

Turning a Handout into a Handshake

Creating Partnerships for Funding Success

By Ben Syden, AICP, Vice President & Lucie Stites, Assistant Marketing Manager,
Laberge Group

As town leaders, you are well aware that municipalities in New York State have had to accomplish more with fewer resources, year after year after year. Many elected leaders and their dedicated staff have been straining to provide high quality services while striving to maintain infrastructure viability and still meeting the state-mandated 2 percent tax cap. With coffers in many town halls running low under this strain, state or federal grant funding and low-interest financing has often meant the difference between a deferred dream and an implemented project of real significance to the community.

The fiscal challenges that communities faced prior to the COVID-19 outbreak were exacerbated while NY was “on pause” and have increased in the wake of the virus. While New York’s towns were already struggling to meet budgets, they’re now facing a 20, 30, or even 40 percent reduction in revenue – both in sales tax and state aid – which has increased stress on municipal budgets and made the importance of securing outside funding more critical than ever.

The combination of an increased demand for state funding and depleted State resources makes it inevitable that the already crowded and competitive grant and financing landscape will become even more densely packed and fiercely competitive. Because of the anticipated spike in competition, the metrics for awarding scarce state funding are expected to be more stringent, making the strategy of employing a partnership framework for funding success more critically important than ever.

Turning A Handout into a Handshake = Partnering for Funding Success

At a time when the media makes daily references and analogies to the financial straits of the 1930s, take this opportunity to build partnerships with grant funders rather than seeking a handout. Put another way, as we stated at a recent Association of Towns grant workshop, now is the time to turn a HANDOUT into a HANDSHAKE.

How is that accomplished? The fundamental framework that turns a handout into a handshake is partnership – working together toward a common goal. Partnering with a funding agency entails the 4 TOOLS, detailed below to help the funding agency achieve THEIR mission by



INVESTING in yours.

1. Perspective is the Key

The first step is to convert your mindset from that of a grant-seeker, to a partner in progress. When you carefully consider the point of view of the funding agency you’ll be submitting an application to, it will allow you to consider how to solve their problems in order to address your own. It’s not manipulative, it’s partnership.

Remember that each funding agency 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. In order to set up for a true partnership, it is important to work along parallel tracks with your funding partner. Track 1: Project initiation- determining the needs and potential solutions for your community; and Track 2: Identification of potential funding sources and agency priorities. This dual-focus during project launch will help ensure that the project is crafted to meet BOTH the funding agency’s mission and your community’s needs from the outset – laying the groundwork for a true partnership toward a common goal and providing an opportunity for the agency to invest in an initiative that will further their mission.

See: TOOLBOX on Page 24

Grant Funding Toolbox: Building Lasting Partnerships Key to Success

Note that this is the opposite of skillfully describing or cunningly re-wording a project description to fit an application after the fact. This is much more than filling in a box, or twisting a program to meet your needs, it is forging a relationship that is mutually beneficial. You are helping the agency invest in high quality projects, while simultaneously implementing your local project. Remember, your perspective changes based on what side of the table you are sitting on.

2. Answer the Most Challenging Questions

The most fundamental questions that communities must answer for grant funding agencies aren't explicitly written in the grant applications. In a highly competitive round of funding, why should we invest in you? Why is your project the best use of our funds to help accomplish our goal? And why are you the best partner to work with toward achieving that goal? Using the partnership framework, when the time comes to develop the grant or financing application, you will be prepared to answer these questions, framing your project as a worthy investment opportunity to advance the mission of the funding agency.

3. Keep the Lines of Communication Open

In order to fully understand what type of projects the agency is looking to fund, open communications are essential. Speaking with funding officers is the best way to gain a nuanced understanding of the funding entity's specific priorities. For instance, often grant funding agencies adjust its metrics for reviewing grant applications based on local or federal regulations or programmatic changes. While the funding officers will gladly discuss these new metrics with you if asked, often important information cannot be easily found in the grant application directions. Without initiating a direct dialogue with funding agencies, you may miss out on meeting one of their top annual priorities or miss securing crucial points in the review process. If you don't feel comfortable working directly with funders, find an experienced consultant with a strong history of grant success with the funding programs. Armed with these insights, you can be a true partner in providing the funding officers with optimal investment opportunities to meet their objectives.

