FAÇADE AND STOREFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

TOWN OF ASHBURNHAM

SEPTEMBER 2023

Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities
Massachusetts Downtown Initiative

Innes Associates Ltd

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks to the business owners who agreed to be interviewed during the development of this program, and to Rebecca Beaton and Bea Lee of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce.

Prepared with a grant from the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative from the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities

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Prepared by Innes Associates

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Introduction

The Town of Ashburnham has set aside $25,000 received as part of its funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This act provides federal funds to states and municipalities to help mitigate the negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on local businesses, especially retail and restaurants in the Town's center, which suffered a disproportional negative economic effect from the pandemic.

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC, formerly DHCD) sponsored the development of this program through the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI), which promotes the revitalization of downtowns and commercial areas throughout Massachusetts. MDI paired Innes Associates, a planning and design firm, with the Town of Ashburnham to develop a façade and storefront improvement program that addresses the specific needs of local businesses and property owners located in the Town's center.

PLANNING PROCESS

This planning process included the following engagement with the Ashburnham community:

- An initial site visit on November 29, 2022
- Meetings with the Economic Development Commission on March 14.
- Interviews with business owners on April 13, 2023.
- Public presentation at Town Hall on April 13, 2023.

The process also included research on façade and storefront improvement programs in other towns, using the *Sign & Façade Rapid Recovery Program Toolkit*, developed as part of EOHLC's Rapid Recovery Program, as an initial resource.

FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Façade and storefront improvement programs are a proven method of assisting small businesses. Such improvements can include new signage and lighting, upgrades to storefronts, including better access for those with physical disabilities, and site changes, including landscape, public art, and (for restaurants) outdoor dining. These improvements attract customers by identifying what the business is, and whether it is open; making it safer and easier to enter the building; and improving the experience of being a customer.

These programs vary in scope and scale. Some programs address the beautification of an area, focusing on minor

repairs to storefronts, repainting, and visual additions such as planters and coordinated outdoor retail displays. Such programs may also address accessibility by providing ramps to address level changes between the sidewalk and the store entry. Smaller programs may also address awnings or signs that are outdated or in disrepair.

Some programs address the entire façade and include more significant repairs and upgrades. These programs may be layered with other grants that address energy efficiency, interior accessibility, or building renovation. Such programs may establish more control over the final design, with design guidelines that may designate colors, materials, and consistency within a designated geographic area.

The focus of façade and storefront improvement programs is to promote economic development and the success of small businesses by increasing the safety and attractiveness of an area. Case studies[1] have shown that these programs **positively impact local businesses and the value of the properties**. The cost does not have to be significant to make a difference. Benefits include increasing the number of first-time customers, increasing sales for participating and nearby businesses, and increasing the property's value.[2]

1 https://nmsc.connectedcommunity.org/blogs/hl-admin/2017/05/11/measuring-the-economic-impact-of-storefront-improvements

2 Bill Ryan, Amy Greil, and Dayna Server, "Downtown Economics: Ideas for Increasing the Vitality in Community Business Districts," University of Wisconsin Extension, Issue 180, March 2015, pp. 1-2.

A program that assists several businesses can leverage the investment by enhancing an entire area. Customers who are attracted to one business may be encouraged to visit others, bringing economic activity to an entire district. Property owners who participate in these programs support their tenants and create additional value for their buildings.

When façade and storefront improvement programs are paired with local culture and arts and reinforced with programming, they can spearhead the revitalization of commercial and mixed-use districts and strengthen the local economy, district identity, and social cohesion.

