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New grant program offers funds for building renovation

Travis K. Fischer
Mid-America Publishing

A new grant program will be passing out $1 million to communities looking to make improvements to their older buildings.

The Community Catalyst Building Remediation Program, created by the Iowa legislature earlier this year and administered by the Iowa Economic Development Authority, is now accepting pre-applications from communities for grants of up to $100,000 for projects that would help turn an underutilized building into an economic asset.

Main Streets across Iowa can be easily recognized by the brick buildings constructed generations ago. However, in today's Iowa, many of these buildings have been left unused or abandoned as owners cannot spare the expense to make needed renovations or repairs. Often this results in the city taking ownership of the property and dealing with the expense of tearing it down.

Looking to reverse that trend, the new state program is seeking out projects that could give these buildings a needed boost in productivity. From sprucing up the outside face to repairing a roof to renovating the interior, projects must involve the rehabilitation, development, or reconstruction of a property, with the intent that it will become or remain commercially viable.

"We would really like to see these be tax producing properties," said Jim Thompson, program manager with the Economic Development Authority. "We're really emphasizing a total building rehab."

For example, many small towns in Iowa have Main Street buildings that once housed thriving retail stores. However, as businesses close or leave, it's not uncommon for property owners to retrofit their buildings into apartments. These grants could be used to mitigate some of the costs of that modification.

Buildings don't have to be specifically on a community's Main Street. So long as a city can explain how a building project would be a boon for economic activity in their community, they will be considered.

"If there are nodes in a town where economic activity is present, those buildings are eligible," said Thompson.

Applications for the grant will be a two-step process. First, a pre-application must be made by an incorporated city. The city doesn't necessarily need to own the building in question, but the property owner must have a plan and be willing to invest their own money into the project.

"We want to make sure that the owner has skin in the game and is serious about creating this catalytic project," said Thompson.

Cities interested in submitting a pre-application can contact Thompson at the Iowa Economic Development Authority.

The Economic Development Authority will examine the pre-applications and invite qualifying cities to submit a full application, due March 1. With 947 incorporated cities in Iowa, competition for the funds is expected to be strong.

"We're hoping for 12 to 14 applications to be awarded across the state," said Thompson.

Smaller communities shouldn't be discouraged though. One unique condition about the program is that 40 percent of the funds must be used in communities of less than 1,500 people, ensuring that Iowa's smaller rural communities aren't left out.

"That's the first time I've seen a dedication to rural development like that," said Thompson.

For communities facing an unexpected catastrophe, some of the funds have been set aside for emergency situations. If a city has an immediate need and a plan laid out, the Economic Development Authority can expedite the application process.

With $1 million to give away in the inaugural launch of the grant program, Thompson is hopeful that successful projects encourage the state legislature to continue to fund the grant program in future years.

"The legislation is in place," said Thompson. "The dollars are not beyond this year."

A fresh and tasty take on a much-maligned holiday staple

Certain foods are synonymous with the holiday season. Thanksgiving turkey. Holiday cookies. Fruitcake. While those first two make mouths water, fruitcake rarely inspires stomachs to rumble in anticipation.

But fruitcake is more than just something to go ignored on holiday serving tables. The following recipe for "Fig and Walnut Fruit Cake" from Andrew Schloss' "Cooking Slow: Recipes for Slowing Down and Cooking More" (Chronicle Books) is chewy, crunchy and wholesomely rich, making it something holiday hosts will be proud to serve to their holiday guests, who might just come away with a whole new appreciation for fruit cake.

Fig and Walnut Fruit Cake

Makes 12 servings

Vegetable oil spray
1 pound walnut halves and pieces
1 pound dried figs, stems removed, quartered
3/4 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt
1 cup sugar
3 large eggs, lightly beaten
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup diced candied orange peel
1/4 cup walnut brandy, such as Nocello

Preheat the oven to 225 F. Coat the inside of a 9-by-13-inch baking pan with the vegetable oil spray; set aside. Toss the walnuts and figs in a large mixing bowl; set aside.

Mix the flour, baking powder, salt, and sugar in a medium bowl. Toss 3 tablespoons of the dry ingredients with the nuts and fruit to coat.

Adds the eggs and vanilla to the remaining dry ingredients and mix with a wooden spoon to form a smooth batter. Mix in the candied orange peel. Scrape into the nuts and fruit and toss with a rubber spatula until everything is evenly coated.

Scrape the batter-coated nuts and fruit into the prepared pan, wet your hands with cold water, and pack the nuts and fruit firmly into the pan. Set in the oven and bake for 8 hours, until the top is golden brown and a skewer inserted into the center comes out clean. (An instant-read thermometer inserted in the center of the cake should register 215 to 225 F.)

Remove the pan from the oven and spoon the brandy over the top. Cool on a rack for 30 minutes. Run a knife around the edge to loosen, invert onto a rack, remove the pan, turn right-side up, and cool to room temperature.

Variation: You can "bake" this in a slow cooker; you will need a 1 1/2-quarter soufflé dish and a 6-quart or larger slow cooker. Once the batter is in the soufflé dish, put it in the slow cooker and cook on low for 6 hours.

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