



Historic Downtown Brownsville Property Improvement Grants Guidelines

I. Introduction

Since 2019, BCIC's Business Improvement & Growth (BIG) Program has invested over \$4.4 million across 130 projects, helping spark over \$53.2 million in private investment and new activity in Historic Downtown Brownsville. These efforts have played a big role in the momentum we're seeing today, as downtown reclaims its place as the hub and heart of our city.

The BIG program continues to strengthen our partnership with property owners and tenants who are investing in Brownsville's future. This year, we've refined the grant to better assist established businesses seeking quick, high-visibility facade improvements and reorganized the rehabilitation grants to make extensive projects easier to complete. The updated structure emphasizes activating upper floors and preparing buildings to be move-in ready, further supporting downtown's growth and revitalization.

II. About BIG

The BIG Program provides reimbursable matching grants to downtown property owners and tenants who invest in rehabilitating commercial buildings located within the BIG Program Boundaries (refer to [map link](#)). The program is designed to strengthen economic activity in Historic Downtown Brownsville by encouraging the preservation of existing buildings, preventing further deterioration, preparing vacant spaces for occupancy to reduce vacancies, and promoting mixed-use development through activation of multi-story buildings.

Grant Options at a Glance (How to Determine Eligibility)

The BIG Program includes three (3) distinct property improvement grant structures designed to meet a range of investment needs in Historic Downtown Brownsville. Review the summaries below to determine which category best fits your project and eligibility before applying.

1. Storefront Improvement (Owners & Tenants)

- a. **Purpose:** Supports small, high-visibility exterior projects that make an immediate impact on the downtown streetscape.
- b. **Match & Max:** 50/50 match, up to \$10,000.
- c. **Minimum Project Size:** \$2,000.
- d. **Who's Eligible:** Established businesses operating for two (2) or more years within the BIG Program Boundaries that have not previously received a BIG grant for the same property.
- e. **Typical Uses:** Paint or mural, exterior doors/windows, lighting, signage, and facade restoration.

2. Standard Rehabilitation (Owners & Tenants)

- a. **Purpose:** Assist with moderate facade and interior work needed to prepare a building for full occupancy.
- b. **Match & Max:** 50/50 match, up to \$25,000 (facade) and up to \$35,000 (interior).
- c. **Minimum Project Size:** \$10,000.

- d. **Who's Eligible:** Property owners and tenants within the BIG Program Boundaries and has not previously received a BIG Grant for the same property.
- e. **Typical Uses:** Facade restoration, wall/drywall/paint, signage, fire suppression systems, and electrical and plumbing rough-ins.

3. Extensive Rehabilitation (Owners and Property Managers)

- a. **Purpose:** Encourages complete rehabilitation and multi-story activation of downtown commercial buildings.
- b. **Tiers & Match:** Tier I - project cost \$250,000+, 80/20 match up to \$100,000; Tier II - project costs \$1,000,000+, 80/20 match up to \$200,000.
- c. **Who's Eligible:** property owners or property managers with projects that activate at least two floors for commercial or mixed-use occupancy.
- d. **Typical Uses:** facade restoration, structural upgrades, HVAC and fire suppression systems, interior build-out, and multi-floor activation.

The BIG Program also offers **Rental Reinvestment Grants** designed to assist new businesses in establishing themselves in Historic Downtown Brownsville. These grants are governed by their own set of guidelines, which are separate from the Property Improvement Grant guidelines.

For full details, please refer to the Rental Reinvestment Guidelines available [through this link](#).

III. Program Funding

The BIG Program is funded through BCIC's 2026 Operating Budget. Funding is limited, and the BCIC Board of Directors' approval of grant applications is contingent upon the availability of funds.

*** This program is not intended to fully finance or initiate projects. Applicants must demonstrate sufficient capital to complete the entire project as proposed.** If the application is not approved by the BCIC Board, the applicant remains responsible for all costs incurred in meeting the program's application requirements.

