

FFA Program - Tip of the Week



Information is power, and sometimes a simple, small piece of information can make all the difference in saving valuable time, frustration, and even money. In the arena of public funding, knowing the rules and how to play the game is critical to success. One tip, trick, or piece of advice can result in a more competitive grant application, a more successful compliance audit, a project budget staying on track or on budget, etc. Our Tips of the Week are designed to help you have an advantage.

Prepare for Grants: SAM.gov and Grants.gov – May 5, 2023

Does your municipality anticipate applying for a federal grant now or in the future? If so, then there are two important boxes to check off your list now to be ready. First, ensure your [SAM.gov](#) registration is active, and you are registered in [Grants.gov](#) now.

[SAM.gov](#) is the site for registering an entity to do business with the U.S. Government, which includes receiving grants. [SAM.gov](#). Registrations are FREE and must be renewed annually. If your municipality has a Unique Entity Identification (UEI) number, it is registered in [SAM.gov](#). [Grants.gov](#) is the federal government's centralized location for grant seekers to find and apply for federal funding opportunities. Registering and registration approval in both these portals can take several weeks. Grant competitions usually are only open for just a few weeks. Do not wait until the grant competition starts to register! Start early so that you don't run into trouble.

Prepare for Grants: Planning for EV Charging Infrastructure - January 27, 2023

2023 is the year to fund your Electric Vehicle (EV) recharging infrastructure. The US Department of Transportation plans to release its Community Charging and Refueling Infrastructure Grant this winter. The EPA and Department of Energy also expect to offer EV charging installation grants in 2023. And, the Inflation Reduction Act offers tax credits municipalities can use.

Is your community prepared for these opportunities? Develop an alternative fuel vehicle refueling properties location plan (a.k.a. EV charging plan) now. Two helpful resources are the Drive Electric Vermont [Charging Installation Guide](#) and the US



Department of Transportation's [Rural EV Toolkit](#). Don't forget to consider school districts, transit agencies, non-profit organizations, businesses, the State, and other stakeholders to see if they have plans. Knowing where others have and/or propose to site public and private charging stations allows the municipality to fill gaps. Start by checking to see [where charging stations already exist](#) in Vermont and plan from there. Also, don't forget to check your municipality's zoning bylaws to ensure they are EV charging friendly. The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development provides some helpful tips for bylaw updates in its [Local Electric Vehicle Charging Station Regulation - A Welcoming Approach to Electric Vehicle Plug-In Technology](#).

[Grant Writing: Active vs. Passive Voice – June 2, 2023](#)

Use [active voice \(vs. passive\)](#) whenever possible. Active voice gets you to the point quickly and clearly without wasting words. This is especially important if grant narratives have a word count. Example: "A massive flood destroyed the bridge." (active) vs. "The bridge was destroyed by a massive flood." (passive). Application readers appreciate clear, concise, direct writing. Think fact, not fiction, and leave out unnecessary drama. And don't forget to use active voice in your grant progress reports too! Use the grammar checker tool in programs like Microsoft Word to help you quickly identify passive language.

[Grant Writing: Online Grant Portals....Don't Lose Your Work! – May 26, 2023](#)

When using an online grant submission portal, ask the funder if they have the application in Word or PDF format. If not, then make your own. This will allow you to develop your draft application and then copy/paste the text into the online form without the pressure of timing out or losing your work. Some online portals automatically save your draft work as you go, but many others do not. Working offline then transferring the information reduces the risks in an online system. It also allows you to keep a copy of your application language in case you want to recycle some of it for another application – why reinvent the wheel?!



Grant Writing: Express Gratitude – May 19, 2023

Take time to express gratitude - thank the grant program staff. They have spent a lot of time providing technical assistance to applicants, and reviewing and evaluating your application, even if you did not receive an award. A thank you leaves the funder with a positive impression of your organization, which helps build relationships. Going old-school and sending a snail-mail, handwritten thank you note goes a long way!

Thank entities that provide letters of support too and follow up to let them know whether the project received an award. Even if the application wasn't successful, let them know you appreciate their support. Building relationships fosters collaboration for future grants and inspires other entities to help you meet your goals.

Grant Writing: Using Grant Braiding for Local Match – April 21, 2023

The rules for achieving a project's local cost share, also known as **match**, vary among grants. Many projects involve "braiding" or "stacking." *Stacking* is when multiple grants fund components of a single project. *Braiding* takes stacking to the next level. It uses funds from one grant to meet the match requirements of another grant in the project. For instance, a municipality that will be constructing a sidewalk might use a grant award from the [AARP's Community Challenge program](#) as its local match to a grant award from VTrans' [Vermont Bicycle and Pedestrian Program](#).

