

Grant Guide

Is Your Community Ready To Compete?

The Lombardi Approach To Grant Development

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The 2014 Olympic Games are about to begin, and these athletes have been training for years to be ready for this monumental event. There are no excuses for not being ready; there is no one to blame ... no one to shoulder that responsibility but the athlete.

For the past three years, the “grant game” in New York State has become an annual event now known as the Consolidated Funding Application (CFA). Through this new CFA process, the governor has typically announced the availability of funds in late spring, set the grant deadline for mid-summer and announced the funding awards in December. Right now, many communities have the opinion that we are in the “grants off-season.” Or ... are we?

While grant writing may not be a sport, it is a competition, and there are communities and projects that “win” and others that “lose.” In today’s society, the preferred tags are “those that are funded” and “those that did not secure funding.” Whether you believe that grant writing is a sport, there are many linkages that can be made to – and lessons that can be learned from – the ways an athlete often approaches his or her craft. Communities should be proactively thinking of this time as the training season for the next great grant event in order to prepare all of their applications.

The off-season is a time to reflect on your community’s vision and goals and plan for action before the season begins. Like athletes, communities should use the off-season to strengthen areas of weakness and shore up game plans to be competitive when the season begins. Right now, in terms of grants, New York State municipalities can choose to relax and wait until the gun goes off to compete for funds, or they can use the off-season to review their community’s goals, prioritize projects, identify the grant needs and partnerships for each project and develop project

“If you’re early, you’re on time. If you’re on time, you’re late. If you’re late... don’t bother showing up.”

– Vince Lombardi

folders to be ready for action. Then, when the grants are announced, they can plow straight-ahead toward victory.

How can a community best prepare for the upcoming grant season? There isn’t a golden rule that can apply to every community or every grant. Resources are often limited, and all municipal employees are being asked to do more with less. However, there are a few things that a community can do to maximize the off-season and to get ready for the next round of grants.

Your Grant “Off-Season” Training Plan

Review. First, start by reviewing your community’s comprehensive plan or other planning documents, especially your Regional Economic Development

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Council's plan. How well are your community's strategies and projects articulated in your Regional Strategic Plan? Are your strategies linked to job creation? How is the implementation of your community's strategies also an opportunity for the region? Begin to identify priority goals or strategies that are achievable and viable. Often, funding agencies will give extra points or consideration to priority items identified in a plan. This may happen even more often for priority items that align with the region's priorities.

Prioritize. Understand your community's vision statement, and work with your municipal boards and the public to prepare a list of priority projects. It may be worthwhile to dedicate a board meeting to prioritize these projects with the public to ensure you clearly understand what the community supports and what they are willing to fund. Because grant funding almost always requires a local funding match from the community, it is important to know whether the community supports dedicating community funds before the grant writing begins, or a project may get derailed. Projects presented to the public can range in readiness, but they should have the community's support before attempting to advance them through a grant process. Too many communities waste valuable time and money trying to gain community support during the application process when such resources can better be spent at that time.

Identify. Take this time to review previous CFA application materials and requirements. While they may change slightly year to year, it is a good basis for you to understand the program requirements and to begin framing each of your projects. If you previously submitted a grant application, now is the perfect time to sit down with the funding agency and review why your application was not selected. If it is a new application, approach the funding agency for preliminary feedback regarding what may be weak and strengthen your project's outline. Funding agencies are often more comfortable sharing ideas and concerns about an application when a grant deadline is not looming.

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Identify and build your project-specific partnerships! While it is not important to prepare grant narratives in the off-season, it is of paramount importance to develop a listing of potential project partners and to understand the program requirements early. Start building these partnerships before the grants are announced. These partners will be advocates for your projects. Get them on board early and stay in contact with them so they can see your commitment and become familiar with your priorities. Make sure that your regional council, state agencies and local officials are aware of your project, and build the relationships early. We are very fortunate to have the best and brightest working for New York State, and they are a wealth of knowledge and expertise in project development.

Develop. Create a folder for each project that outlines the components of each project. This folder will contain the project's specific outline of tasks and responsible parties, a detailing of the project sources and uses of funds and a list of all the

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partners and community support letters needed and obtained. It is critical to understand the items that are required for submittal, as some of these items need significant lead time and cannot be generated in the 60-90 day grant window. Whether it is income surveys, preliminary engineering designs, cost estimates, site schematics, stakeholder support, additional private sector partners, bank financing or community support, the time to get it done is in the grant off-season.

IF YOU'RE ON TIME, YOU'RE LATE.

While the CFA Round 4 has not yet been announced (at the time of this writing), our advice to communities is simple- "start *now*" - Vince Lombardi

once said "If you're early, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late. If you're late, don't bother showing up." This was true of his athletes, and it is true in the development of grants in New York State. If you begin to develop projects when the grant is announced, you are already late in the game. Create a project folder for each priority. Review the grant requirements and begin to collect the backup required. If your application needs a public hearing, set it. If you need two months lead time to get community support or a board resolution, start the process. If your project application requires an appraisal, order it. The more you can do in the "grant off-season," the more likely your chances are at being competitive when it is game time.