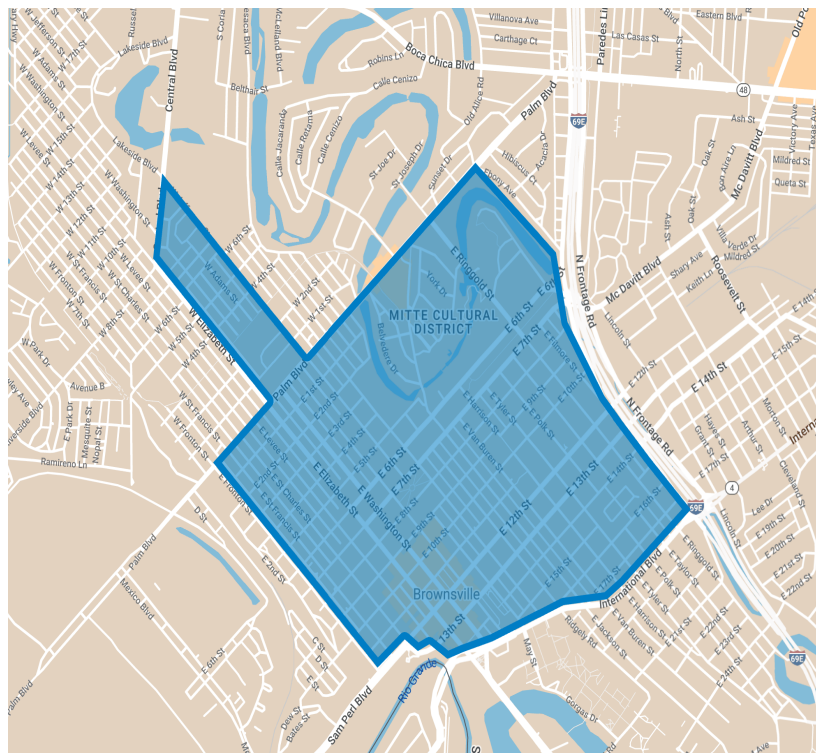
IV. Program Boundaries

Properties must be located within the BIG Program Boundaries. Reference this [map](#) for eligibility or visit BCIC's website.

Historic Downtown District

In 2019, the National Park Service designated Downtown Brownsville a National Register Historic District. As such, proposed projects must carefully consider building modifications and help preserve the historic elements that contribute to the significance of downtown's rich and diverse architectural character.

All proposed projects must comply with the City's Historic Overlay Regulations and consult the City's Historic Preservation Officer (HPO) for any alterations to the building's facade, including historical elements, windows, doors, signage, paint, and/or awnings. The applicant must obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness from the HPO,



when applicable, and submit it with their application.

We encourage applicants to contact the City of Brownsville's Historic Preservation Officer, Juan Velez at juan.velez@brownsvilletx.gov or call 956-548-6142 for more details.

Understanding Historic Tax Credits

The Historic Tax Credit (HTC) is a federal and state incentive program designed to encourage the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Through this program, property owners who rehabilitate certified historic structures can receive a tax credit worth up to 20% of eligible rehabilitation costs on their federal income taxes. In Texas, the Texas Historic Preservation Tax Credit offers an additional 25% state credit, which can be combined with the federal credit for significant savings.

To qualify, the property must be listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as a contributing structure within a historic district, such as Historic Downtown Brownsville. All rehabilitation work must meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, ensuring that improvements preserve the building's historic character.

For a property owner, receiving historic tax credits can mean:

1. Substantial financial benefit, offsetting a portion of rehabilitation costs.
2. Improved project feasibility, making larger or more complex restorations financially attainable.
3. Enhanced property value and long-term community recognition for preserving Brownsville's architectural heritage.

When combined with BCIC's BIG Program, historic tax credits can significantly reduce the net cost of investment, making preservation-driven redevelopment both achievable and rewarding.

For information on historic tax credits and requirements, visit the Texas Historical Commission: <https://thc.texas.gov/preserve/grants-tax-credits-and-funding/historic-preservation-tax-credits>

V. Rehabilitation Grants

The BIG Program provides reimbursable matching grants to support eligible façade and interior improvements for commercial buildings. For this program cycle, BIG includes three (3) categories for property rehabilitation projects, each designed to meet the varying needs of downtown property owners and tenants.

1. Storefront Improvement Projects

The **Storefront Improvement Grant** supports **small, high-visibility, exterior-only projects that make an immediate impact on the appearance and vitality of Historic Downtown Brownsville**. This category is intended for established businesses operating two years or more that have not previously participated in the BIG Program.

A minimum project cost of **\$2,000** is required due to the administrative effort involved in preparing and reviewing each application.