4. Meet Critical (and Unwritten) Metrics

Not only does each agency as a whole have a mandate to carry out, the funding officers who will be reviewing your community's application have specific metrics they're required to meet. Picture a funding officer reviewing a

See: TOOLBOX on Page 25

NAVIGATING THE COVID 19 FISCAL CHALLENGE

In the COVID 19 environment, local governments are being asked to deliver extraordinary services and maintain essential government services while working with significantly reduced revenue streams such as sales tax, State and Federal revenues, and grants funds.

Laberge Group's seasoned Government Operations & Efficiency team has the tools, municipal finance acumen, and operational experience to support local government leaders in addressing these unprecedented fiscal pressures while remaining fiscally sound, protecting municipal reserves, minimizing the impact on property taxes, and charting a course to a bright future.



Grant Funding Toolbox: Building Lasting Partnerships Key to Success

mountain of grant applications. What is your initial reaction to that mental image? Do you see her or him as a gate-keeper? A hurdle to overcome? A customer to sell to? If so, it's time to shift your perspective. If you're able to put yourself in the funding officer's chair and see things from his or her point of view, it will benefit both parties.

Just as funding agencies are project partners rather than neighborhood banks, their officers are investment professionals, not gate-keepers or drive-thru tellers. They're charged with carefully selecting the most promising investments according to specific criteria and metrics for success that are more stringent now than ever before. To partner with those officers is to make them successful in achieving their missions. As such, you must help them meet those metrics.

So what are some of the mandates and metrics that most funding officers have in common that you can help them meet?

Metric 1: Putting Money to Work Right Away

While it has long been an industry buzzword, "shovel-ready" is now practically a household word. Eager to jumpstart the economy, it's not surprising that funding entities at the State and Federal level are prioritizing projects that can be put into action right away to impact the economy as quickly as possible – and funding officers are charged with determining which projects most successfully meet this metric.

What constitutes project readiness? That varies depending on the project, of course, but in the case of infrastructure initiatives, it generally means that most, if not all, of these items are completed and ready to go out to bid:

- ✓ Studies, assessments, and reports that demonstrate project need and an implementable path forward;
- ✓ Complete financing plan with all funding committed (except the grant that you are applying for);
- ✓ Site control;
- ✓ Preliminary and final designs;
- ✓ Evidence of fiscal viability (including third-party validated budgets);
- ✓ Environmental studies;
- ✓ SEQRA documentation;

- ✓ Surveys and basemapping; and
- ✓ Documentation of community support and key partnerships.

If presented with several projects of equal significance and impact, one of which has environmental studies

See: TOOLBOX on Page 26

The Laberge Group logo is displayed at the top, featuring the company name in a serif font over a background map of a city. Below the logo, a list of services is presented in white text on a blue background: ENGINEERING, PLANNING, GRANT WRITING, SURVEYING, and ARCHITECTURE. The lower portion of the advertisement contains a 2x3 grid of six photographs: a dam with water flowing over it, a paved walking path through a park, a group of people in a meeting room, two workers in safety gear at a construction site, a surveying instrument on a tripod by a lake, and a wide street with a yellow center line. At the bottom, contact information is provided: (518) 458-7112, www.labergegroup.com, and clientservices@labergegroup.com, accompanied by Facebook and LinkedIn social media icons.

