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Jose Luis Alcataur's Westside business has thrived for nearly a decade, particularly in the Latino community.

But, like most small businesses in the U.S., the downturn in the economy has caught up with him.

"Right now, the fixed costs -- rent, gas, air -- have gone up, but sales are down," said Alcataur, 61 owner of Merry's Bakery.

So when Alcataur found out that he qualified for a newly launched program that would provide funds to help give his store at 4107 W. Michigan St. a face-lift, he applied.

The Local Initiatives Support Corp. has teamed up with Fostering Commercial Urban Strategies and the Business Ownership Initiative of Indiana to help support immigrant-owned businesses citywide.

The program is called the Small Business Facade Program. The program will reimburse business owners up to 50 percent of the cost to make improvements on primary front-facing facades and building entrances.

Business owners have until Jan. 28 to apply. A review committee will select winners based on the highest impact the improvements will have on its community overall.

Priority will be given to businesses located in low-income neighborhoods, where the impact of the improvements will help bring up a struggling commercial corridor, for example, and create jobs.

LISC funds small businesses all over the city, said program officer Rachel McIntosh.

This particular program focuses on immigrant-owned businesses because that's where they see the most growth, she said.

"We feel that's where the growth has been in the last decade," McIntosh said. "Even in the downturn. It also speaks to the increasing diversity of the city as whole."

The foreign-born population in 15 Central Indiana counties that represent greater Indianapolis' work-force area has risen by 69 percent since 2000, to almost 100,000 foreign-born residents in 2007.

Hispanic immigrants comprise the largest growth in overall population of immigrants in Indianapolis, but Asians, South Asians and Africans are not far behind, according to the latest Census estimates.

In October, the U.S. Census released figures that showed Indiana ranked 10th nationally for the increase in gross revenues from Hispanic-owned businesses. In 2002, they made \$792.5 million; by comparison, in 2007, they made \$1.7 billion.

Alcataur, an immigrant from Mexico, has been living in the U.S. nearly 20 years, but he's not a citizen. He took the test several years ago but because of a backlog to approve U.S. citizenship requests for

Mexican nationals, he's still waiting for it to become official.

In order to apply for federally funded grants, business owners are required to provide adequate documentation.

"All businesses, American or Hispanic, are going through hard times," Alcataur said.

"About four to five years ago, being a business owner was easy, and that's because the economy was going well. Today, you really have to know what you're doing and to know what your costs are. These types of programs help," he said.

Alcataur will find out if he'll be able to make improvements on his business on March 31. That's when the review committee plans to announce recipients of the grant.

The funds come from a mix of private and public funds. State Farm, the city of Indianapolis and the Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing partnership are providing funding for this particular program.

To download an application, log on to [www.focusindy.com](http://www.focusindy.com) or call LISC at (317) 396-0588, ext. 16.

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