



City of Athens Opportunity Council Districts

Small Business Physical Improvement Incentive Program

Program Outline & Incentive Guidelines

I. Program Overview

On February 23, 2026, the Athens City Council adopted Resolution #2026-2141, which called for the establishment of a program to promote the economic development of the City of Athens, through an effort to provide economic development incentives to retail-stagnant or economically distressed areas. The council determined that there are such areas within City Council District 3 and City Council District 5, and it allocated \$200,000 to support the program. The council's resolution directed Mayor Ronnie Marks to establish the program and to develop appropriate guidelines for it. This document is issued by Mayor Marks in response to that resolution.

The program, named the *Opportunity Council Districts Program* (referred to herein as the "Program") is an incentive-based economic development initiative established by the City of Athens to encourage small business growth within retail-stagnant areas of designated city council districts.

The Program will be available for projects located in:

City Council District 3, represented by **Councilman James Lucas**

City Council District 5, represented by **Councilwoman Amy Golden**

The Program focuses on the funding of permanent, physical improvements to commercial properties that enhance business viability and spark future investment in these areas.

II. Program Objectives

The Program is designed to:

1. Promote the economic development of the City of Athens within retail-stagnant areas.
2. Induce small business growth and retention within underutilized commercial corridors.
3. Stimulate long-term economic development through permanent property upgrades.
4. Improve the visual and functional appeal of static retail areas.
5. Promote equitable economic opportunity across council districts.
6. Encourage district-level input through District Advisory Teams.

III. Program Funding

Total Program Allocation: The City Council has allocated **\$200,000** in support of the Program. **\$100,000** for District 3 and **\$100,000** for District 5.

Maximum Award Amount: Incentives are available for the improvement costs of **up to \$20,000 per project/property**. There is no set limit on the number of grants per council district.

Funding Structure: Incentives will be awarded on a competitive basis upon a review of applications by the Mayor and approval by the city council. Early submissions are encouraged.

Incentive funds will be distributed upon the completion of the project (as discussed in more detail herein). Incentive funds are generally not available until the project has been fully completed as proposed, so the City can ensure that the incentive award is not provided until the project that is being incentivized has been accomplished as represented and conditioned.

Funding Nature: Funds are intended for one-time, permanent physical improvements.

The Program is aimed at incentives to encourage future projects, and as such, funds are not available for reimbursement for previously completed projects. If an applicant is seeking incentive funding for a project, then no work should begin on that project until there has been a determination whether that project will participate in the Program. (However, if work has been commenced prior to the time of the application, but the project had not been substantially completed at that time, then an exception may be allowed for later phases of the project, provided the applicant agrees to make any revisions or modifications as a condition of the incentive.)

IV. Eligibility Requirements

Eligible Applicants must meet all of the following criteria:

- Be a locally owned small business that is physically located within the geographic boundaries of City Council District 3 or City Council District 5.
 - Be a retailer or a non-professional personal service business (such as, but not limited to, a convenience store, neighborhood market, restaurant, grocery store, clothing store, drugstore, auto repair shop, furniture store, barbershop/hair salon, or nail salon). Professional services such as attorneys, accountants, architects, doctors, chiropractors, surveyors, insurance agencies, bankers, financial service providers, and engineers are not eligible. Residential rental businesses and home occupation businesses are not eligible. Businesses whose primary purpose or operation is the sale of alcohol, tobacco, or controlled substances (such as vape shops or package stores) are not eligible.
 - If the applicant is a tenant, then the property owner's written consent will be required, as well as certification that the tenant has a long-term lease in place (with a term of three (3) or more years) for the use of the property.
 - The business' operations must be fully consistent with the zoning district where the business is located.
 - Be compliant with all City of Athens zoning, building codes, and ordinances.
 - Be in good standing with:
 - City of Athens taxes and fees
 - Business licensing requirements
 - Have no outstanding code enforcement violations.
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V. Oversight Structure

A. District Advisory Teams

The Mayor will administer the Program. To assist the Mayor in this effort, the Mayor will appoint two District Advisory Teams, one with respect to District 3 and one with respect to District 5. These teams will be responsible for the initial review, evaluation, and recommendation of applications to determine their merit and suitability.

The Mayor has determined that each District Advisory Team will include:

- The respective City Council Representative
- Communications Specialist Justin Travis (Point of Contact)
- Up to five (5) additional district community leaders, as appointed by the Mayor

The teams can make recommendations to the Mayor. They do not expend or appropriate any public funds. None of the team members, their immediate family members, or any business with which they are associated, will be eligible for participation in the Program.

B. Review Process Overview

The District Advisory Team will evaluate each applicant based on the factors that are identified herein. This is a competitive grant process whereby applications will be weighed against one another based on the factors identified herein, and as such, no applicant has any right or entitlement to receive funding through the Program. Each application will be carefully reviewed to determine whether it is eligible, and if so, whether it merits a recommendation for approval to the city council. The District Advisory Teams will judge each application based on an extensive number of factors to determine their recommendation and whether to forward it to Athens City Council for final review. The Athens City Council will have the ultimate authority to award the incentive and determine the amount.

