

Preparing Successful Grant Proposals

by Tobin Scipione

Grants, both public and private, play an increasingly important role in planning and community development projects. Funding from grants can advance important community initiatives that might not otherwise be achieved.

To augment limited budgets, a growing number of planning departments are finding themselves seeking grants. In larger communities grant writing may be a formal staff responsibility. Smaller communities may look to planning commissioners and others to assist with grant preparation.

The grant industry is vast and “giving” can take a variety of forms, including monetary funding, land grants, and in-kind donations of equipment or technical expertise.

However, today’s funders, whether government agencies, private foundations, or local corporations, receive more requests than ever before. Competition to obtain funding is high, but creating a

winning proposal is far from impossible even for the novice grant-writer.

THE GRANT PROCESS

The grant process begins with identifying and prioritizing a project. Grant proposals should reflect regional or local

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planning priorities, and support identified planning goals and objectives. Funders want to see this connection in project proposals. Grant proposals are often unsuccessful when they are developed

primarily to meet donor interests and requirements (i.e., just because there’s a pot of money available).

Grant proposals reflecting “partnerships” with citizens groups, non-profit organizations, local businesses, and other agencies should not be underrated. Funders often look for proposals that take a collaborative approach, and show community-wide benefits that can be linked to other efforts. Funders want the most for their money, so emphasis on weaving together concurrent programs or studies, even of other organizations, is strategically important. By making the grant process inclusive, the merits of the proposal will be strengthened.

THE (HIDDEN) COSTS OF GRANTS

The decision to pursue a grant should begin with an evaluation of not just the time and effort needed to prepare the proposal, but also what it will take to implement the project, and report back to the funding agency.

Partnership grants may require additional time during the proposal development process. During this process, a designated point-person should facilitate meetings and be in charge of writing and circulating the draft proposal.

It is always important to weigh whether or not the resulting funds, if awarded, are worth the time and energy required. Staff time does not end once the proposal is submitted. If grant funds are awarded, time and resources (beyond the grant award) will often be needed to support project implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. Poor reporting, often the result of staff time constraints, will likely impact future grant opportunities from that funding agency.

Especially relevant to new projects are the future implications of project funding once the start-up funds provided by the grant are exhausted.



A sampler of the thousands of grants awarded to communities across the country:

- The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission received a \$165,000 grant award from the Joyce Foundation to study the region’s future water supply, quality, and usage.
- The small city of Forsyth, Missouri (close to country music mecca, Branson) received \$4,500 from the Orton Family Foundation for the production of a community video to help engage citizens in the city’s comprehensive planning process.
- The City of Prescott, Arizona, with the help of two nonprofits (Prescott Alternative Transportation and the Open Space

Alliance) received \$1.2 million in federal Transportation Enhancement grants for bicycle and pedestrian projects.

- New Jersey’s Office of Smart Growth has awarded more than \$5 million in state planning grants to dozens of municipalities and counties, ranging from \$112,000 to Hunterdon County for preparation of a Strategic Growth Management Plan, to \$25,000 to Sea Bright Borough for a Vision Plan and Revitalization Study.
- The Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission in Ohio received a \$131,000 EPA Watershed Initiative Grant to develop innovative solutions to address regulatory and water resource challenges in the Great Miami River Watershed.

Most grants are designed to provide the “seed money” to help get new projects or initiatives off the ground, rather than to support ongoing local programs.

All these considerations should be evaluated before any substantial time is put into preparing a proposal.

GRANT PREPARATION

The first step to building a strong proposal is to research the target funding agency. Often funders showcase past grantees on their websites, making this a great way to learn about the types of pro-

grams and projects that capture the interest of the funder. Reading successful grant proposals will also help newcomers to the grant process become familiar with the lexicon of grants.

The most important aspect of writing a proposal is to remember the “3 Cs” – be clear, be concrete, and be creative. Clearly presenting ideas is critical. Avoid long sentences. Also, steer clear of overly technical jargon and superfluous information that may lose the reviewer’s attention. Be concrete in your presentation of need, goals, and the strategy to achieve the project’s objectives. Finally,

don’t be afraid to be creative. This means thinking broadly when presenting the importance of both the direct and indirect impacts of your project.

