

Staff Report

Campustown Façade Program

November 18, 2014

BACKGROUND:

In the City 2014-2015 Budget the City Council has included funding for a Campustown Façade Program, specifically to develop design guidelines for city façade grants and to carry out two pilot improvement projects. This new program is intended to enhance the appearance of Campustown commercial buildings, fulfilling the objective outlined by the City Council and by Iowa State University in their mutual goal of supporting Campustown. The program is also intended to increase the vitality of the area and encourage more economic development through private investment. This report presents the proposed design principles for the program.

The City has an existing façade program known as the Downtown Façade Program, however the proposed Campustown Program is quite different from the Downtown Design Guidelines. The design objective of the Downtown Façade Program is to promote a consistent image within the district. The Downtown Design Guidelines are based on the historic character of that district. **The objective of the proposed Campustown Façade Program is to promote diverse building styles and increased activity and commercial use. The proposed program supports enriching the individual detail and character of each building within the context of a pedestrian oriented commercial district.**

The Program was developed through a two-step process. In 2013, the Campustown Action Association formed a focus group that examined the existing character of Campustown and identified valued characteristics that help make Campustown successful. In 2014, the City retained the design firm Haila Architecture Structure Planning to examine Campustown and its valued characteristics, as well as to propose design concepts for physical improvements to Campustown buildings. This process also involved a work group providing ideas and feedback. Together these two groups of Campustown stakeholders were represented by Campustown business owners, property owners, students, customers, neighbors, the University, and the Campustown Action Association.

The resulting design principles are in the form of an “Ideabook,” which identifies five Design Concepts accompanied by ten Project Examples from across the country. The Ideabook is intended to stimulate creative thinking and spark design proposals that will respect and expand the design characteristics that make Campustown special. ([See Ideabook on Planning Webpage “What’s New” Section](#))

The five Design Concepts are as follows:

Transparent Campustown. Visual transparency invites pedestrians to patronize the businesses inside. Physical access promotes cohesiveness within the district. Promoting more glass and larger physical openings show the commercial offerings in the district and encourage people to spend more time here.

Social Campustown. Well designed outdoor gathering areas create a positive social atmosphere. Small, unused, visible spaces can be transformed to expand commercial opportunities. It is not the intent of the program to fund sidewalk dining or other uses of the public right-of-way, although improvements to the building that are part of any outdoor gathering area project would be eligible.

Diverse Campustown. The variety of building types and design styles contribute to the vibrancy, funkiness, visual interest and diversity of businesses. Facades are encouraged to be distinct from their neighbors and unique in the district.

Identifiable Campustown. High quality signs, graphics and other design features that express the unique identity of local businesses can be part of a distinctive design for façade improvements.

Historic Campustown. Some buildings in Campustown have potential to illustrate the historic development of Campustown over 100 years. Projects can include removing cover-up materials, restoring original storefronts/entrances, and restoring masonry.

These Design Concepts will form the basis for city staff evaluation of the proposed façade improvement projects which seek grants. Staff will assess the pilot project's by determining:

- 1) how clearly the proposed design incorporates the Concepts,
- 2) the degree of visual impact the project will have in the context of Campustown,
- 3) how many of the Concepts are incorporated into the designs.

It is not proposed that projects awarded a grant must incorporate all five of the Concepts.

The Board of Directors of the Campustown Action Association, which includes representatives of all stakeholder groups described above, unanimously recommended approval of the Ideabook as the design principles for the Campustown facade pilot projects. The Board also recommended eligibility for projects located within the commercial area south of the ISU campus and of the area west of the ISU campus to Campus Avenue. **Under this recommendation, areas eligible for grants would include the East and West University Impacts Areas for the West Street neighborhood commercial and the Campustown Service Center area.**

STAFF COMMENTS:

Staff believes that the proposed principles and the “Ideabook” approach reflect the characteristics of Campustown, will encourage the creativity that those characteristics call for, and can form the basis for a manageable façade grant program. It will be necessary for city staff to work with potential applicants to prepare design proposals for pilot project that are consistent with Council’s expectations and priorities for the program.

It is the intent of this program to provide financial support for permanent physical improvements to commercial buildings and privately-owned spaces associated with those buildings. The program is not meant to fund temporary/portable improvements or elements within the right-of-way. Staff recommends that projects that propose only signs and/or furniture not be funded.

At its November 25th meeting City Council will be asked to approve the Ideabook with its design concepts, solicit applications for two pilot projects, and delineate the boundaries for the program. Staff recommends the program apply to the designated Campustown Service Center zoning district and neighborhood commercial area within the West University Impacted overlay zoning district.