Grant Award Amount

Property owners and tenants may qualify for:

1. Façade Improvements up to \$10,000 with a 50/50 match

Example of Reimbursement

Total Project Cost	Property Owner Match (50%)	BCIC Match (50%)	Reimbursement Amount
\$20,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000

Eligible Costs for Storefront Improvement

The façade is defined as the front exterior of the building facing a public street. For corner buildings, a secondary façade may also be considered. Eligible activities include:

- Minor façade restoration that maintains the building's historic character
- Security lighting to enhance storefronts.
- Paint or mural installation that enhances the visual appeal of downtown and contributes to public art activation goals. Murals may be funded as standalone projects.
- Repair, replacement, or removal of windows, shutters, and exterior doors.
- Remove obsolete fixtures or other non-historic features.
- New signage or preservation of historic or ghost signs.
- **Soft costs such as Historic preservation consultant fees are eligible** for property owners of historic buildings seeking National Park Service or Texas Historical Commission Historic Tax Credits or historical markers. These costs help preserve the National Register Historic District designation awarded to the City of Brownsville in 2019.

Murals and Public Art Installations

- Murals must be professionally designed and installed.
All mural designs must be reviewed and approved by the City's Historic Preservation Officer (HPO) and BCIC before installation.
- Murals must be located on exterior façades visible to the public and must maintain harmony with the building's design and the surrounding area.
Artists should be compensated at fair market rates. In-kind or volunteer labor is not reimbursable.

- Applicants are encouraged to collaborate with local artists and arts organizations to ensure cultural relevance and community impact.

Ineligible Costs for Storefront Improvement

The following costs are not eligible under this grant category:

- Interior work of any kind (including MEP, walls, restrooms, paint, or finishes).
- Roofing or structural repairs.
- In-house labor, sweat equity, or undocumented expenses.
- Equipment rental, pest control, or cosmetic items (e.g. blinds, shelving, curtains).
- Furniture.
- Work started or completed prior to BCIC approval.
- Properties or applicants who have **previously received a BIG grant**.
- Murals that serve as commercial advertisements, include business logos, slogans, or product branding.
- Murals on surfaces not visible from the public right-of-way or temporary installations such as banners or wraps.
- Repainting or maintaining existing murals, graffiti removal, or touch-ups.

Project Completion and Reporting

Storefront Improvement projects must be completed within one (1) year of signing the program agreement. A project report will be submitted one (1) year after project completion. Tenant applicants are also required to provide one (1) annual sales tax filing and participation in an on-site check-in conducted by BCIC staff.

2. Standard Rehabilitation Projects

Standard rehab projects are defined as projects that entail minimal to moderate work completed on a commercial building to be 100% occupied. Property owners and tenants may apply for this category. Due to time and effort needed to prepare and submit a funding application, a minimum project cost of **\$10,000** is required.

Grant Award Amount

Property owners and tenants may qualify for a 50/50 match for the following:

1. Façade Improvements up to \$25,000
2. Interior Improvements up to \$35,000

Example of Reimbursement

Total Project Cost	Property Owner Match (50%)	BCIC Match (50%)	Reimbursement Amount
\$50,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000
\$25,000	\$12,500	\$12,500	\$12,500
\$10,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000

Eligible Costs for Standard Rehabilitation

Façade Improvements up to \$25,000 (façade facing a public street; side elevation on corner lots may be considered a secondary façade)

- Façade restoration that maintains the building's historicity.
- Security lighting that will enhance the storefront(s).
- Paint or mural installation, when completed in conjunction with other façade work.
- Repair, replacement, or removal of windows, shutters, awnings, Exterior doors and Roll-up storefront doors
- Exposure of transom windows.
- Removal of obsolete fixtures or other non-historic features.
- New signage or preservation of historic or ghost signs.

Interior MEP Improvements up to \$35,000 (MEPs are defined as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems)

- **Mechanical Systems:** Fire suppression system only such as sprinklers and fire alarms. No other mechanical systems are considered eligible costs
- **Electrical upgrades:** including wiring and conduit replacements that are up-to-code electrical rough-ins.
- **Plumbing upgrades:** Ensuring it is up to code, and underground/aboveground plumbing rough-ins.
- **Additional Interior Improvements:** Walls, drywall, and paint.
- **Soft Costs:** architectural/engineering plans; historic preservation consultant fees.

Activation Required - Standard

If funding is awarded and the building is vacant, the applicant must have a letter of commitment from a business, and that business must open within ninety (90) days of project completion. A letter of commitment for each storefront must be submitted if the building has multiple storefronts. Failure to have the building at 100% occupancy during this timeframe may result in reimbursing BCIC for any disbursed funds.

3. Extensive Rehabilitation Projects

The Extensive Rehabilitation category encourages the complete rehabilitation and activation of multi-story commercial buildings in Downtown Brownsville. To qualify, projects must activate and prepare at least two floors for commercial or mixed-use occupancy.

