

WE LOST.... NOW WHAT?

How to Make Your Project Fundable

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"This project is essential to our community and our application was strong - why didn't we win the grant or qualify for the financing we applied for?"

Many town supervisors have asked themselves this painful question at one time or another. You and your team invested countless hours and substantial effort with this application. You went through the rush of meeting the deadline, endured the anticipation and build-up leading to the press conference, and then... you lost. Now what? For many communities, the cycle of grant-loss grief kicks in:

- **Phase 1 - Denial:** "Our application was solid – I just can't believe we didn't win!"
- **Phase 2 - Anger:** "This is ridiculous! Our project is as strong as the winning one – maybe stronger!"
- **Phase 3 - Depression:** "This project just isn't going to happen – and our community really needed it..."
- **Phase 4 - Bargaining:** "Maybe we can just resubmit the application next year and hope there's a weaker pool of applicants."
- **Phase 5 - Acceptance:** "It was a strong submission, but maybe there's more work to

be done – not just on the application, but on the project itself."

Now that you've accepted that there's room for improvement, you can move on to the

phase that will make all the difference to your community – perseverance!

Get Back in the Ring

Does that mean waiting another year and simply resubmitting an updated version of the application? *Absolutely not!*

Investing the time to thoroughly review your application and honestly evaluate where you went wrong can pay significant dividends for your town. Once you've identified key mistakes or omissions, your team can put together a plan-of-attack to address the issues, develop a stronger application (and hopefully an improved project), and put your community in

contention to win funding in the next round. So, what are you looking for in your application review?



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Avoid 7 Common Pitfalls of Funding Applications

1. Turn a Handout into a Handshake

Remember, the funding agency that will be reviewing your application has a mission to accomplish, whether that be to stimulate economic growth in low-income communities or to support infrastructure initiatives to ensure clean and safe drinking water. Yet one of the most detrimental mistakes made by grant applicants is failing to see the agency representatives as partners working on a common mission. Rather than seeing your community as requesting a handout to implement your project, think of yourself as developing a project that both meets the needs of your community AND provides an opportunity for the agency to invest in an initiative that will help meet THEIR goals. Switching to this partnership focus will help you frame your application as an investment opportunity. Why should they invest in you? Why is your project the best use of their funds to help them accomplish their goal?

2. A Review is Due (Diligence)

You might be surprised how many communities submit a second application without taking the time to evaluate – and request funding agency input on – the strengths and weaknesses of their previous effort. Before jumping back into the ring, it's important to meet with agency representatives EARLY in the preparation process to review your previous submission. Find out where you did well so that you can accentuate positives, then ask the funding officer where your application fell short so that you can fix your deficiencies. Some agencies can work with you right up to the application deadline, while others

can't speak with applicants once the deadline is announced. Make sure you follow the rules for communication on each particular grant.



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3. Craft Winning Projects

Many town leaders make the mistake of fully developing a project designed to meet the needs of their community and only investigate funding sources once their planning process is complete. As a result, they are often forced to shoehorn their project into the grant application. Rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, the process should be more like shaving off the corners of an octagon to make the circle you need. Instead of pulling and prodding project descriptions and supporting materials to fit an application, you could be making small adjustments and subtle modifications.

How do you accomplish this? Successful grant applicants move along parallel tracks – needs analysis and funding analysis. BEGIN by understanding your community's needs then immediately and almost simultaneously target potential funding sources. The next step is to open a dialogue with funding agency representatives to understand their priorities at the OUTSET of project planning. An important distinction to keep in mind is that just because a project is ELLIGIBLE for funding, that doesn't mean it's FUNDABLE. You need to fully understand what type of projects the agency is looking to fund. Speaking with funding officers and reviewing winning projects from previous years will provide that information. Armed with these insights, you can craft and mold a winning project. Remember – for a project to be implementable, it must meet BOTH the needs of your community AND be solidly aligned with the goals, vision, and investment priorities of the targeted funding agency.