As you consider project funding that involves braiding grants, it is important to consider several things.

- **First**, review the match requirements for each grant to determine what is allowed. Will Grant A allow you to use it as match to another grant, and will Grant B accept Grant A as matching funds? It is important to obtain a written answer (emails work!) to both of these questions from the respective grant funders.



- **Second**, are the scopes of work for each grant aligned for the project? Using the sidewalk example, would the AARP grant construct a portion of a larger sidewalk project or would it pay for materials only? If it would construct part of the larger project, the scope of work for the VTrans' grant must be that larger project - its scope of work must include the portion to be paid by the AARP grant, not just the remainder of the project.
- **Third**, are the award start and end dates for both grants aligned to work together? Most grants do not allow you to begin work without a fully executed grant agreement, certain terms/conditions being met, including procurement of contractors. If one grant is awarded 6-9 months prior to the second grant, is there sufficient time to complete its scope of work before the grant award close date? If not, then talk to your funder.
- **Fourth**, make sure you have your project fully funded and under agreement before starting any work, unless the project is being phased and this is allowed by your funders.
- **Finally**, can the municipality track costs for both grants separately within the project budget? Each funder will want to know that there is no duplication of payment ("double-dipping") so be sure to work with the municipality's Treasurer and/or finance staff.

Braiding grants can be beneficial in reducing demands on a municipality's budget when care is taken to investigate and consider how multiple funding sources could work together in a project.

Grant Writing: Telling Your Project's Story – March 24, 2023

You've read grant program materials and done your research, now, how do you begin writing responses to the grant application narrative questions (narratives) relative to the purpose of the funding source – how do you tell your project's "story"? A good place to start is to **pencil in one strong, concise bullet point answer for every narrative question**. Bullet points keep the narrative focused on the main story for



your project. They make it easier to confirm you've answered the question asked, and they daylight when duplicative information is used for multiple answers. In some ways, grant writing is like developing a comic strip. The grant application's narrative questions are the number of panels you have for telling your story. Your bullet points represent your storyboard outline, the main idea each panel must convey. The remainder of each question's text then can be honed to provide only necessary context (the scenery) to support that main point. Following a comic strip approach when writing grants showcases your project's story, focuses your application, and saves you time.

[Grant Writing: Coordinating with the Municipality's Legislative Body - February 3, 2023](#)

Thinking about applying for a grant for your municipality? Then make sure you ***discuss it with the legislative body first.*** Ask to be added to an upcoming meeting agenda and get their support on the record. Although grant applications are often completed by others – like members of a planning or conservation commission, or even a member of the community - the legislative body needs to be aware of and authorize all grant applications that are submitted, especially since most require a match of the town's funds. To ensure the legislative body is officially on board, some grants require a signed resolution as an attachment of the application. If your application is successful and results in an award, then you will need the legislative body (the Chair or Vice Chair) to sign the grant agreement since it is a legal and binding document, and they have the authority to bind the town. There are times when the legislative body may decide to designate someone to sign the agreement on their behalf. If this happens, be sure this decision is made in the realm of a warned meeting and captured in the meeting minutes.

[Grant Writing: Knowing When NOT to Apply - January 20, 2023](#)

A good grant writer not only knows when to apply for a grant opportunity but also when ***not*** to apply. How? They invest time in researching a grant before starting an application. They closely read the funding program's guidance documents and



application materials, then read through the application itself several times to become familiar with it. They attend application workshops that might be offered by the funder. They study the requirements for the funding, if awarded, to better understand what the grant administration will entail. They research information like past awards to help build an understanding of what makes a successful, competitive, and fundable application. They may reach out to the program staff of the funder to introduce the project to determine if the grant opportunity is a good fit and the project would be competitive; staff can often be very helpful in offering advice on how to strengthen a prospective application. The hours spent researching for a grant application may be many more than the hours spent actually writing it. After all that work, a grant writer might determine that an application in that particular round isn't a good idea – whether because the timing isn't right, or the project isn't quite ready, or the fit is wrong, or the funding is just too difficult to use for the amount funds being sought. However, if the go/no-go decision results in a "go," then think of grant writing as marketing your project and the funder as your investor. If you want the funder to give you their money, then you have to demonstrate the value and return on their investment.