Grant Award Amount

Property owners may qualify for the following:

1. Tier I: Improvements \$250,000+ with an 80/20 match up to \$100,000
2. Tier II: Improvements \$1,000,000+ with an 80/20 match up to 200,000 (Must activate at least 2 floors)

Example of Reimbursement

Rehab Tier	Total Project Cost	Owner Match (80%)	BCIC Match (20%)	Reimbursement Amount
Tier I	\$250,000	\$200,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
Tier II	\$1,000,000	\$800,000	\$200,000	\$200,000

Eligible Costs for Extensive Rehabilitation

Façade Improvements

The façade is defined as the front exterior of the building facing a public street. Eligible activities include:

1. Façade restoration that maintains the building's historicity.
2. Security lighting will enhance the storefront(s).
3. Paint or mural installation, when completed in conjunction with other façade work.
4. Repair, replacement, or removal of windows, shutters, awnings, Exterior doors and Roll-up storefront doors
5. Exposure of transom windows.
6. Removal of obsolete fixtures or other non-historic features.
7. New signage or preservation of historic or ghost signs.

Interior MEP Improvements

(MEPs are defined as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems)

1. **Mechanical Systems:** HVAC, fire suppression systems, and sprinkler systems.
2. **Electrical upgrades:** Including wiring and conduit replacements that are up-to-code electrical rough-ins.
3. **Plumbing upgrades:** Ensuring it is up to code, and underground/aboveground plumbing rough-ins.
4. **Structural upgrades:** Structural and support upgrades around the building to ensure sustainability and infrastructure.
5. **Additional Interior Improvements:** Walls, drywall, and paint.
6. **Soft Costs:** Architectural/engineering plans; historic preservation consultant fees.

Activation Required - Extensive

If funding is awarded and the building is vacant, the applicant shall provide a letter of commitment from a business confirming that it will open within ninety (90) days of project completion. A separate letter of commitment shall be submitted for buildings with multiple storefronts for each storefront. If funding is awarded to a multi-story building for a fire suppression system, the entire building, including all upper stories, shall be occupied by one or more businesses, and upper stories shall not be used for storage purposes, as the installation of a fire suppression system eliminates the barrier of occupancy for the building. Failure to achieve

and maintain one hundred percent (100%) occupancy within the required timeframe may result in the applicant reimbursing BCIC for any disbursed monies.

VI. Project Completion and Reporting

Storefront and standard rehab projects must be completed within one (1) year of signing the program agreement. Extensive rehab projects must be completed within two (2) years of signing the program agreement. Applicants must submit TX Sales & Use Tax Return every 6 months for 2 years.

Ineligible Costs for Standard & Extensive Rehabilitation Projects

Although the list below is not an all-inclusive list, the following items are specifically ineligible:

- Roofing
- HVAC units (only extensive rehab projects qualify for HVAC)
- Grease Traps
- Activation of basements or rooftops
- Upper-story additions to existing buildings
- Interior light fixtures
- Flooring and carpeting
- Furnishings, equipment, and appliances
- Kitchen or bathroom fixtures (sinks, toilets, mirrors)
- Cosmetic improvements and decorative items include blinds, shutters, curtains, mirrors, shelving, track lighting, doorknobs, handles and locks, and light bulbs.
- Surveys – asbestos and/or lead testing
- Equipment rental
- Improvement costs are completed prior to program application approval.
- Debris clean-up and dumpster fees
- Pest control
- In-kind contributions, donated items, “sweat equity,” or similar no-cost improvement work, services, or materials.
- Miscellaneous and project management costs.
- Emergency repairs.

VII. Program Requirements

Eligibility

Property owners and tenants located within the BIG Program Boundaries are eligible to apply for funding if they meet the following criteria:

1. If you are applying as a tenant, submit a notarized consent letter from the property owner.
2. Applicants MUST use licensed contractors on standard and extensive projects.
3. Applicants may not hire themselves or contract any company in which the property owner(s) hold an ownership interest to perform renovation or rehabilitation work funded by this program (applies to Standard and Extensive Rehabilitation).
4. Provide at least 2 contractor bids and identify the selected bid (applies to Standard and Extensive Rehabilitation).
5. Property taxes must be current and remain current through the preservation period.
6. All City accounts must be in good standing; no active code enforcement violations.
7. Must provide proof of available unencumbered capital (minimum 50% of total project cost).
8. Businesses that support community health and wellness (e.g. healthy menu restaurants, wellness services, fitness-based businesses) may receive additional consideration in BCIC communications and promotions.

