

6 Steps to Get Funding for Your Water Infrastructure Project

By **Tracy Adamski, AICP**

Many utility and municipal leaders would love to fund improved water service infrastructure projects to ensure quality, reliability and support future growth of their communities. But, local taxes and other community funding sources are often already stretched. Our most recent blog provides a six step process communities should consider to build stakeholder support and prepare for funding initiatives through state, federal, and other sources.

Finding financial resources to carry out water infrastructure projects, without putting too much strain on the municipal coffers, can be frustrating. At Tighe & Bond, we've found that it's important for local governments to understand that the funding process needs to follow a clearly defined flow, like water through a pipeline.

1. Determine the problem you're solving.

First, get a clear idea of what situation you're seeking to change. Is there a major employer or industry that would like to locate in (or you'd like to attract to) your town – but it needs better utilities? Maybe a need to reinvigorate a downtown village or brownfield site in the community? Understanding the community need you're addressing will help you get a clearer idea of both the project and the potential stakeholders – this in itself may lead you to funding options.

2. Decide on the parameters of the project.

If you need to increase the water supply, loosen a bottleneck in your water distribution system, or maybe reduce unaccounted for water through leaking pipelines, first get a clear idea of what is needed. This helps you get clarity around the scope of the project and what it entails. You'll also understand other issues that may be affected – such as a road that must be torn up in order to replace a pipeline. This helps you establish a cost for the project, timelines, and how the work may impact others. Also, it may reveal potential opportunities that flow from the project, such as resurfacing a road, adding a bicycle lane or street-scaping with benches and trees, and open the door to cost sharing opportunities across departments and agencies.

3. Find the stakeholders. A stakeholder is anyone who will be affected by the project. For example, if the project is intended to support an affordable-housing development, local civic groups may be willing to lend their voice – and provide letters of support. There may be local, state or federal agencies who could provide financial contributions to the project, if convinced it will further their mission. To do this, you need to understand their mandate and what they look for in funding applications – and they will need to see evidence of local support for the project. Many times, Tighe & Bond has pulled in multiple funding sources to meet project costs for smaller communities by using a combination of USDA's Rural Development fund and state grant funding to cover infrastructure design, permitting and construction costs.

6 Steps to Get Funding for Your Water Infrastructure Project	
1. Determine the problem	Understanding the community problem that needs a solution clarifies the project and potential stakeholders. It may also point to specific funding options.
2. Decide on project parameters	Determining the project scope helps establish costs, timelines, and how the work may impact others. It may also reveal potential opportunities that flow from the project and open the door to cost sharing opportunities across departments and agencies.
3. Find the stakeholders	Seeking out and listening to anyone affected by a project – both those who support and oppose – is crucial. Stakeholders may be willing to lend their voice, provide letters of support, and possibly deliver financial contributions if convinced it furthers their mission.
4. Build your story	Presenting your idea as a story, not as a dull recitation of facts and figures, makes all the difference. Outline the present situation and problem, the work needed to improve it, who benefits, and how the solution will make lives better. Then back it up with anecdotal evidence and hard data.
5. Research your funding options	Keeping an open mind and “thinking outside the box” when researching funding sources is key. Although funding programs change their purpose and requirements over time, all of them have “hot button” issues that need to be addressed in funding applications.
6. Test your ideas	Meeting informally with supporters, allies and potential funding sources is likely to boost your chances of success. Uncovering any potential problems, including what might be deal-breakers, helps you work around them. It also helps build stakeholder support.

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Also, seek out people who may be opposed – maybe they don't want further development because of noise and traffic congestion, or they are opposed to spending their taxes on the ongoing maintenance of the project. Make sure that they have a seat at the table and that their views are heard throughout the process.

- 4. Build your story.** Everyone loves a story, and it's the best way to present your idea – not as a dull recitation of facts and figures. We suggest that your story should follow this outline: The situation at present, the problem this causes and for whom, what you want to see instead, what work needs to be done to change the situation, who benefits, and how their lives are better as a result.

Be prepared to back up your story with anecdotal evidence from your stakeholders. Also, provide the hard data needed to answer the questions and concerns of your funding sources -- factors such as flow rates, water quality, water pressure and population growth. Providing this information in graphs, charts and diagrams helps.

In a recent client engagement, we developed a narrative around the benefits of a wastewater treatment plant upgrade: for maintaining a key employer in Town, for providing capacity for revitalization of a downtown center and for environmental protection.

- 5. Research your funding options.** Funding programs come and go, change their purpose and requirements, and vary from state to state. So, it's important to keep an open mind, and "think outside the box" (to use an overused phrase) about sources of funds. Sometimes different government entities will contribute partial funding, if you can show them how your proposed project will help them fulfill their mandate. So, you might be able to get a commitment for \$1 million from one agency, contingent on you finding the rest of the funding elsewhere – so you may need to pull together the full amount from various sources. All financial sources have "hot buttons" – issues that they believe in strongly – so your research must find out what those are, and respond to them in the proposal.

We have worked with many communities to develop creative opportunities to make the best use of their funds. For example, we coordinated leveraging municipal funds and private stakeholder financial contributions to garner state and federal funding to round out project costs.

- 6. Test your ideas.** Boost your chances of success with informal meetings with supporters, allies and potential funding sources. This helps you uncover any potential problems, including what might be deal-breakers, so you

can work around them. It also helps build stakeholder support, and find ways your project can meet more local needs.

Our experience in working with communities indicates that getting external funding for projects needs to be approached in a systematic way, and with imagination, so that more potential beneficiaries of the project can be found and their support enlisted. These have included meetings with key private-sector stakeholders, as well as public meetings, to define the project need and develop sufficient support.

Professional advice from a qualified source – a firm that understands the technical issues, is up to date on the wide range of funding programs, and is experienced in gaining support from stakeholders – can help guide your project from idea to ribbon-cutting.



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