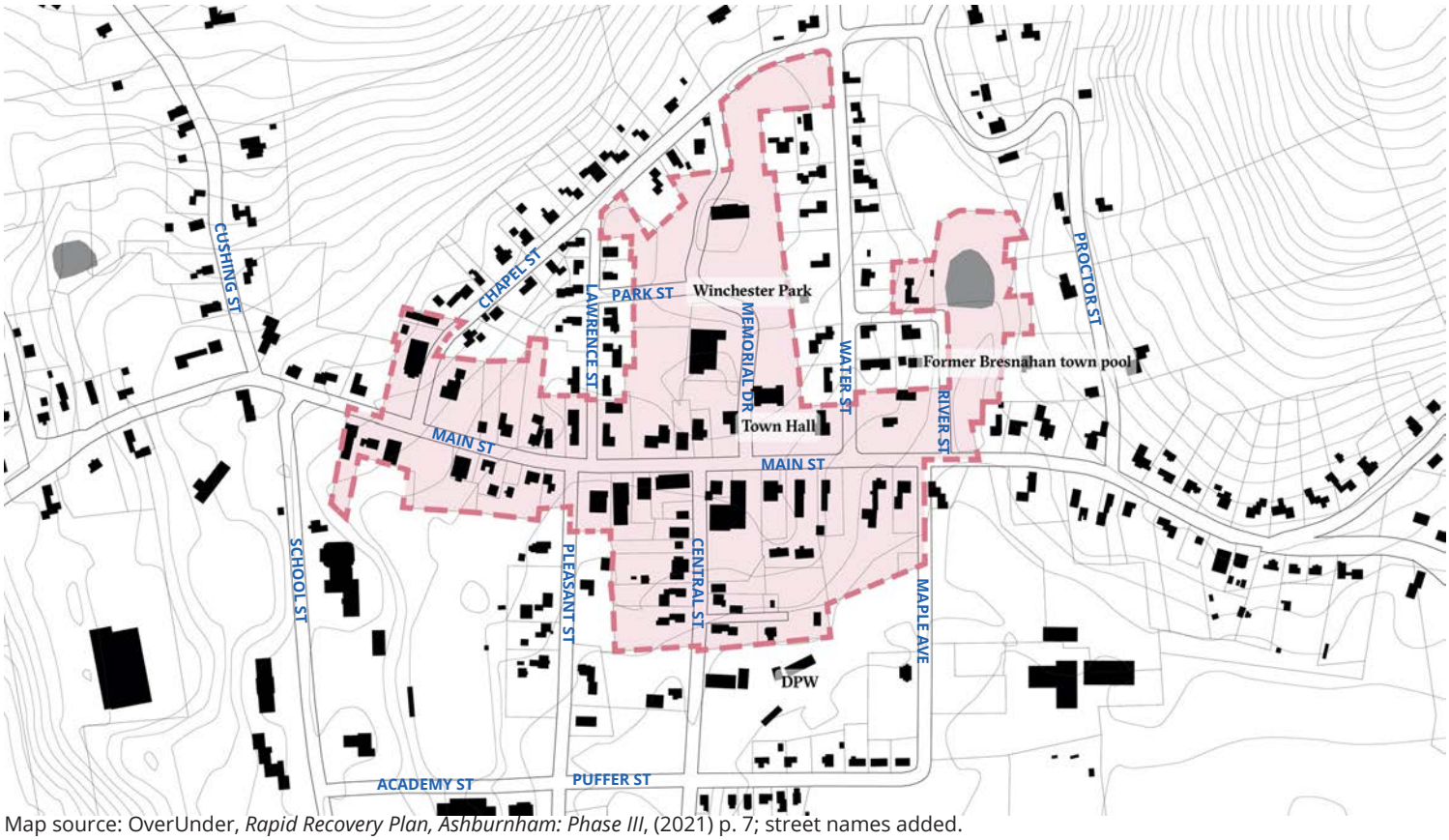
NEED

The Town's goal is to address specific conditions, including outdated signage, illegible signage, and unattractive or unsafe site conditions, including access to the interior of the buildings. Businesses within the downtown area outlined in the map on page 6 are eligible for this program.

Ashburnham's Rapid Recovery Plan (2021) identified six strategies to promote and support Ashburnham's Village Center. Creating a storefront improvement plan was one of the three actions identified for the first goal, Provide Support to Businesses in Need.[3] The final presentation identified the following as problems: inadequate signage, poorly organized interior layouts, or outdoor spaces that cater to cars rather than pedestrians.[4] The photos on pages 6 and 7 provide

3 OverUnder, *Rapid Recovery Plan, Ashburnham: Phase III*, (2021) p. 15.

4 OverUnder, *Rapid Recovery Plan, Ashburnham: Phase III*, (2021) p. 21.



Map source: OverUnder, *Rapid Recovery Plan, Ashburnham: Phase III*, (2021) p. 7; street names added.

Opportunity for private/public partnership on site design

Opportunity to update multi-tenant signage and create transparent window displays to advertise businesses

Opportunity for creative signage/ lighting

Opportunity for creative front-yard design to showcase business

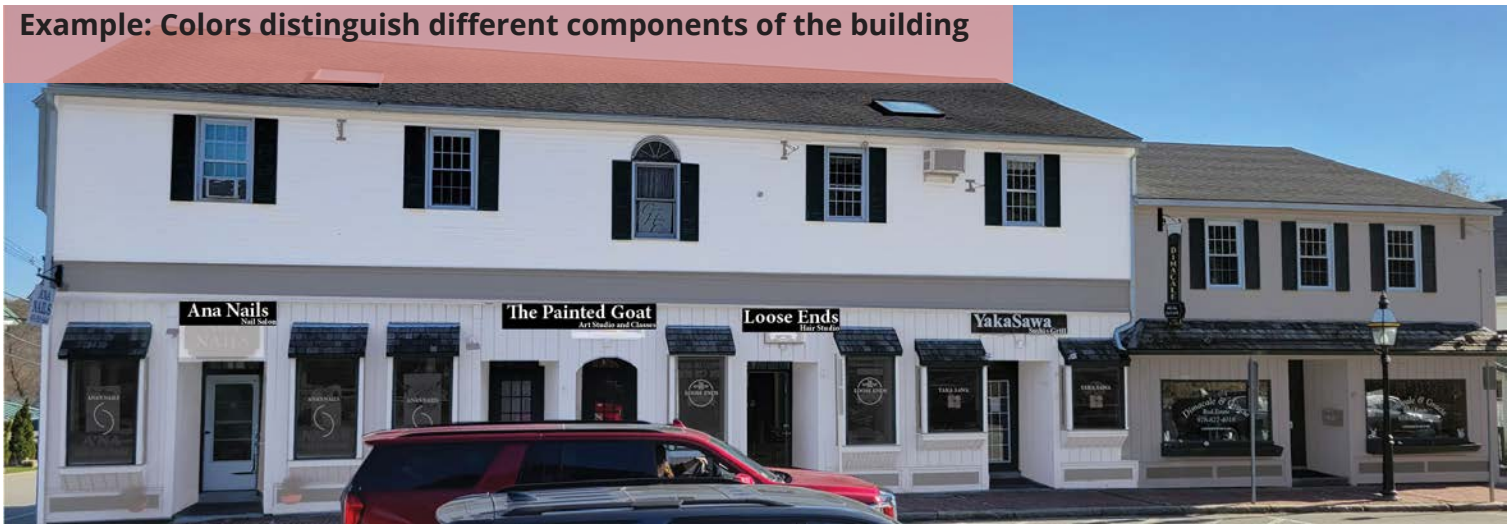
Blank walls are opportunities to showcase community and or business identity