Ineligible Applicants

- Property owner(s) and/or tenant(s) that received a BIG Grant in the last three (3) years.
- Property owners of residential or multi-family properties—including short-term rentals—without a dedicated commercial storefront business operating on the premises.
- Properties located outside of the BIG Program Boundaries.
- Existing businesses with Conditional Certificates of Occupancy.
- Elected officials of the City of Brownsville as well as City of Brownsville employees.
- BCIC board members and staff (current).
- Former BCIC board members, former BCIC staff, and former City employees involved in BCIC grant administration, for a period of 12 months after their service or employment ends.
- Appointed members of the City of Brownsville boards and commissions who are required to file a Personal Financial Statement (PFS) during their service and for 12 months thereafter.
- Immediate family members, defined as individuals within the first degree of consanguinity or affinity under Texas Government Code Chapter 573 (including former spouses with shared children who are living).

Project Scope, Budget, and Construction Timeline

Applicants must submit a project scope, budget, and construction timeline.

1. **Project Scope** - a detailed description of the project work to be completed. Applications are considered per legal parcel identified by the Cameron County Appraisal District.
2. **Project Budget** - must be an itemized list from a Contractor of the items to be worked on with its respective cost.
3. **Construction Timeline** – submit a complete construction timeline, including proposed construction draws. Construction draws will only be permitted when the project is 50% complete and at the time of project completion.

VIII. Application Process**Application Submission**

Eligible applicants must submit a separate application for each incentive they will apply for via [BCIC's website](#). The application(s) must be completed in its entirety, and all required documents must be uploaded for the application to be considered complete and submitted. Applicants will be able to save their application as they work through it.

Required Documents

Required documents for applications include:

1. All applicable permits required by the City of Brownsville for the Scope of Work submitted with the application. BCIC staff will share the Scope of Work submitted by the applicant with the City to ensure all permits were obtained. **Any discrepancies or omissions communicated in writing to either entity will automatically disqualify the applicant.**
2. If applicable, the City's Historic Preservation Officer issues a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). This permit is required for all façade work for properties within the BIG Program Boundaries.
3. Financial documents dated within the last 90 days demonstrating that the applicant has at least 50% of the total project cost in unencumbered, unrestricted funds. It is preferred that applicants have the available capital to complete one hundred percent (100%) of the project. This includes any costs associated with planning, design, permitting, construction, and materials. Financial documents must validate the amount of funds listed on the application that are available. Acceptable documents include:
 - a. An official letter from the applicant's banking institution.
 - b. Financial and/or bank statements.

- c. A notarized statement from the applicant.
- 4. Sign Permit if signage is included in the project scope for the Façade Improvement.
- 5. Proof of Ownership (warranty deed) if the property owner is the applicant or a Certified Lease Agreement if the tenant is the applicant.
- 6. Notarized Consent Letter from the Property Owner if the tenant is the applicant.
- 7. Project Scope, Budget, and Construction Timeline.
- 8. Contractor bids on the contractor's letterhead that includes an itemized scope of work must be dated within 90 days of application submission.
- 9. Schematic designs, conceptual renderings, and/or construction drawings
- 10. Floor plan(s) submitted to the City's Permitting Division
- 11. Digital photos of the façade and the areas included in the project scope.
- 12. Certified Tax Certificate
- 13. Tenant Letter of Commitment (if the property owner has existing vacancies).

The applicant must notify BCIC in writing if the applicant makes any changes to any of the components of the original application after submission. BCIC reserves the right to reconsider the application, and any funding awarded.

IX. Application Deadline & Review

Applications are accepted continuously, with a strict deadline of the 10th of each month to allow for a 30-day application review. No exceptions will be granted regarding this deadline. The Board of Directors will consider submitted applications in the subsequent month.

BCIC Staff will review all applications and work with the applicant to collect any pending information. All applications must be presented and approved for funding by the BCIC Board of Directors. Applicants will be notified in writing whether their application was approved or denied. The applicant must be available to answer questions about the application or project.

PRO TIP: Applicants must wait to begin the Project Scope until the BCIC Board approves the application and a Notice to Proceed is issued. Items paid for before the application is approved are not eligible for reimbursement, except for architectural or engineering plans.