Note that the Athens City Council and the District Advisory Teams reserve the right to deny any applicant's application and deny any funding for the incentive at any stage of the process prior to issuance of the check to the applicant, for any reason that the Athens City Council and the District Advisory Teams determine to be appropriate, including but not limited to: (a) the applicant's failure to cooperate with the Athens City Council and/or respective District Advisory Team, (b) the applicant's failure to adhere to the design approved by the Athens City Council and/or the Design Committee, (c) or a withdrawal or failure of the funding necessary to support this program.

Please note these steps in the process:

1. Applicant will complete and submit the City of Athens Opportunity Council Districts Application and the Release and Hold Harmless Agreement to the City. The deadline for all submissions (unless extended by the Mayor for all applicants) shall be June 15th, 2026.
2. The respective District Advisory Team will review the application request to determine its merit and suitability. In the course of doing so, the team may reach out to the applicant for additional information concerning the proposed project, as well as the applicant's willingness to comply with any conditions.
3. The team may engage the City's Department Heads to review the feasibility of the recommended projects.
4. The District Advisory Teams will make their recommendations to the Mayor.
5. The Mayor will review those recommendations, and if he concurs, he will prepare a recommendation to the Athens City Council.
6. The Mayor will cause a public notice to be issued in the Athens News Courier in advance of the city council's approval of the project for funding through the Program.
7. The Athens City Council will review the recommendation at a public meeting, and determine whether to approve the project for funding through the Program.

VI. Eligible Improvements

All improvements must adhere to City of Athens ordinances and regulations. All projects must constitute an improvement to a building located within the limits of the respective Opportunity Council District. Improvements to historically or architecturally significant buildings must not, in the view of the Athens City Council and/or respective District Advisory Team, detract from historically or architecturally significant features. All improvements must contribute to the unique and historical design aesthetic of the building.

A. Exterior Improvements

- Façade renovations
- Exterior painting
- Signage or signage upgrades (per city sign ordinances)
- Storefront windows and doors
- Lighting improvements (architectural or security)
- ADA accessibility improvements
- Exterior landscaping directly tied to business frontage
- Parking area improvements directly tied to business frontage (striping, lighting, surface repairs)

B. Interior Improvements

- Code-required upgrades
 - Permanent interior build-outs tied to business expansion
 - Electrical, plumbing, or HVAC upgrades related to long-term functionality
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VII. Ineligible Uses of Funds

No incentives will be made to government-owned properties or to tenants in government-owned properties. Funds are only available for applicants making permanent physical improvements to their small business.

Funds may not be used for:

- Operating expenses
 - Expenses relating to government permits and fees
 - Rent or mortgage payments
 - Payroll or staffing costs
 - Inventory or supplies
 - Marketing, advertising, or branding
 - Equipment not permanently affixed
 - Routine maintenance
 - Debt repayment
 - Work completed prior to incentive approval
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VIII. Application Requirements

Applicants must submit a complete application package including:

1. Completed Application Form
2. Detailed Project Description
3. Itemized Project Budget
4. Project Timeline
5. Contractor Quotes or Estimates
6. Photos of Existing Conditions
7. Business License Documentation

Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.

IX. Project Evaluation

Applications will be evaluated based on weighing the following factors, which if answered in the affirmative, will weigh in favor of the application. However, no one criteria is overriding or determinative. Moreover, the City is permitted to add other factors if they are deemed by the City to be relevant to the promotion of economic development:

- Does the project relate to a project that is located in a retail-stagnant or economically distressed area?
- Does the project relate to a project involving the renovation/revitalization of an existing or historical building/structure? If so, does the project involve the preservation of any historical or significant architectural features?
- Does the project involve a business that will generate significant city sales tax revenue?
- Does the project relate to a business that will provide goods or services to the surrounding community?
- Does the project relate to a business that will generate jobs to the surrounding community?
- Will the proposed improvement make a permanent and long-term positive impact on the property at issue?
- Does the project relate to a locally-owned and operated business?
- Does the project enhance the business' viability and spark future investment?
- Does the project improve the visual and functional appeal of static retail areas?

X. Award Disbursement

- Funds may be disbursed as:
 - Reimbursement upon completion of project as specified; or
 - Progress-based reimbursement disbursements (only as specifically approved)
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- An agreement must be executed prior to any work beginning
- If the project relates to a new business that is not already operating at the location, then funding may also be conditioned on the business opening to the general public.
- Awards may be conditioned upon certain requirements being met. Such conditions may include, but are not limited to:

Completion of improvements by a date certain;

Adjustment of project to confirm with requirements issued by City; or

Clawback of city funds in the event that business is not operated or maintained as represented.

XI. Compliance & Reporting

Recipients must:

- Obtain all permits required by state and local laws
- Use licensed contractors where required by law
- Allow inspections by city staff at any time
- Maintain improvements for a minimum period of time as defined in the agreement
- Submit completion documentation and invoices/receipts

Failure to comply may result in forfeiture or repayment of funds.

Contact Information

For questions or clarification applicants are encouraged to contact Communication Specialist and Established Program Point of Contact Justin Travis at jtravis@athensal.us or by calling (256) 262-1451.