Small changes, such as coordinated paint colors, can make a big difference. These two pages provide a series of studies for an existing building on Ashburnham's Main Street to illustrate how changing and coordinating the colors can have significant impacts on a multi-tenant building. The signs, including the window signs, are coordinated with each other and the building colors. Of course, these images are just illustrations of concepts; businesses and property owners will want to tie colors and signage to their own branding and buildings.

Example: Single Color for whole building

Example: Consistent accent colors (shutters, doors, signage, and base panels

Example: Colors distinguish different components of the building



Example: Colors change by business (monochromatic)

Example: Colors change by business (bright)

examples of the existing conditions.

Program

The Town of Ashburnham is offering grants to small businesses and property owners for improvements to signs and façades as described below. The Town has a total of $25,000 available from funding made possible by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Recipients will be required to match 25% of the grant with their own funds (in other words, the Town will provide 75% of the costs and the recipient will provide 25% of the cost). See the call-out box to the left for information about how small businesses can apply for a loan for that match, if needed.

Grants are on a first-come, first-served basis and will be awarded in amounts ranging from $1,000-$5,000 depending on the scope of the project.

This program ends by September 30, 2026.

Small Businesses

Small businesses may use the funds to upgrade signs and storefronts. This includes new signs and, with the permission of the property owner, nonstructural upgrades or repairs to the storefront, and temporary accessibility improvements.

Property owners may also apply; see the call-out box on page 11 for more information.

PURPOSE

The primary goal of this program is to support Ashburnham's businesses and support a walkable and attractive town center.

The purpose of this façade and storefront improvement program is to provide resources to updated business signage and lighting, enhance the appearance of the storefronts and sites, and improve accessibility. The program is extended to all Ashburnham businesses that meet the criteria.

ELIGIBILITY

All Ashburnham businesses with a storefront visible from the street or another public way are eligible to apply. Applicants must be either the property owner or a commercial tenant with written permission from the property owner.

- Applicants who have received funding within the five years before their application are not eligible to reapply.
- Applicants must be up-to-date with all taxes and fees owed to the Town.

Small Business Assistance

The **North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce** offers a FASTrack loan program for microloans up to $5,000. This program, which usually takes only 1-2 weeks to approve, is available to small businesses who need help with their 25% match for this program.

The FASTrack loan program includes technical assistance for the recipient. This provides additional resources to the loan recipient, including marketing and other advice designed to support growth.

Businesses do need to meet certain requirements. The link below provides more information about the program.

https://www.northcentralmass.com/fastrack-loans/

Historic Grants

The 1772 Foundation provides matching grants for historic preservation.

https://www.1772foundation.org/grants

- Applicants must have all relevant approvals and permits for the proposed work and comply with building code and zoning requirements.

COMPONENTS

Eligible improvements include the following:

- Exterior signs (building and site)
- Lighting
- Improvements to address accessibility
- Awnings
- Re-striping for on-site outdoor dining
- Pollinator gardens in the front or side setback
- Murals for blank walls
- Addressing code violations as part of the approved work
- Design costs for the work (for example, design of the sign to be installed)

The grants may support either assistance with the design of the project, installation costs, or both.

FUNDING

Once approved, an applicant will receive notification that they have been awarded the grant. The Applicant may undertake a larger project consistent with the components above, but the Town's contribution will be limited to the approved amount.

Conditions

To receive the grant, the Applicant must meet the following conditions:

- The work cannot be started before the Town approves the grant.
- The Applicant must seek a minimum of two bids for the project.
- Design fees can be no more than 10% of the total amount of the project unless otherwise justified by the application. The Town may choose to create an on-call designer program; if so, the Applicant will be required to use one of the designers selected as part of the program.
- Sign designs must be legible at the appropriate distances, must be permanent signs, and must meet the requirements of the Town's sign code.
- The Applicant must complete all work, complete any required inspections, and pay all contractors prior to submitting receipts to the Town for reimbursement.

Property Owners

Property owners could pair the funds from the Town with other programs. For example:

- Reducing operating costs by installing energy-efficient windows and doors, in partnership with the Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) program which provides funding to help commercial property owners add energy improvements to their properties. The Town is coordinating this program with MassDevelopment and the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources.
- Addressing more significant improvements by applying for state and federal historic tax credits for eligible buildings.
- Adding public art to the site, for example, wall or ground murals, that showcase local history, cultures, or talent. The Ashburnham Cultural Council may be able to assist with grants. Applications open in September and close in October.