X. Appeals Process

Applicants denied program participation by the BCIC Board may appeal the decision in writing within thirty (30) days of denial and must submit the appeal to the BCIC Office. Appeals are reviewed by assigned BCIC staff. The reviewers will compile a recommendation of whether to reverse the denial. They will be taken to the BCIC Board at the next meeting. All appeal decisions are final.

XI. Participation Agreement

Applicants whose applications have been approved by the BCIC Board will be required to sign a Participation Agreement. The agreement will be prepared by BCIC staff and reviewed with the Program Participant. The agreement shall state specific terms, such as the effective agreement date and obligations required by the Program Participant and BCIC. At a minimum, the Program Participant agrees to:

- 1. Before applying, the applicant must obtain all applicable permits required by the City of Brownsville for the Project Scope submitted.
- 2. The project must begin within sixty (60) days of signing the Participation Agreement and receiving a Notice to Proceed. It must also conform to the City of Brownsville codes, ordinances, and comprehensive plans.
- 3. Applicants awarded funding are not eligible to reapply for the same grant for three (3) years.

4. Allow BCIC to promote the participant and project using photographs in printed promotional materials, press releases, websites, and social media outlets.
5. Place a sign provided by BCIC on the building throughout the duration of the project to create awareness for the BIG Program.
6. Notify BCIC staff in writing if there are any changes to the project scope, budget, timeline, or terms stipulated in the Participant Agreement. The BCIC Board reserves the right to reconsider participation and funding based on any changes to the original agreement.
7. Standard and Extensive Rehab: Two-year preservation period with semi-annual Texas Sales and Use Tax Return filings.
8. For completion reports, tenant applicants submit one annual sales tax filing with staff onsite check-ins for one year.
9. A two-year preservation period will be in effect after project completion. During this period, any alterations to the property may result in reimbursement to BCIC.
10. BCIC may request a repayment of funds if, within twelve (12) months of signing the Program Agreement, the property or business is sold or transferred, or the business closes, and the business owner was the applicant.

PROJECT START AND COMPLETION TIME

Applicants must obtain all applicable permits for the work listed in the Scope of Work submitted by the applicant. Projects must begin construction within sixty (60) days after receiving the Notice to Proceed. The Program Agreement will stipulate the Completion Date for the approved project scope. The completion dates are as follows:

1. **Extensive rehab projects 2 years**
2. **Standard rehab projects 1 year**
3. **Storefront rehab projects 1 year**

The BCIC Board may consider a written request for an extension of the project start date and completion date if it is made at least thirty (30) days before the deadline to start or complete the project. The BCIC Board is not obligated to allow extensions. However, all terms and conditions must be met if an extension is granted. The decision is final and may not be appealed if an extension is denied.

XII. REIMBURSEMENT REQUESTS

The application requires that the applicant have at least fifty percent (50%) of the total project cost available in unrestricted, unencumbered funds. Therefore, reimbursement requests will be allowed at two intervals:

1. At 50% project completion
2. A final report will be submitted with all the required documentation to finalize the reimbursement upon project completion.

The Program Participant may be reimbursed for eligible expenses only. All reimbursement requests require documentation, which will be detailed in the participation agreement, but, at a minimum, includes:

1. An invoice from the Program Participant to BCIC.
2. Itemized vendor invoices detailing the work performed and receipts.
3. Bank statement showing a cashed check.
4. If paid with a credit card, the credit card receipt must be included along with the credit card statement showing payment.
5. If paid with mobile or peer-to-peer payment apps such as Google Pay, Apple Pay, Venmo, or Cash App, the app's receipt must be submitted along with the bank or credit card statement showing the processed transaction.
6. Transactions must be posted and not pending.
7. No receipts from a manual receipt book are allowed.
8. No CASH payments are allowed.

9. Photographs of the areas where work was completed.

If proper documentation has been submitted, reimbursement requests may be disbursed within thirty (30) business days of receipt. To ensure a thorough review of the submitted documentation, BCIC cannot expedite reimbursement reviews.

XIII. Support & Questions

For questions about the program, guidelines, and eligibility, please contact:

Eric Quintero
Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation
Community Development Manager
equintero@brownsvillecic.com

Free resources are available for entrepreneurs through the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). Contact UTRGV to find out what resources are available and schedule an appointment with a Business Advisor to discuss your business plan and operating pro forma.

UTRGV Small Business Development Center

Website: <https://www.utrgv.edu/sbdc> | Phone: (956) 665-7535

UTRGV Entrepreneurship and Commercialization Center

Website: <https://www.utrgv.edu/ecc> | Phone: (956) 882-4119