Let the proposal communicate the enthusiasm of your agency and its partners in the project. Passion is contagious. You want the potential funder to share your enthusiasm for the project.

ODDS & ENDS

As you prepare a proposal, do not hesitate to call the contact person listed at the funding agency if questions arise. Clarifying a question prior to

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Components of a Grant Proposal

What follows is a description of the eight basic components of most grant proposals, followed by corresponding excerpts (in bold type) from an actual “Safe Routes to Schools” grant proposal which was funded by the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles. While funders may have a required format for their grant application, most applications contain similar components.

1. Project Summary:

The summary should be no longer than two or three paragraphs, presented either as part of a cover letter or at the beginning of the proposal.

It is often easier to write the summary last, after the other proposal components are written. But bear in mind that the summary is the critical first impression grant reviewers will have of your proposal. As a result, this is usually the single most important part of the proposal. Indeed, in situations where many grant proposals have been submitted, the summary may be the only part that is carefully read before a reviewer makes a determination on whether to read through the rest of the proposal.

The project summary should include all key points of the project, and communicate objectives and expected outcomes.

In the 2002-2003 school year the Alliance for Community Choice in Transportation (ACCT) will pilot a Safe Routes to School program in the City of Charlottesville increasing the number of children walking and bicycling to school. ACCT will

coordinate with educators, students, parents, health professionals, planning staff, neighborhood associations, PTOs and bicycle and pedestrian advocates to initiate a safety and awareness campaign for elementary school students. ACCT will work with students and parents to map safe routes to school, identify route safety improvement needs and produce and distribute educational materials and resources to students and their parents.

ACCT will accompany the distribution of these educational materials and resources with teacher-training, classroom-based educational sessions and school-wide events with emphasis on involving surrounding school neighborhoods. In an effort to ensure the overall success of the program, ACCT has built alliances with key agencies and organizations that will, in various capacities, participate in aspects of the program. The ACCT pilot program is developed from best practices already demonstrated in communities around the country such as Marin County, California and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

2. Introduction of the Applicant Agency:

This is the opportunity to present your agency as a credible applicant. Most proposals require a description of the agency including its mission, current programs, and past successes. Include brief biographies of board / commission members and key staff members. If you are writing a partnership grant, identify the lead agency and include information about your partnering agencies.

As a local nonprofit organization, ACCT has pioneered important on-the-ground visible programs to promote transportation choices including producing and distributing the area’s first Regional Mobility Map, devel-

oping a regional scorecard tool to assist citizens and neighborhoods in evaluating the impact of proposed transportation projects and coordinating an Active Living marketing program.

ACCT has developed partnerships with broad sectors of the Charlottesville/ Albemarle community, including working closely with local elected officials, the state and local health departments, University of Virginia, regional and city planning staff as well as a multitude of grassroots groups and local organizations.

ACCT is proud of the partnerships it has created to bring successful programs to the greater Charlottesville community. With a strong and committed volunteer board and citizen-base ACCT has been able to garner significant momentum to address issues of transportation choice in the region.

3. Needs Statement and Proposal Narrative:

The needs statement should be clear and concise, identifying the purpose for the proposal and the nature of the problem (with supporting evidence). The proposal narrative should note current efforts, if any, addressing the need, and identify who will benefit from the project and how. Emphasis should be on clearly presenting the problem with supporting data.

The number of children walking or bicycling to school has diminished dramatically to a national record low of 17 percent compared to 72 percent thirty years ago (2003, Surface Transportation Policy Project). Locally, in the city of Charlottesville that percentage has fallen even lower to an estimated 11 percent, yet almost half of

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submission is critical, and most funding agencies will be happy to answer.

Before you submit the proposal allow sufficient time for a review by several colleagues who (preferably) have not been involved with the proposal. What you want is critical feedback that will further strengthen the proposal. If you are partnering or cooperating with other agencies or groups, also allow time to circulate the proposal for their feedback.