PROCESS

Town will accept first-come first serve applications 90 days from the date of the Launch Presentation. To apply for this façade and storefront improvement program, the Applicant must do the following:

1. Meet with program staff to discuss the project, requirements for application, and a list of required permits and approvals.
2. For projects that require a building permit, the Applicant may require additional information to prepare the appropriate plans/elevations and budget.
3. For all projects, the Applicant must solicit two separate estimates. Estimates from each contractor must be on contractor letterhead and itemized so that a cost is associated with each task or material to be installed.
4. Required information for the application:
   a. Completed Application.
   b. Business Certificate from the Town or Articles of Organization.
   c. Proof from the Town of Ashburnham Treasurer's Office that there are no outstanding taxes or other liens on the property.
   d. Description of the proposed project, including materials and colors, as appropriate.
   e. The plans and elevations (if required).
   f. Completed building permit application (if required).
   g. Project budget.
   h. Proof that the Applicant has access to sufficient funds to meet their 25% share of the grant. Proof includes a bank statement or confirmation that the Applicant has received a loan for the match.
   i. Two bids from contractors.
   j. "Before" photos of the building. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.
   k. Signed and notarized letter from property owner giving permission for the work (if the Applicant is a tenant).

APPROVAL

The Town of Ashburnham will have 60 days to approve the project, including the building permit (if required). Once approved, the Applicant must select a bid and may start work.

The Town may designate an existing committee or create a new committee to review the submitted applications and designs.

POST-APPROVAL

The Applicant will have 90 days to complete the work after the project has been approved. Applicant must notify the Town of any changes in writing once work has started. Applicant must receive proof of final inspection by the Building Department/ Inspectional Services before notifying the Town that the project is complete.

All work for this program must be completed by June 30, 2026.

REIMBURSEMENT

After the work is completed and inspected, the Applicant must submit all receipts and invoices showing that the architect, engineer, suppliers, and contractor (as applicable) have been paid in full to receive reimbursement and proof of final inspection for any project requiring a building permit. The Town will provide the funds within 60 days of receipt of the reimbursement request.

Applicants must submit "after" photos showing the work, with the request for reimbursement. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.

All requests for reimbursement must be received by within 30 days of the date the work is completed.

REJECTION

Applications may be rejected for failure to provide the necessary documents, inability to get a building permit, outstanding taxes or liens on the property, or failure to follow building code and zoning regulations.

Reimbursement requests may be rejected for failure to fully document payment for all budget components and lack of proof of a final inspection for work requiring a building permit.

TERMINATION

The Town of Ashburnham has the right to terminate any agreement under the Façade and Storefront Improvement Program if a participant violates any conditions outlined in these guidelines or if the project has been started before an executed agreement with the Town of Ashburnham.

Design Guidelines

The following pages provide design guidance for the desired improvements. The guidance addresses the following topics:

- Accessibility
- Building storefronts and façades
- Signage
- Lighting
- Site treatments

The images in this section are intended to inspire landlords and businesses; the specific options shown are not required. The design assistance available as part of this grant may be useful to ensure appropriate design and installation for each site. All solutions must be consistent with the building code, the Town's zoning bylaws, and the Town's sign bylaw.

Because of Ashburnham's unique characteristics as a destination for arts and education, creative options are included within each topic. These options can be altered to meet the needs of business and the town center.

Other resources for design options are included in the appropriate section.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility refers to the ability of all people to enter a business and be able to move around within the business. People who have physical disabilities, which may be permanent or temporary, visible or invisible, may have trouble entering a business or accessing the goods and services within the business. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires businesses that serve the public, referred to as public accommodations in the ADA, meet certain requirements for public access.

For businesses who want to attract more customers, addressing accessibility is important. This list of resources can help:

- This is a useful reference for **businesses and property owners**: ADA Primer for Small Businesses: https://www.ada.gov/regs2010/smallbusiness/smallbusprimer2010.htm
- This is a useful reference for **Town officials and staff**: The One Step Project, Pittsburgh: https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/dcp/One_Step_Project_Packet_(Digital).pdf
- This (slightly fuzzy) document from the National Park Service is a guide to making historic properties accessible and can also be useful for addressing improving accessibility to older buildings, even if not historic: https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/preservation-brief-32-accessibility.pdf

Creative Accessibility

Stopgap.ca is a Canadian foundation helps communities and businesses address accessibility with a low-cost, movable yet sturdy ramp. The ramps allow for wheelchair access into stores with a single step up; they can also contribute to community identity by being colorful or including artwork as a component of the design.

Waterloo Architects provides an example of a community-led project to create the ramps for Cambridge, Ontario (not Massachusetts). The examples in the blog post (one of which is shown in the lower right, indicate how the ramps can also include images that relate to the business or to local culture.

Picture Credit: Stopgap.CA
https://stopgap.ca/get-involved/community-ramp-project/

Picture Credit: Waterloo Architects
https://waterlooarchitecture.com/bridge/blog/2018/01/11/stopgap-ramps-in-cambridge/

BUILDING

Building design for this program includes the following components:

- Storefront window display.
- Storefront system, which could include an awning.
- Awnings can also be coordinated with the entire façade

Storefront Window

Key points to this design:

- The window has minimal signage.
- The display in the window and the shop itself can be clearly seen from the exterior.
- The display is sufficient for a potential customer to understand what is being sold.