Grant Writing: Connecting Application Budgets and Narratives - January 6, 2023

A common grant writing error is disconnection between the project budget and application narratives. For instance, the narrative might discuss having a substantial public engagement process, however the budget does not include a line item or clear description of these activities in it anywhere. To prevent disconnections, create a list of the project components first and then line them up against your project budget. Do they match up? If not, then you can do two things. You could provide more clarity in the areas of the budget where the resources exist to fund these activities – include "*Public Engagement*" as a line item in your project budget. Or, to help the application reviewer, you could include parenthetical reference notes in your narrative about which section of your budget funds these activities, such as "(Community engagement, \$4,000, included in line item XX of the project budget)". This helps avoid the



allurement of adding major (unbudgeted) components solely to win review points, and it demonstrates your attention to details. Don't forget to cross the "T"s and dot the "I"s: after finalizing your narrative, go back and verify that the budget ties out.

Grant Writing: Using Income Surveys to Qualify Projects – December 23, 2022

Grant programs that use equity criteria, such as a community's median household income, may allow applicants to use income surveys of specific beneficiaries to qualify a *project* for funding **even if the community would not qualify**. Water, wastewater, and broadband projects can benefit from income surveys if the system's users have a different median income than the community.

Budgeting: Grant Timelines Impact Project Cost - April 28, 2023

A common error in project budgeting is failing to consider how grant timelines might impact project cost. For a construction project, the time from submitting a grant application, to receiving an award, to construction commencement and substantial completion can take 2-4 years (or longer!); 2-4 years for a planning study. In the past, including a 10% cost contingency in a project budget might have been sufficient, but the costs of wages, materials and associated project needs continue to increase due to economic forces and 10% is not even close to enough anymore.

The **New England Employment Cost Index** shows that wages and salaries increased by 5.9% from December 2021 to December 2022. If increases continue at that same rate annually, it would equate to an 18.7% increase in wages over three years and 41% over six years. When creating your project budgets, keep these increases in mind for both municipal staff that will be paid through a grant and for consultant and contractor costs.

Budgeting: Budget Cash Match Over Multiple Years – March 10, 2023

If cash is tight, consider spreading cash match for grants over multiple municipal budget years. This can help minimize the impact of cash outlays. An even better idea is to set aside funds every year to use as match for grant-funded projects. This would



be a beneficial use of local ARPA funds!

Grant Administration: Detailed Timesheets Matter – May 12, 2023

Do municipal staff or project volunteers working on a grant have to record their time working on the grant? The answer is **YES** if they are being paid by the grant, receiving a stipend from the grant, or donating their time to meet the municipality's in-kind match. Federal grants require *Time and Effort Reporting* to document that federal funds were charged only for the time actually worked on activities related to the approved scope of work ([2 CFR § 200.430\(i\)](#)) - this essentially is a detailed timesheet.

The *Time and Effort* documentation must clearly identify the grant or funding source name; show the dates worked, the number of hours worked on project activities, and a description of the activity performed; and be signed by the individual. For employees, the timesheet must be approved by a supervisor with firsthand knowledge of the grant-funded work performed. The activity description must be specific enough to be tied to the grant-funded project's scope of work. For instance, use "reviewed draft Hazard Mitigation Plan and provided comments" not "Hazard Mitigation Plan". These records must be available for audit by an organization's financial auditor and for a state/federal program auditor ("monitoring"). Don't wait until you are ready to invoice a grant to collect staff or volunteer time reports. The best practice is to collect staff time reports at least twice a month and volunteer reports at least monthly. This improves the quality and accuracy of reporting and helps volunteers remember to complete the reporting.

Grant Administration: Always Read the Grant Agreement – April 14, 2023

"Always read the fine print." It is an old adage that holds true when it comes to your grant agreement. Read it. Reading a federal or state grant agreement and its terms and conditions can seem like a daunting and arduous process, especially if you are doing so for the first time. The agreement may include unfamiliar terms, refer to sections of federal statute, rules, and codes (i.e., 2 C.F.R Part 200), and generally make you want to sign it without reading it. **Don't!** The agreement is your contract with your



funder - the state or federal government – and you are bound to it upon signature. It contains your legal obligations regarding the money you are accepting. Agreements have administrative requirements, like reimbursement limits; programmatic requirements, like data collection and reporting schedules; and specific conditions related to the grant, like web accessibility and document credits. Unpack your grant agreement – use it to make a list of required activities, due dates/deadlines, and items that require review should they occur, such as notifications regarding changes in personnel. The internet is a good tool for researching unfamiliar terms and conditions. Some state and federal agencies post their standard grant agreement terms and conditions on their website so applicants can review them prior to applying.