Laberge Group

ENGINEERING
PLANNING
GRANT WRITING
SURVEYING
ARCHITECTURE

(518) 458-7112 • www.labergegroup.com • clientservices@labergegroup.com

Grant Funding Toolbox: Building Lasting Partnerships Key to Success

completed and SEQRA documentation submitted so that it is cleared to proceed, while the others do not, it is more likely than ever that the shovel-ready project will receive the funding. No matter how compelling the narratives or public support statements of the other applications may be, it is unlikely that they will prevail over a project that can put the funding entity's money to good use immediately.

Metric 2: Leveraging Funding from Multiple Sources

With available funding at critically low levels, and the need to stretch the dwindling funds across more communities than ever before, funding entities have to ensure that each dollar they commit leverages other investments – i.e. local community funds, private investments, or funding provided by another agency. Similar to their counterparts in the private sector, funding officers (“investors”) are facing increasing pressure to identify investment opportunities in which theirs is the “last money in,” helping a project that is already making great strides, cross the finish line. So what are the prime opportunities to line up other investments to leverage in helping funding agencies meet this mandate?

Community Funds: Like private equity firms, public funding agencies are looking for project leaders who have “skin in the game.” Even in times of significant economic cut-backs, it may be possible to isolate a specific project component that can be funded by the community. Work with the Town Board and relevant department heads to find a project component that will generate strongest impact from the smallest investment.

Private Funds: Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) utilize private sector funding to assist the public sector. These private investments are typically geared toward stimulating economic development and job creation, but partnerships that stimulate economic growth can span a wide range of projects from downtown revitalization planning to infrastructure improvements that attract and support future development.

Investments from other State and

Federal Agencies: New and more stringent metrics have been established by some funding agencies. One recent metric added by a popular funding sources is a requirement that applicants apply for

See: TOOLBOX on Page 27



*Turning economic development strategies
into implementable projects that help
build strong and vibrant local economies.*

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Site Planning & Design	Surveying & Mapping
Engineering Services	Zoning & Code Services
Environmental Compliance	Public Engagement
Construction Management	Grant Development
Infrastructure Design	Strategic Planning

Laberge
ENGINEERING
ARCHITECTURE

Group
SURVEYING
PLANNING

(518) 458-7112 • clientservices@labergegroup.com
www.labergegroup.com



Grant Funding Toolbox: Building Lasting Partnerships Key to Success

all other available grants and financing avenues prior to submitting an application to this agency. The new approach will identify the critical need for agency funding and increase its return on investment by providing the final funding component, or last piece of the fiscal puzzle. Grant toolbox tip: Often agencies don't explicitly stipulate significant new metrics in their application instructions. Applicants should take the time to reach out to prospective funders to determine if they have introduced new metrics, and if so, how important they may be in the evaluation of your application.

Metric 3: Expanding the Partnership

The problem that you're facing may also be an issue for your neighboring community. While the concept of finding and funding a "shared solution to a joint problem" is not new to community leaders, shared services, consolidation, and/or functional consolidation are a natural way to expand the partnership, and may be more important than ever in these days of fiscal challenge. Creating an inter-municipal agreement and applying for a grant jointly with another community achieves three things: it adds a potential municipal funder into local match funds, it extends the reach of the State agency into multiple jurisdictions, and it may potentially be a more efficient deployment of government services (with quantifiable savings that can be shown in a joint budget).

Tilting the Financial Scales in Your Favor

If a funder is forced to choose, as they often are, between equally worthy and impactful projects submitted by several communities, how are they to determine which to fund? If you've read this far, you know it's not a coin flip. Communities that demonstrate shovel-readiness and commitments from other funding sources that can leverage a funding agency's investment and stretch their limited funds will have a decided advantage.

The Time is Now

When is the best time to begin preparing to build this funding partnership? The rule of thumb on this may surprise you – approximately one year out. With many Towns

drafting budgets in the early fall, being able to commit funds in advance of the grant season is a strategic step in showing project commitment.

With many applications due in the summer, this is the perfect season to build or revisit your project and funding plan, schedule discussions to help prioritize projects, and begin strategizing how to build your project-specific funding partnerships for the following year. ▢