Storefront Window

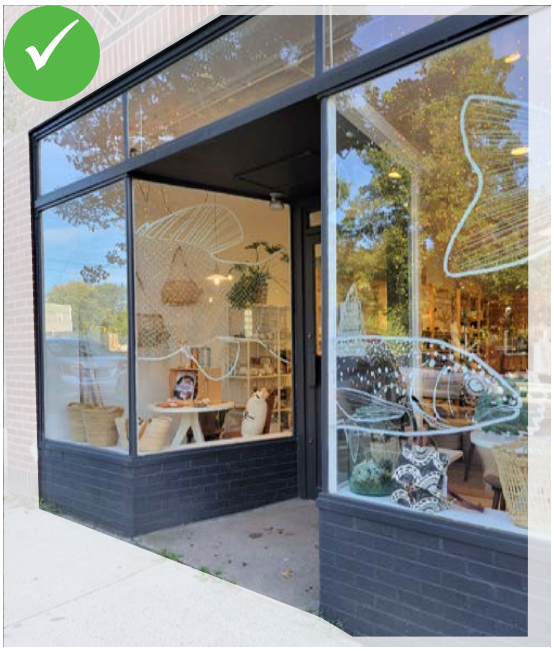
Key points to this design:

- The difference with this storefront is the transparent linework that reflects the identity of the store without hiding the window display and the interior.

Storefront

Key points to this design:

- The base and trim (window and door) are the same color creating a consistent effect that allows the window display to be more visually prominent.



Storefront Window

Key points to this design:

- Clever use of materials makes the most of a shallow display area.

Storefront

Key points to this design:

- The colors of the base, storefront window trim, and top are the same, giving a unified look.
- The door is in a contrasting color.

Con:

- The entrance is not accessible.

Awnings

Awnings in the photo to the right are coordinated by color, but vary in style by business.

Awnings in the photo below right vary in color by business, but not in style.

On both photos, text on the awnings is limited to either the name of the business or the items available within.

Façade

Key points in this design:

- The color of the trim around the windows and the window baskets is coordinated with that of the ground floor.
- The design elements on the ground floor (commercial) are distinct from the upper floor (residential).
- Lighting is appropriate for the use: one type illuminates the sign while the other illuminates the windows.

Façade

Key points in this design:

- Retail ground floor is consistent in signage and treatment of doors.
- Upper floor is distinguished by different materials and window styles.
- Upper floor windows are proportional to each other.

Discouraged

In the photo to the right, signs cover the windows, providing no visibility into the store. Blinds or curtains should also not be used to obscure the interior of the building.

Discouraged

In the photo to the right, the awning stretches across the entire façade. Awnings should match the storefront divisions. This building should have two awnings; one over each storefront system. Awnings should not cover important architectural details, such as pilasters.

SIGNAGE

A business may have more than one sign: its name, its hours of operation, its address, and an indication of what the business is. Signage in the Town of Ashburnham is regulated by the sign bylaw, which is part of the zoning bylaw. All non-residential signs must comply with the sign bylaw.

The examples in this section are divided into the following general categories:

- Building signage
- Site signage
- Multi-tenant signage
- Wayfinding/campus signage

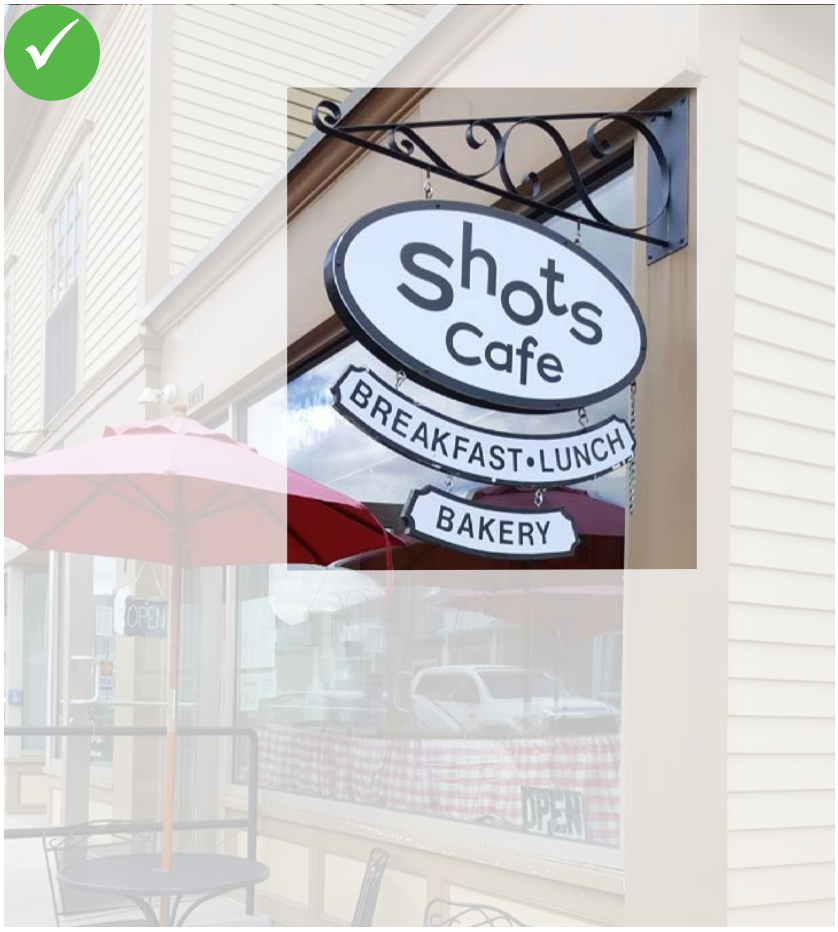
This section also provides examples of creative signage and of sign types that are inappropriate for a town center.

