

Accessing State Funds: Three Steps to Success

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In the recent economy, municipal leaders are finding themselves in a struggle to balance budgets, fund improvements, and still provide the high quality services that taxpayers demand. As a result, municipal leaders are often teased (or tormented) by the numerous funding announcements that are dangled like a carrot for all eligible communities. It seems like every day a new grant is announced and communities find themselves asking “How can we *win* that money?”

The key to successfully securing any grant is being prepared and ready when the funds are announced. A Comprehensive Plan is an essential tool to enhance a community’s ability to take action.

Envision It

In order to advance any planning project, one must not only know the small details associated with the project, but how it fits into the big picture or community vision. A community’s vision is crafted based upon its understanding of the positive and negative attributes, as well as the significant issues that need to be overcome to achieve long-term success.

During a typical planning process, a community begins by completing an inventory of its many resources. The level of detail of these resources may vary from community to community. However, what is important to understand are the assets and liabilities of each community. Strategies are developed to build upon the identified opportunities and to eliminate the known constraints. Often, design solutions are generated to help public and private partners visualize the long-term outcome of future development.

Visualization helps create great design, guide future development and shape our communities.

Plan It

Reach for the stars, not the universe. The planning process is built upon a series of steps designed to help communities understand their identities. It is through this understanding that municipal leaders are enabled to make strong decisions based on the detailed research of the Comprehensive Plan. Understanding how each community wants to grow or change over the next 10 or 15 years will significantly affect the decisions that are made by town officials. This vision is often outlined in a series of goals and actions to be implemented over time. While all of these goals and actions will not be achieved overnight, there should be a mix of short- and long-term goals to keep the plan on track. Achievable short-term goals are an extremely important part of implementation to allow a community to see their vision come to fruition. Actions that can be completed in 60 days of adopting a plan can build momentum amongst community members to ensure the plan never sits on a shelf.

When planning, take a hard look at the best practices in the field of land use and look to incorporate those components into your community plan. Today, large sums of grant funds are dedicated to green technology, sustainable development and sharing services. It is very important to make sure that the programs for which you seek funding are mentioned and supported in your planning document.

Implement It

So what does it take to implement your plan? In short: leadership,

commitment and resources. Successfully implemented plans have leaders that have mastered the “four ‘A’s” of implementation: Assess, Assign, Activate, Accomplish.

Assess the current situation and your resources; know your community’s immediate and long-term needs. Assess the status of your current plan. Many plans were written 10 or 20 years ago. However, with numerous new grant announcements, even a plan written two or three years ago may be outdated. Update the Comprehensive Plan to ensure your community is best positioned to secure future funding. During this update, review your goals and objectives to ensure they are aligned with the community’s current vision. Identify the priority goals that are achievable and viable. Often funding agencies will give extra points or consideration to priority items identified in a plan. In addition, project viability is vital to a funding agency; agencies want to provide money to communities that can confidently advance a project. Therefore, projects need to reflect the Comprehensive Plan and have public support. Your Comprehensive Plan should identify numerous funding opportunities available for the implementation of the plan’s many actions. However, the true key to unlocking funding is not only understanding what is eligible, but what is truly “fundable.” Grant criteria provided by funding agencies will outline what projects are eligible. Community leaders should talk with

Continued on Page 31

Continued from Page 8

agencies to find out what has historically been funded to better position future grant applications to win.

Finally, reassess the feasibility of future community projects based on updated information and funds.

Assign tasks and responsibility. Delegating tasks creates a realistic implementation matrix. The Comprehensive Plan's action matrix should not only clearly identify each goal and action, but who is responsible, when the action is expected to be completed, and the potential funding available. Create a project team (staff, volunteers, consultants and local and state officials) to assist with the implementation.

When assigning tasks, develop a project schedule and work plan for implementing the Comprehensive Plan, complete with milestones and

deadlines. Accountability is often a strong motivator. A successful planning effort requires an inclusive public outreach process that is built upon both public and private partnerships. More can be achieved together than with any single effort. An inclusive planning effort will continue even after the plan is complete, as contacts and partnerships formed during the process will continue to carry out the plan's goals and actions.

Activate your team. Accept responsibility for ultimately implementing the plan and coordinate the effort with project team members. Get the stakeholders involved early. Stakeholders have an invested interest in the successful implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. Many stakeholders willingly participate in the development of the plan and are among the first partnerships formed in advancing it. Continue to work

with the media to obtain support from the public. Priority items that are frequently featured by the media and supported by the public often gain support from those that can influence the funding dollars.

Finally, initiate project planning by applying for available grants and loans.

Accomplish your goal. The implementation process of the Comprehensive Plan will include many milestones, so celebrate your achievements. Provide recognition to all of the stakeholders, partners, staff, media and/or individuals that assisted in the project's success. Compliment everyone's efforts to continue to build strong partnerships for the future.

Whether it takes your community three years or 15 years to successfully implement all of your goals and actions, stay focused. Once complete, re-assess your goals and start over!