Once the proposal has been sent, follow-up to confirm its receipt. Many funders now have online application processes, which will automatically provide confirmation that the proposal was received. If you are emailing or faxing a

proposal remember to also send a hard copy via registered mail.

IF YOUR GRANT IS FUNDED

As soon as your proposal has been chosen for a grant award, send a thank you note to the contact person. Building a relationship with the funding agency will help ensure that your project is supported if there is ever a problem with its implementation. A relationship with the funder will also go a long way if a change of course is needed. Finally, having a good relationship will allow for your agency and project to be remembered should you ever reapply for funding.

IF YOUR GRANT IS NOT FUNDED

If you submit a proposal that is not funded, do not consider this the end of

the road for the project, or with the funding agency. Instead, use the opportunity to contact the funding agency to review the proposal's strengths and weaknesses.

Roxbury, New Jersey, planning board member Lisa Voyce notes how her township turned an unsuccessful grant submission for a smart growth build-out analysis into a successful application the next time around. "We did the right thing when we were not funded. We asked the funding agency why and made the necessary changes to address their concerns while keeping to our needs and agenda in our second submission to them. Talking to them also let them know how serious we were about the project and needing the funding."

Components of a Grant Proposal...

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Charlottesville's school children live within one mile of their neighborhood school (2003 Greenbrier Parent Survey).

Most children have never been exposed to the necessary pedestrian and bicycle safety training that would enable them to walk safely on our streets. Instead, children remain vulnerable on our roads and are now considered by the Virginia Department of Health to be one of the highest at-risk groups for pedestrian and bicycle related injury and death.

4. Project Objectives:

An outline of project objectives as a bulleted list will clearly delineate the proposal's goals. Project objectives are all of the specific activities of the proposed project. The objectives will form the basis of the evaluation process once the project is funded, so make sure they are realistic.

Excerpts from Project Objectives:

- **Objective 1: Initiate take-home parent surveys.**
- **Objective 2: Provide curriculum materials and assistance for in-classroom pedestrian and bicycle educational sessions for students, designed to meet learning standards.**
- **Objective 3: Map Safe Routes to School with students and families, including the distribution of these maps.**

5. Measurable Outcomes:

Identify measurable outcomes for each

objective. Outcomes should be presented as performance indicators. Each project objective may have more than one identified outcome.

For Objective 1 (relates to point 4. Project Objectives):

- **Production and distribution of 350 parent surveys based on the NHTSA model: estimated response rate of 35 percent.**
- **Identification of current school commute patterns as well as existing challenges and obstacles to safe bicycle and walking to school.**

For Objective 2:

- **In-classroom lessons to approximately 600 students: increase basic pedestrian and bicycle safety awareness from 50 to 600**
- **Training for 6 physical education teachers educators and staff on bicycle and pedestrian safety units: increase trained PE teachers from 1 to 6.**

For Objective 3:

- **Identification of 50 walk and bike to school routes currently used by students, including evaluation and identification of the safest existing routes.**
- **Production of 600 Safe Routes to School maps to be sent home with all school children**

6. Monitoring and Evaluation:

Presenting a credible and clear approach to monitoring and evaluation is critical.

Project evaluation consists of reporting on how well the project satisfied the desired

objectives, and whether or not the proposed outcomes were met.

Process evaluation addresses how the project was conducted in terms of the proposed implementation strategy.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation throughout the project will ensure that adjustments and changes are made if the project is not satisfying its objectives.

Evaluation measures related to first objective:

- **Collection of school specific data: i.e. location of homes, walkability checklist of neighborhood, demographics, traffic counts, # of walkers, # of bicyclists, # of bused children.**
- **Student surveys (at beginning, middle and end of program).**
- **Parent surveys (at beginning of program).**

Note: the process evaluation measures for this grant consisted of measuring the level of involvement of partners in the project and the organization's ability to maintain those partnerships and bring on new partners to fill existing gaps in areas of service and expertise.

7. Budget:

A budget should clearly present line items and projected costs. A well-prepared budget will be consistent with the proposal narrative and justify all related expenses.