4. Strong Supporting Materials = Funding Viability

There are two types of supporting materials – those that are required to submit a funding application, and those that are necessary to make your project immediately achievable as soon as agency funds are committed. While almost all communities will meet the first bar,

making sure that you clear the second bar will set your project apart from its competitors. Now more than ever, New York State is looking for projects that are ready to go on day one. Agencies want to ensure that their investments are not tied up in projects that may take months or years to get underway. Yet a surprising number of communities simply don't complete the work necessary to clearly demonstrate project readiness in their applications. For example, EFC and DOH require that a series of initial steps and documents be included in NY Water applications to prove that the project is ready for implementation.

If any of the following are required for your project to move forward, don't wait until after the application submission – begin today as you may not be able to apply without them:

- Engineering reports
- Environmental reviews
- Income surveys
- Special district formation
- Bond resolutions
- Third party cost-estimates
- Intermunicipal agreements

Remember – strong applications have projects that are ready to go – not projects that will take 1-2 years to design before you can even access the awarded funds.

5. Dot Your I's and Cross Your T's

Funding agencies receive a surprising number of applications in each round that contain significant errors and omissions. Careless mistakes such as arithmetic errors, consistency issues, and formatting problems can undermine your credibility. Common omissions include failing to show adequate administrative capacity, demonstrate funding viability, and provide proof of project readiness. Any of these

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issues will impede the ability of reviewers to appropriately score your application. In order to ensure that your submission is both thorough and error-free, begin work well in advance of the deadline.

Allow ample time to vet the application with the appropriate departments and ensure that you rectify issues. Getting an early start will also allow you the time to set the application aside and review it with fresh eyes. Remember to look for errors of omission as well as commission. Use the submission checklist to ensure completeness. Submit a comprehensive and error-free application – every time!

6. **Demonstrate Funding Viability and Provide a Complete and Consistent Budget**

Understandably, agencies will not commit funds to a project that they feel will not ultimately be financially viable; yet they frequently receive applications that don't clearly demonstrate funding viability. To avoid this pitfall, itemize all project costs - and be thorough (including all administrative and consulting costs). Supply realistic third-party estimates for each line item, then provide PROOF of committed sources of adequate funds for each one. For instance, in order to adequately document the commitment of funds to bridge the gap between grant financing and project costs, you may need to pass a board resolution, execute a bond resolution, or provide a letter of commitment from the municipality. You will also need to clearly define and document the commitment of work-in-kind contributions.

It's also essential that your budget matches your project narrative. A surprising number of application narratives include descriptions of project components that are not reflected in

the budget tables. Conversely, it's important to ensure that each budget line item is included in your project description. Funders want their resources to be used effectively on projects that are well-managed, so inconsistencies between narratives and budgets can easily derail a funding application.

A thorough, consistent, realistic, and fully-funded budget is an absolute necessity for application approval, so be sure to allot the time necessary to execute this essential application component flawlessly.

7. **Dial-In Your Partnerships**

Successful project implementation often requires cooperation between the town and other entities. In this age of budget tax caps, there is more fiscal pressure than ever before to include government efficiency initiatives – such as shared services or co-location – in successful grant applications. Once you've identified and quantified your project need, proposing a "shared solution to a joint problem" could set your community apart from the competition. Be sure to quantify the cost savings and show a supporting joint budget. Take your commitment a step further by presenting an executed or draft Intermunicipal Agreement with your application. Again, the more that you can demonstrate project readiness, the better your investment opportunity will look to the funding agency.



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Preparation is the Key to Success

One common element to avoiding all of the pitfalls we've reviewed is preparation. To submit an application with the greatest chance of success, your community should begin preparations well in advance. Timing is the key - waiting to prepare for funding can make the difference between a fully funded project and a theoretical exercise.

Conducting a thorough assessment of your previous grant application can be both frustrating and time-consuming. However, it's well worth the time and effort to review the application, look for the pitfalls we've reviewed, and rectify the issues we've identified. Armed with these insights, you may well be on your way to receiving the funding necessary to successfully complete a project that will benefit your community for years – or even generations – to come. ☐

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