Components of a sign include the text (font and letter height), colors, graphics, material, shape, and position. These components will interact and may affect how easy it is to read the sign. The speed of the reader – i.e. pedestrian, bicyclist, or driver – can affect the size of the sign and the size of the text within the sign. If the letter size is too small, or if the sign colors are wrong, the sign will be unreadable and potential customers will miss the business. Expert design help can assist a business or property owner with the successful design of a sign.

Building Signage

Key points in this design:

- Projecting sign is easier for pedestrians to read.
- Sign indicates the business and what it sells. (Note that the sign does not include brand names of products.)



Site and Building Signage

Key points in this design:

- Materials, including the materials for sign supports, colors, and text are all part of the overall design.
- The design should be consistent with the business' identity.
- The weathered material of the support and the clean design of the text provide an engaging contrast.

Creative Building Signage

Key points in this design:

- The use of color calls attention to the sign (in the sign band) and the design elements.
- The bicycle wheels and lights are a creative way to draw attention to the business and can be seen by pedestrians and drivers.
- The image in the lower left is a reference to the business name (Dragon Pizza).

Creative Building Signage

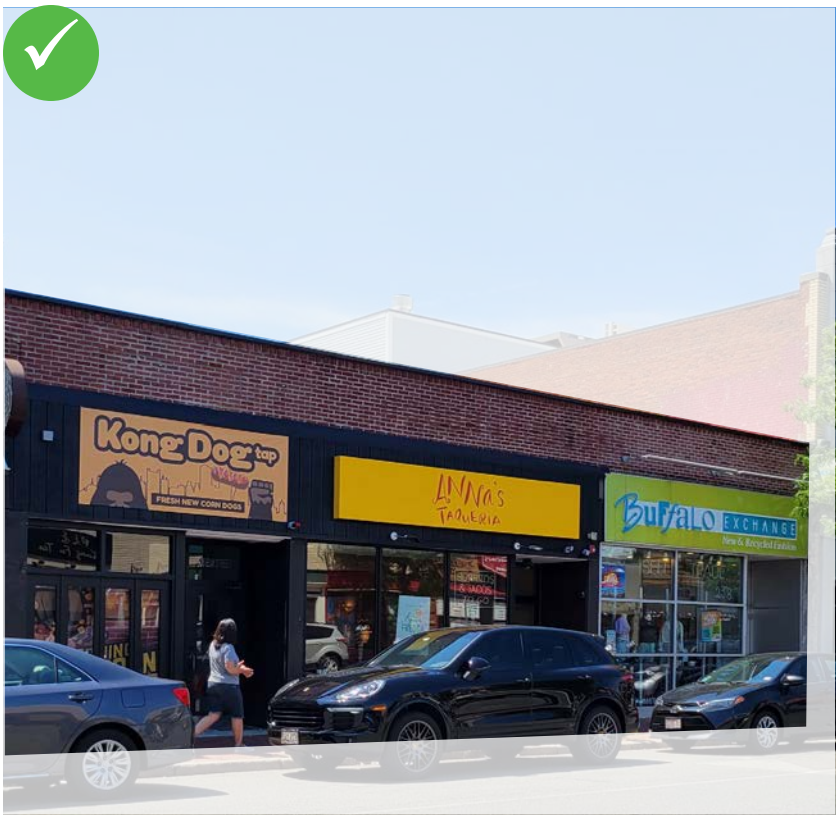
Key points in this design:

- The use of color calls attention to the sign without hiding the underlying materials.
- The black building facade and dark window trim allows the sign to be a design element.
- Minimal signage in the window allows passers-by to understand what the ground floor use is.
- The ramp provides accessibility for all users.

Building: Multi-tenant Signage

Key points in this design:

- The signs are located in the sign band of the building, above the storefronts.
- The text in each sign is large enough to be read by pedestrians and drivers.
- Each sign has its own identity that reflects the businesses they advertise.
- The single building has three different storefront systems and two different colors.



