



PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT

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May 17th, 2023

To: Economic and Community Development Commission

From: Planning & Development Staff

Memo RE: Façade Grant Program, Elevate Downtown and Northside

Planning & Development Staff are proposing the attached Elevate Downtown and Northside Façade Grant Guidelines to be reviewed and approved by ECDC. This program has made a few changes for clarity and ease of implementation, shifted to staff review, and included a historic consideration into the Northside program. Each of those changes are identified in the attached red-lined version of the Guidelines, however we have provided more commentary below:

Although the Elevate Downtown Grant program began in 2017 and the Update North La Crosse program began in 2018, façade improvements have a longer history in La Crosse. In 1995 the City established the Historic Preservation Façade Improvement Loan program using Community Development Block Grant Funds, an entitlement program through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, to help preserve historic structures. This loan program was dormant for 20 years until it was revived through collaboration with Downtown Mainstreet, Inc. to establish the Elevate Downtown Façade Grant Program. In creating the modern iteration of this program, there was a heavy focus on leveraging public dollars to elevate the city’s infrastructure and preserve our historic buildings.

These programs are now currently funded through the Capital Improvement Program, Tax Incremental Financing and American Rescue Plan Act dollars. To date, \$642,943.49 of City funds have leveraged a total building and restoration improvement of \$10,662,363. There are 45 finished projects that have utilized these programs, with an additional 15 projects in process.

The process for updating these programs included feedback from City staff, the Mayor, applicants/awardees, the existing façade review committees, and our consulting firm Baker Tilly along with a deep dive into historical city records on the program. This feedback was utilized to make the grant programs ARPA compliant, clarified program specifics to assist in ease of implementation, and update items within the grant process to better reflect how the program is enacted.

We are recommending that the programs shift from a review committee to staff review for approval of projects. The existing review committees were not created through resolution or include members appointed by the

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Mayor and approved by Council, yet have had authority to oversee the distribution of City funds. However, creating another standing City committee adds unnecessary redundancy and places more undue burden on a handful of staff. Staff will still have the ability to reach out to subject matter experts, which would likely include previous committee members, when needed in reviewing applications. All façade applications that include a historically designated building will still need review and approval from the Historic Preservation Commission.

The Northside Grant Program was also altered to include consideration of historical buildings, which serves to further align the two programs. Including the historic component of the grant program into the Northside increases the potential of the grant allotment to \$20,000 maximum for historic buildings and \$10,000 maximum for non-historic buildings and it preserves the City's 50/50 match of these funds.

Following recommendations from staff on items that required clarification, both programs were changed to align more in the specifics of how to apply and how funds are awarded. These points of clarification include deleting items that require a digital copy of the application be submitted through a flash drive and adding in items that specify when and how an extension request will be granted. Feedback from the façade review committees also led to the clarification point on grant award amounts being offered based on a per primary façade basis due to difficulties in the past of one tax parcel containing several primary façades. Any further changes were made to simplify the language and make the process clearer to applicants.