

By **Gabrielle Belfit**

Many municipalities take a reactive approach to seeking money from state and federal grants: *"There's been an announcement that some money's coming available next month, let's apply for it."* All too often this approach leads to disappointment and the conclusion: *"Applying for grants is a waste of time; we never win any."*

Yet numerous municipalities have good relationships with granting agencies and strong track records of community improvements to show for it. What are they doing right, that others may be missing? Through my participation in many successful efforts over the years, I've found that a big part of success lies in taking a long-term approach that starts well before filing a grant application.

7 Ways to Help Your Project Meet Grant Requirements

1. Understand what you want to change.

The first step is to get a firm idea of the issues your municipality is facing. It could be that your downtown floods in some years, or some local beaches have bacterial counts too high to allow swimming, causing a decline in tourism revenue. Or perhaps an estuary has algae blooms in hot weather, resulting in fish kills and putrid odors.

Be sure to keep an ongoing and detailed list of problems that you are trying to fix – and keep records that document specific events. This includes newspaper reports, water quality surveys, or even complaint logs to the DPW. Plus, photographs are worth their weight in gold when it comes to documenting the need for a specific project.

2. Develop a wish list of projects

From your wish list, write descriptions of projects that would help deal with the issues you have identified, and put them in priority order. Some will be short-term projects. Larger projects might be more acceptable to funding agencies if they are divided into phases, each of them

able to stand alone, offering definable benefits even without the rest of the project. Get an idea of the steps required for each project and cost estimates for completing each phase, including: feasibility studies, environmental review, stakeholder and community consultation, construction, and maintenance.

3. Match your projects to funding agencies' goals.

It's important to understand why a particular state or federal agency might be interested in the projects you've identified. Get to know their mission, legal obligations, and what policy or goal will be advanced by the grant. For example, you might note that your project site borders a state park, and the work you have in mind could help improve the water quality in the streams

7 Ways to Help Your Project Meet Grant Requirements	
1. Understand what you need	Keep an ongoing and detailed list of problems that your municipality is trying to solve – along with records that document specific events. This includes newspaper reports, water quality surveys, DPW complaint logs, and photographs.
2. Develop a project wish list	Write descriptions of projects that would help solve the problems you identified and prioritize them. Outline the steps required for each project and develop cost estimates for completing each phase.
3. Match your projects to funding agencies' goals	Research specific state or federal agencies that might be interested in your wish list projects. Get to know their mission, legal obligations, and what policy or goal of theirs will be advanced by the grant.
4. Make your project have "zing"	Highlight what makes your project a standout. Does it benefit multiple communities or meet multiple objectives? Is it a new technology or solution that serves as a pilot, or is there an educational component? Create pizzazz for your project!
5. Be willing to subdivide your project	Subdivide your project plan into standalone project phases to aggregate funding resources from multiple agencies. When possible, segmenting larger projects into smaller parts can help match project cost to available grant dollars.
6. Pay attention to the details	Read the application documents carefully, and make sure you cover all your bases: deadlines, eligibility criteria, necessary paperwork, and all program requirements for the given year.
7. Learn from the ones that got away	Pursue feedback from funding agencies on a grant application that you didn't win. With this feedback, you will be better prepared for the next application.

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running through the park. If you can make that connection, you can improve the odds that a state environmental agency may fund your project.

4. Make your project have “zing.” Some quick research on successfully funded projects should provide some clues on what made an application jump out from the pile on the funding officer’s desk. These might include:

- Is this something that can be transferred to other communities?
- Is there an educational component, or can volunteers be involved?
- Can your project benefit multiple communities simultaneously?
- Can it meet multiple objectives (maybe, a project that protects shellfish – and also provides coastal resiliency)?
- Is this technology or solution new to the area, so it can serve as a demonstration or pilot project?

5. Be willing to subdivide your project - the right way. Aggregating funding resources by applying for phases of a project from multiple agencies is one way to fund a project. *“We can get some funding for this water project from an emergency response agency because it’ll help control flooding, and the rest from an environmental agency concerned with surface water quality.”* This process can be successful, but only by carefully segmenting phases into standalone projects that meet individual agency goals. This can help stretch the dollars required to complete a project, but it is not a good idea to rely on this strategy as part of a required match. One agency has no control over whether another agency will come through with its share of the funds, and this makes both agencies reluctant to contribute funding.

In addition, there may be numerous good reasons to segment larger projects into smaller parts. One of these is that segmenting helps match the cost of the project to the money available from the granting program. And, it is easier to direct segments of a large project to meet priority goals for the grant agency. However, each smaller project must stand on its own, and be designed to produce benefits to which the funding agency can point. Plus each small project must be part of a well-thought-through plan to solve a larger problem.

Another funding “combination” package might be to get a funding commitment from non-traditional sources such as a downtown improvement committee, and more traditional in-kind contributions from the municipality or DPW to offset the total grant money requested. These sources of local funding demonstrate local support for the project and improve the chance of being funded.

Also, there is an increased trend among funding agencies to pay for feasibility studies, environmental permitting,

building community support and planning - as opposed to only “shovel-ready” projects. Projects where these early steps are well thought out, and effectively executed, are more likely to provide the expected benefits when completed.

6. Pay attention to the details. Read the application documents carefully and find a way to make sure you have covered not just the big issues, but the not-so-little aspects that can cause a proposal to go straight to the recycling bin. Many proposals have failed because they missed a deadline, didn’t meet the eligibility criteria, or failed to include paperwork – even as minor as a signatory page. Another cause for failure includes an assumption that the requirements for a program have not changed from the previous year – so review the new requirements carefully, rather than just cutting-and-pasting from last year’s application. This is more likely to happen if the application was left to the last minute. If a deadline is too tight to realistically meet, consider waiting until the next funding cycle.

7. Learn from the ones that got away. DFunding agencies almost always get more applications than they can fund. Even worthy, well-thought-through, complete applications can be passed over with finite resources available for a grant. You won’t get every grant that you apply for, but following the steps outlined above will surely help.

Finally, it’s important to learn from what didn’t work. Remember, agencies do want to fund projects that further their own goals – they may be willing to sit down and discuss with you what you might have done differently in a proposal that was off the mark. With this feedback in hand, you will be better prepared for the next round, and closer to furthering your goals, too.



Gabrielle Belfit is a Senior Environmental Scientist who has more than 30 years of experience in regional and community water resource planning. She has worked with a wide range of environmental grants including federal, state and private grant funding programs. She has successfully applied for and administered grants for regional agencies, individual towns, and multiple towns as co-grant applicants. For more about Gabrielle’s background, contact her at GCBelfit@tighebond.com.

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