Building: Multi-tenant Signage

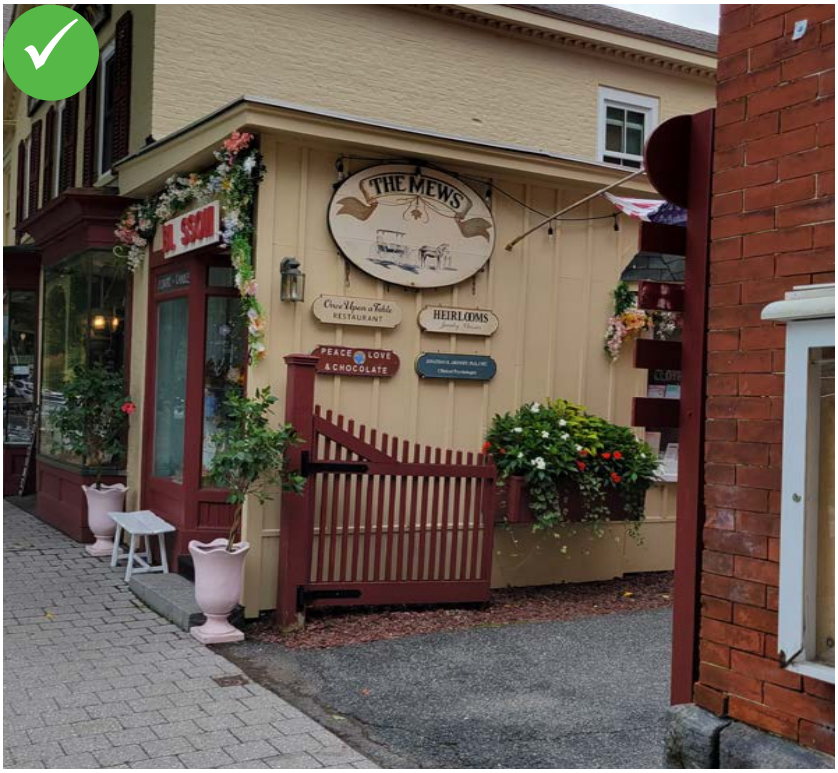
Key points in this design:

- The signage for the principal business of the ground floor clearly provides the name of the business, the address, and what the business is within the sign band of the building.
- The signage turns the corner and adds two other business that are in the same building.
- The lighting for the signs is also consistent along both sides of the building.

Building: Multi-tenant Signage

Key points in this design:

- The signage is consistent with the overall color scheme for the building.
- Signs are readable to pedestrians (this is a complex of businesses; see inset below).
- Signs are replaceable as tenants change.



Site: Multi-tenant Signage

Key points in this design:

- Tenant signage is organized with a consistent theme, size and colors.
- Scale is appropriate for viewing by pedestrians but not by car.
- Signs can easily be removed and replaced, allowing for quick updates as tenants change.

Wayfinding/ Campus Signage

Key points in this design:

- The map indicates where the person is relative to the attractions.
- A smaller-scaled map could also work for a site with more than one building.

Wayfinding/ Campus Signage

Key points in this design:

- The sign identifies all the businesses and attractions along this street.
- Individual panels are easy to change if businesses move.
- This type of signage could also work for a site with more than one building.

Discouraged

The signage in the photo to the right is designed for a highly traveled road, and not a downtown.

The sign advertises three tenants but is not coordinated to provide a uniform appearance.

LIGHTING

Building/Storefront

Key points in this design:

- Downward directed lights call attention to the name of the business without causing uplighting or overspill.
- Lights under the awning make the entrance easy to see and promotes safe access for customers.
- Lit windows indicate that the business is open.

Source: https://www.barnlight.com/inspiration/featured-customer-exterior-lighting-plays-important-role-for-neighborhood-grocery/

Outdoor/Indoor

Key points in this design:

- Commercial-grade outdoor strings provide a welcoming area for outdoor eating.
- Illuminated box sign indicates business is open and what the business is.
- Creative interior lighting sets the stage for the customers' experience and looks attractive from the street.

Source: https://www.lightingpros.net/blog/attractive-outdoor-lighting-designs/

SITE DESIGN

Creative Setback Design

Key points in this design:

- The landscaped front setback is welcoming to customers and provides visual interest for the whole street.
- The upper level entry allows for seasonal displays of flowers and contributes to the overall design.
- This miniature garden also showcases the sign and its contrasting colors.