While some grants do not require match funding, your proposal will be enhanced if you can show some matching/community funding, as this is another way of demon-

SUMMING UP:

Whether you are preparing to write your first or one hundred-and-first proposal, developing a grant can have pay-offs that extend far beyond securing money. The process of researching and writing a grant proposal itself can help build long-lasting partnerships within your agency and community.

Preparing a winning proposal is a process that requires the “3 C’s”: a clear concept, a concrete strategy, and creative goals. Making links between the project and other efforts in your organization and the community is critical to strengthening the grant proposal.

Successful proposal writing takes practice and refinement. In the end, regardless of whether or not a project is

funded, completing a proposal you are proud of should be both personally and professionally satisfying. Dream, research, network, organize ideas, believe in your goals – and start writing! ♦

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strating to the funder a high level of support for the project. Depending on the funding agency, match funding can take the form of a monetary match, volunteer hours, or an in-kind donation. The 2004 national volunteer rate is \$17.19 / hour, which can be translated into a cumulative dollar figure.¹

It is also helpful to include information on how the project will be funded long-term beyond the grant period. There are two reasons for including this: (1) to demonstrate to the funder that there is a long-term commitment to the project (this also affirms the importance of the project to the community), and (2) to commit your own agency to ongoing support for the project after the grant funding is exhausted. (This relates to my earlier point about carefully weighing whether the grant is worth pursuing).

Two of the line items from the Safe Routes to School grant:

1. Production, distribution and analysis of parent surveys, student “show-of-hands” surveys and walkability checklists.

**\$1750 Federal funding,
\$1000 Community funding**

2. Mapping of existing Safe Routes to School with current walkers, including map production of results.

¹ Statistics on the average dollar value of volunteer time are available at: <www.independentsector.org/programs/research/volunteer_time.html>

\$3500 Federal funding, \$750 Community funding.

ACCT will utilize its volunteer base for involvement in the Safe Routes to School program and will engage key community agencies and local groups in the program to increase the sustainability of the program beyond the grant period. In addition, ACCT will work with schools to identify potential funding sources for infrastructure improvement needs as identified through the program.

8. Attachments:

Include as attachments several letters of support. Be strategic in the selection of who is solicited for a letter of support. Identify specific individuals, public officials, academic institutions, and community organizations, and determine which would provide the most compelling demonstration of support.

Give individuals plenty of time to write the letter and return it to you. To avoid scrambling at the last minute to collect letters, give them a deadline that is at least a week before your proposal's due date. To ensure that the letters cover necessary areas, it is immensely helpful (and often appreciated) to provide a list of key points to make.

The Safe Routes to School Grant included letters of support from a City Council member; an elementary school principal; a parent; and the two partnering agencies.

Resources



For some planning commissions and city departments, grant writing has become a key staff role. For example, the Department of Development Services in the City of Bradenton, Florida (population 50,000) has a grants coordinator who meets with department representatives to discuss needs and news of upcoming grant opportunities. The coordinator determines which new grants are most relevant to the needs of the city and provides assistance with the applications. Smaller communities may not have staff time to dedicate to grants research and writing. Assistance in developing grant proposals can come from a number of sources, including volunteers and independent consultants.

Don't forget to look right in your own backyard for potential funders! In many places community foundations or local corporations can be important partners in either providing funding for specific planning related activities (such as public education programs) or helping secure grants from other sources. For example, in the small town of Morris, southwest of Chicago, the Morris Community Foundation has supported efforts to define a community vision by sponsoring forums on planning and growth topics, bringing in speakers and panelists.

Specific information on state grant opportunities can be searched through state government home pages online. Local offices of a state agency can also provide helpful advice when submitting a grant to that agency.

Other useful resources on grant opportunities include:

- *The Foundation Directory*, a complete directory of national, state and local private foundations. Can be found in the reference section of most local libraries.
- <www.grants.gov> to search a comprehensive collection of federal grant opportunities.
- <<http://fconline.fdncenter.org>> to search a comprehensive collection of foundation grant opportunities (this site requires a monthly fee to search funders).