

What Grant Funders Look For

Advice for Writing Successful Grant Applications

Courtesy of U.S. Senator Patty Murray

Written by Mary E. McBride

Mary McBride served as the Olympic Peninsula Regional Representative for U.S. Senator Patty Murray of Washington state. Ms. McBride has helped rural communities and organizations apply for grants. She's also reviewed applications for the USDA, HUD, EPA and the Washington State Trade and Economic Development Agency. Ms. McBride compiled these tips based on her own experiences and on her discussions with federal, state, and private foundation grant experts. Obviously, no guide can list everything that grant funders look for, but this list will help make your application as competitive as possible. Best of luck!

1. COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED APPROACH

- Not just piece-meal, one part at a time, without logic of how the pieces or phases fit together
- If this is a phased project, how does this proposal fit into the full picture?
- It is important that a funder be able to understand “the story” and how this chapter fits into the whole.

2. PRIORITIZED- NOT JUST A WISH LIST

- How high a priority is this within the community? Did everyone just throw their laundry list together? Did this proposal come together because there may be funding available or because this is a local priority? (This is a must under the WA-CERT process in Washington state)
- Explain why this is a priority. What is the project's significance?
- What are the consequences if this project is not funded?

3. WELL THOUGHT OUT PRESENTATION—DOES THIS PROPOSAL MAKE SENSE?

- Funders will look to see if there is a logical link between the project and the proposed results.
- Example: If there is an agricultural community, does the project propose doing value-added wood processing?
- If there are pieces that seem “unusual,” have they been addressed in the proposal?

4. REFLECTS A NATURAL PROGRESSION

- Planning to implementation. A continuum of development.
- Does the proposal request funds for the “right” step in the continuum? Many proposals request funds for construction, remodeling, or other major capital improvement without having gone through a planning phase to determine options, alternatives, and steps. If this has been done, document your proposal.

5. DESCRIBES THE IMPACT IN A COMPREHENSIVE MANNER

- Projects are interconnected. Show the impacts and how they will be addressed.
- Example: Will this project create jobs? What types? Will it displace housing? How will the displaced residents be accommodated? Will it require additional infrastructure capacity? How will it be addressed?

6. PROJECT SHOWS BROAD PARTICIPATION

- Are all stake holders involved? Has anyone been left out? Does this project exclude others?
- Is there a diversity of interests, backgrounds, and skills represented in the organization of the proposed project development and implementation?
- Example: If the project proposes to create jobs so that youth can stay in the community, have they been part of the development proposal?

7. NEED

- Remember that the decision makers may not reside in Washington state, and therefore may not understand the significance of a statement such as “100 people need this project.” Show more than just a number.
- Describe the “real” need.
- Tell the story of need from the human interest point of view.

8. DEMONSTRATION OF CAPACITY AND ABILITY TO SUCCEED AT PROPOSED PROJECT

- What is the overall experience of the applicant? How does the experience relate to the proposed project?
- Has the applicant added expertise into their local group so that all aspects of the project are strong? This is an important point for new organizations proposing a new initiative.
- Does this proposal “bite off” what the organization can reasonable accomplish and handle?
- Know your organization’s capacity, including strengths and weaknesses.

9. STRONG LOCAL COMMITMENT TO AND INVESTMENT IN THE PROJECT

- Demonstrated commitment, not just “lip service” to the idea. The most fundable proposals are able to show broad commitments within the community.
- Seldom are agencies able or willing to be the only financial participant in a project.
- If the local community is not willing to commit their own resources to the effort, it is difficult to convince other that they should contribute outside resources.
- Be prepared to describe the local contributions- including cash, time, and in-kind.
- Funders want to know how they will be a partner in funding the proposal- not the only funder.

10. A STRATEGIC PLAN AND A STRATEGIC APPROACH

- Is there a strategic plan in place?
- Was the plan developed locally by a diverse team or by a few select individuals?
- Is it comprehensive? How old is the plan?
- Is this proposal addressed in the plan in some way?

11. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSAL

- What is the life expectancy of the proposed project?
- Describe how on-going financing needs will be addressed.
- Will the sustainability of the project rely on outside funding or local resources?
- What is the sustainability track record of the applicant?

12. IS THE AMOUNT OF THE REQUEST REASONABLE?

- Have you done your homework in determining actual costs? Giving a ball-park figure, rough estimate, or a “we think it will cost this much” is not reasonable in an implementation proposal.
- If the costs are high, what are the reasons?

13. IS THIS A DUPLICATION OF SERVICE?

- Is there already an organization in the area providing, what may be perceived as, the same or very similar service? Show how this proposal is different.
- Explain why partnering with an existing organization is not a reasonable alternative.

14. ACCOUNTABILITY

- Make sure that accountability is built into the proposal.
- What is the role of the board in overseeing the project?
- What are the checks and balances?
- What are the check points?

OTHER POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Know your project and understand what you are proposing.
- Keep excellent documentation throughout the process (not just in the proposal process but especially in the implementation phase.)
- Be prepared to demonstrate that you are able to manage all aspects of the project.
- Build strong relationships within the applicant organization, the community and with the funder.
- Do your homework.
- If in doubt, ask for help from funders. Ask them to help you identify weak spots within your proposal.
- Identify unusual circumstances occurring in your community that demonstrate the need in your area.
- Although there is a lot of “forgiveness” in terms of writing styles, remember that if it is not provided in the application, it cannot be considered.
- Have someone other than the author read the proposal and provide suggestions, corrections, and additions.
- Maintaining a relationship is as important as developing a new one.
- Everyone wants to be part of a winning team! Share the spotlight with all stakeholders, including the funders.