

ITEM # 40 a & b
DATE 10/14/08

COUNCIL ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: REVISIONS TO CURRENT DOWNTOWN FAÇADE GRANT GUIDELINES TO INCREASE IMPACT

BACKGROUND:

In 2001, City Council established the program to encourage improving the facades of downtown buildings with the following purposes:

- Increase economic vitality
- Preserving historic character
- Encourage historic facade improvements
- Projects complement each other and present a more unified image

The program criteria include a set of Design Guidelines that are based on architectural elements appropriate to the commercial style that prevailed in downtown Ames during the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's.

Since the beginning of this program the City Council has approved 12 projects. The total expenditures or commitments of all grants awarded has been \$118,100 and \$88,100 remains available for grants in the current budget year. City Council has directed staff to provide a proposal for increasing the impact of the Downtown Façade Grant program. In order to review visual impact, staff prepared a survey of before and after photographs of completed grant projects, which can be found on the City's Internet web site (<http://www.cityofames.org>) by following the link to Options for Expanding Downtown Facade Grant Program on the home page of the Planning and Housing Department.

In reviewing the visual impact of each of these projects, staff noted that the projects with the greatest impact, such as 411 Kellogg (Bicycle Surplus) and 547 Main (Aunt Maude's), involved removing substantial existing materials and elements that do not comply with the Design Guidelines, and replacing them when necessary with materials and elements that comply. These types of projects can be termed restoration projects. The projects with the least visual impact, such as 413 Kellogg (Executive Office Building) and 229 Main (Café Diem), involved removing materials and elements that generally comply with the Design Guidelines and replacing them with newer materials and elements that also comply. Since many of these latter types of projects already maintained their historic integrity, these can be termed preservation projects. Staff has made the following conclusions:

- Preservation is necessary, but by itself is not enough to accomplish program purposes.
- Excluding a grant for preservation alone may create a disincentive to participate.
- The more inappropriate elements are replaced, the greater the impact.
- The greater the impact, the greater the cost.

To encourage restoration projects with greater visual impact, staff proposed the following changes to the existing criteria for Downtown Façade Grants:

- a. Grant money will be provided for replacing existing compliant elements only when the proposed project also includes replacing non-compliant elements with compliant elements.
- b. If all non-compliant elements of the entire façade are not to be restored under one grant project, a plan shall be prepared for the entire façade that illustrates how the applicant intends to improve the façade long-term and what the completed project will ultimately look like.
- c. The scope of proposed improvements for each grant shall be visually significant in the context of how the whole building is intended to look when all improvements to the façade are complete.
- d. Grants for phased projects shall only be awarded for those improvements that are done in the correct sequence of construction.

The City Council can also direct staff to work with the Planning and Zoning Commission on a proposed zoning code text amendment to preserve existing compliant elements of buildings in the Downtown Service Center Zoning District. This text amendment is intended to prevent loss of historic integrity in the downtown area as a result of no longer funding small preservation projects. Before the façade improvement program was initiated, an intensive historic survey concluded that the area is likely eligible to be listed as a District on the National Register of Historic Places. With the overall health of the downtown and the example of the 12 façade improvement projects, the value of an ordinance to maintain historic elements may now be more evident.

City staff presented earlier drafts of these conclusions and proposals on August 14, 2008 at a workshop on "Preservation Opportunities in Ames Commercial Centers." About 30 people attended, mostly from the downtown community. In summary, the following comments were made:

- Although signs should be consistent with the historic appearance, they provide an opportunity for more creativity.
- Preservation and maintenance are very important to a consistent image
- Do not overlook the importance of details that can be seen only from the pedestrian vantage point.
- Because the south facades of the buildings on the south side of Main Street are so visible, any improvements here would have a strong visual impact.
- Given the current economic conditions in the retail sector, requiring more expensive projects at this time could result in fewer façade improvement projects. One solution to this would be to increase the City share of such larger projects.
- Requiring replacement of all non-compliant elements on at least half the façade would have the most impact.

For the last ten days, the proposed revisions to the program have been on the City's Internet web site, with a link also from the Internet web site of the Main Street Cultural District. Notice of this was sent to attendees of the August workshop. On October 7, staff presented this information at the general membership meeting of the Main Street Cultural District. Thus far, the only feedback has been questions for clarification.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. The City Council can approve the following revisions to the current guidelines for the Downtown Façade Grant Program:
 - a. Grant money will be provided for replacing existing compliant elements only when the proposed project also includes replacing non-compliant elements with compliant elements.
 - b. If all non-compliant elements of the entire façade are not to be restored under one grant project, a plan shall be prepared for the entire façade that illustrate how the applicant intends to improve the façade long-term and what the completed project will ultimately look like.
 - c. The scope of proposed improvements for each grant shall be visually significant in the context of how the whole building is intended to look when all improvements to the façade are complete.
 - d. Grants for phased projects shall only be awarded for those improvements that are done in the correct sequence of construction.

The City Council can also direct staff to work with the Planning and Zoning Commission on a proposed zoning code text amendment to preserve existing compliant elements of buildings in the Downtown Service Center Zoning District.

2. The City Council can approve revisions “a” through “d” above to the current guidelines for the Downtown Façade Grant Program, without directing staff to proceed with a zoning code text amendment.
3. The City Council can approve selected revisions to the current guidelines for the Downtown Façade Grant Program and/or make modifications to the revisions.
4. The City Council can deny the proposed revisions to the current guidelines for the Downtown Façade Grant Program.
5. The City Council can refer this issue back to staff for further information.

MANAGER’S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Overall, the façade improvements made in downtown Ames have made a tremendous, positive impact, and the City’s assistance has been an important part of many projects. The historic integrity of much of the district is strong and its value more widely recognized. The importance of buildings owners keeping their buildings in good condition is also more widely recognized. Some of the projects supported by the City could be termed as this type of necessary maintenance project.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council adopt Alternative No. 1, which is a recommendation that the City Council approve the following revisions to the current guidelines for the Downtown Façade Grant Program:

- a. Grant money will be provided for replacing existing compliant elements only when the proposed project also includes replacing non-compliant elements with compliant elements.
- b. If all non-compliant elements of the entire façade are not to be restored under one grant project, a plan shall be prepared for the entire façade that illustrate how the applicant intends to improve the façade long-term and what the completed project will ultimately look like.
- c. The scope of proposed improvements for each grant shall be visually significant in the context of how the whole building is intended to look when all improvements to the façade are complete.
- d. Grants for phased projects shall only be awarded for those improvements that are done in the correct sequence of construction.

It is also a recommendation that the City Council direct staff to work with the Planning and Zoning Commission on a proposed zoning code text amendment to preserve existing compliant elements of buildings in the Downtown Service Center Zoning District. This amendment would not require any improvements to be made to existing buildings, but would apply to remodeling that owners decide to do.

Staff has not recommended increasing the funding for the program at this time. Most of the projects have requested less than the maximum \$15,000 and funds for more projects have remained available. Staff recommends monitoring the cost issues after the program changes are made and considering the need for additional funding at a later time.