Separation from Parking

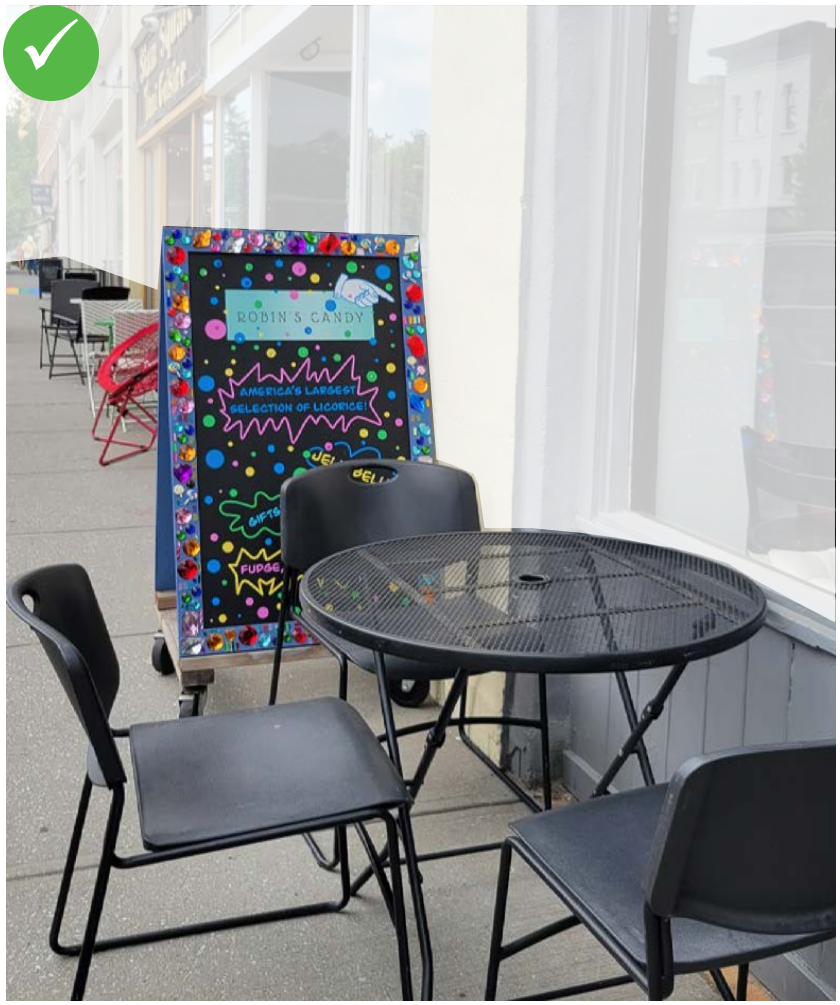
Key points in this design:

- This raised bed provides shade and color to the street.
- It also provides separation between parking and people, and helps to define the driveway entrance. This makes the area much safer for drivers and pedestrians.

Creative Setback Design

Key points in this design:

- Even a narrow spot along a sidewalk can provide a welcoming place to rest, especially for businesses that serve food or who have customers that may need a place to sit (seniors, parents with young children, etc.).
- Check the overall width of the area to make sure pedestrians have room to walk without being blocked by the furniture.
- A seating arrangement could be included in a larger setback, such as in the garden on the previous page.



Outdoor Dining (Parking lot)

Key points in this design:

- A parking area provides a great opportunity for outdoor dining or other activities.
- The area does not have to reduce parking. In this case, the business owner was able to create an outdoor dining area outside of the main travel or parking zone.

Planters and Window Boxes

Key points in this design:

- For businesses without much room, planters and window boxes can provide seasonal interest and variation.

Discouraged

- The front-yard setback is not differentiated from either the street or the driveway on either side. This creates a dangerous situation for pedestrians and drivers.

Wall Mural

Key points in this design:

- The mural on a dark background makes this otherwise nondescript wall an amenity.
- The color of the door picks up a major color in the mural, adding to the coordinated effect.

Wall Murals

Key points in this design:

- Murals can tie into the business theme or components of an area's identity or history.
- By wrapping around the building, this mural leads customers to outdoor eating in the side yard.

Key points in this design:

- Several murals in a row start to develop a special identity for the area. The use of common themes can help reinforce local identity, especially when tied to local and personal history and culture.

Ground Murals

Key points in this design:

- This design reflects the town's location on the water. Choosing something meaningful to a community can be a unique design element.
- Ground murals may also be as simple as a set of footprints or colored dots to indicate direction to a location (for example, a side entrance on a multi-tenant building).

Discouraged

- This striking mural is deteriorating because the base layer was not properly prepared.
- Mural should be touched up on a regular basis.
- Murals can also change; painting a new mural on the same wall each year can be a source of excitement for the area.

Application

Town of Ashburnham
Façade and Storefront Improvement Program
Application

Cover Page

Name of Business	
Business Address	
Contact Name:	
Contact Phone:	
Contact Email:	
Type of Business:	
Is this a new business?	☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

Certification and Signature.

I have read and understand the guidelines of the Town of Ashburnham's Sign and Façade Improvements Program. I understand that approval for funds is based on the approval of the Select Board and subject to the availability of funds. I hereby certify that the information in this application, including the attached documents, is true and complete.

Signature: _____ Date _____

The completion and submission of this application does not guarantee funding or award in whole or in part. Said funding or award shall be determined based upon the criteria and qualifications and availability of funding as determined by the Select Board.

For use of the Town of Ashburnham

☐ Application Complete ☐ Application Complete ☐ Application Approved ☐ Application Rejected	☐ Project terminated before completion	☐ Final inspection completed ☐ "After" photos received ☐ Receipts received ☐ Final funds dispersed

Description of the Proposed Project

Attach more pages if needed.

Project budget.

Attach more pages if needed.

Item	Cost
Total Cost	

Checklist of Attachments

☐	Attachment 1:	Business Certificate from the Town of Ashburnham or Articles of Incorporation from the Secretary of State.
☐	Attachment 2:	Proof from the Town of Ashburnham Treasurer's Office that there are no outstanding taxes or other liens on the property.
☐	Attachment 3:	Plans and elevations (if required)
☐	Attachment 4:	Completed building permit application (if required).
☐	Attachment 5:	Three or more bids from contractors.
☐	Attachment 6:	"Before" photos of the building. The Town will use these to publicly document the success of the program.
☐	Attachment 7:	Signed and notarized letter from property owner giving permission for the work (if the Applicant is a tenant).

Innes
Associates Ltd