriate permit procedures and make the approved improvements to the building.
7. Work must commence within (30) days of approval from BCIC and be completed within six (6) months of construction commencement.
8. After improvements are completed, a final walk-through with BCIC and city staff, proof of payment is provided including copies of all paid invoices, canceled checks and/or credit card receipts including proof that the match has been met, the property owner is reimbursed for the appropriate amount.

VII. REIMBURSEMENT GRANT AGREEMENT

In the event, the Application has received final BCIC Board approval, a Commitment Letter will be issued to the Applicant stating the amount of approved grant funds allocated to the proposed project, the establishment of a commitment period for completion of the project and information regarding the execution of the required Reimbursement Grant Agreement (The Agreement) between the Applicant, now referred to as the "Contractor" (individual or entity responsible for payment of the project improvement expenses), and the BCIC. The Agreement will have been prepared and will accompany the Commitment Letter. The project's information and specifics and the terms and conditions of the Contractor's obligations for receipt of grant funds are outlined in the Agreement including, but not limited to, the following:

- a) Property and project scope location/identification along with exhibit attachments identify the specific approved improvements to be undertaken;
- b) Maximum amount of the approved allowed reimbursement grant funds;
- c) Contract performance deadlines and dates including, but not limited to, submission of building permit(s) and other applicable permits or approvals;
- d) Project monitoring and right of final inspection by BCIC staff or other City of Brownsville personnel;
- e) Compliance with applicable local, state, and federal laws;
- f) Promotional rights to BCIC and City of Brownsville;
- g) Maintenance requirements;
- h) Removal / alteration of project improvements within one (1) from the date of completion.

VIII. REIMBURSEMENT REQUESTS

1. Reimbursements will be made when the entire project is complete. The BIG Advisory Committee and/or the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC) must approve all reimbursements.
2. The Contractor will be required to submit proper documentation to be included in the reimbursement request:
 - a) A completed reimbursement request form and a W-9 form completed with the Contractor's information;
 - b) The Contractor must show itemized invoices and proof of payment (canceled checks, credit card statements, etc.) as documentation of the completed work with the request for payment. Invoices shown to be paid by other than the Contractor will not be included in the payment of the reimbursement grant.
 - c) Proof of any applicable final governmental inspections; and
 - d) Furnish photographs of the building's exterior, roof and foundation as part of the Application request and also after the construction is completed, as a condition of final grant reimbursement (before and after photos).
3. Allow 30 days for processing of the reimbursement request. The payment will be processed in the form of the check made payable to the Contractor. The Contractor will be notified once the check is available for release and will require signature by an authorized party.

The Brownsville Business Improvement & Growth (BIG) Grant Programs are part of the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation (BCIC)'s Economic Development Strategic Plan 2017 – 2020: Strategy 4.1) Align funding that supports downtown revitalization projects necessary to increase sales tax revenue and foster investor opportunities in a vital area of Brownsville, Texas.