Grant Administration: Keeping Good Records – March 31, 2023

*What's the number 1 rule of grant administration? **Keep good records!*** Establish a separate hard copy or digital folder for each grant in your project. Federal grant records retention requirements are outlined at [2 C.F.R § 200.334](#) and they are also often stated in your grant agreement terms. Your grant folder should contain all documents associated with your grant award, like your fully executed (signed by all parties) grant agreement including all attachments, appendices and amendments (if appropriate) and documentation of anything that demonstrates your compliance with the award and its terms and conditions. At a minimum, it should also contain all of your "back up" like vendor quotes, purchase orders, invoices, payment proof, timesheets of grant-funded personnel, inventories of equipment and supplies purchased with grant funds and documentation of how and when it was purchased and for what amount, equipment disposal instructions and documentation of that disposal, contracts, accounting ledgers, project photos, and submitted grantor reports. If the funder provides guidance or clarification about how something should be done, it should be included. Whenever you ask a question of your funder, try do so through an email so you can save their written response to your grant file. If you have a phone call with them, keep a communications log in your grant file and record the date, time, name and position of the person you spoke with along with what was



discussed or decided. You might even follow the phone call up with an email to this person summarizing what you heard and asking for their agreement; save this email to your grant file too! Most often, if it's not in writing, it doesn't exist!

Grant Administration: Contractor Donations and Discounts - March 17, 2023

When contractors offer to donate or discount part of their services, should you accept?

No! As attractive as donations and discounts can be, Federal and State grant rules require all purchases (a.k.a. *procurements*) to be free from conflicts of interest. When only part of the service is donated or discounted, the reduced cost provides a financial incentive to award the contractor the job. This is the very definition of conflict of interest. You can, however, accept the services if the contractor offers to *fully donate* their services and they are not awarded any paid work. The fully donated services can be used as part of the project's local cost share (match).

Grant Administration: Follow Through on Application Commitments – February 17, 2023

An application for a grant is often called a grant "proposal" and it is exactly that – a proposal. It is just like any other RFP (request for proposals) process that you have experienced. If the *client (funder)* likes your *proposal (application)*, then they will *select (award)* yours and legally obligate you to fulfill it through a *contract (grant agreement)* with *terms and conditions*. If you have said in your grant application that you will provide \$X or X% as match, even if it was optional, then you need to follow through on this commitment. Even if your project costs come in under budget, you still need to provide your share of the match and not doing puts you at risk of serious consequences – think of it as a breach of contract. How would you feel about a contractor who didn't do what they said they would do in their contract? Two organizations in California were convicted of fraud for making match commitments in Federal grant applications then not providing the match during a grant award. If your municipality thinks it will be unable to meet a match commitment (or any other term or condition of the grant), talk to your funder immediately to explain what is



happening. In many cases, funders will allow match source substitutions (example, paying a cash match when an in-kind match commitment was made) or the funder may have a policy related to reducing the award amount based on the pro-rated share of match provided. Your success is their success, so consider your funder as one of your key project partners. Having an open and honest dialogue, even when briefly problems arise, is critical - reputation matters if you want to continue receiving grants. Communication is the key to negotiating project challenges successfully!

Project Management: Accessible Project Documents - June 9, 2023

Are your project documents (meeting agendas, event flyers, published reports, maps) **accessible**? Platforms like Microsoft Office 365 and Adobe include an Accessibility Checker that will find most accessibility issues, explain why they might be potential problems, and suggest how to resolve them. These checkers can help you meet your municipality's legal requirements under the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) and the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#). They also help you engage and include people, regardless of ability. 24% of Vermonters have some type of disability, and the percentage is growing as our population ages.

Want to learn more about creating accessible documents, presentations, meetings, and websites? The State of Minnesota IT Services has an [excellent webpage](#) series focused on accessibility. Use the [Quick Cards](#) for reminders or complete online trainings at your own pace.

Project Management: Gantt Charts - April 7, 2023

When multiple grants fund a project, keeping track of tasks, deadlines, reporting, and grant agreement compliance activities can become complex. Using a tool like a [Gantt chart](#) can help manage the complexities. A Gantt chart is a horizontal bar chart that illustrates your project's schedule and tracks its progress. It's an easy-to-digest way to capture tasks, their start and end dates, who's assigned to complete them, and when



meetings, approvals, and deadlines must happen. Consultants often include simple Gantt charts in their proposals to help demonstrate a project's proposed schedule. Once the initial information is input into the chart, dates can be changed from expected to actual, and you can see whether the start and end dates for other tasks may need adjustment to finish the project on time. Gantt charts can be simple Word or Excel files with color coded blocks or complex software that links interdependent activities. They allow you to layer and color code information for each grant, so you have a snapshot of what's due and when. Learn more about Gantt charts and download free Gantt chart excel files and watch tutorials for using them [HERE](#).

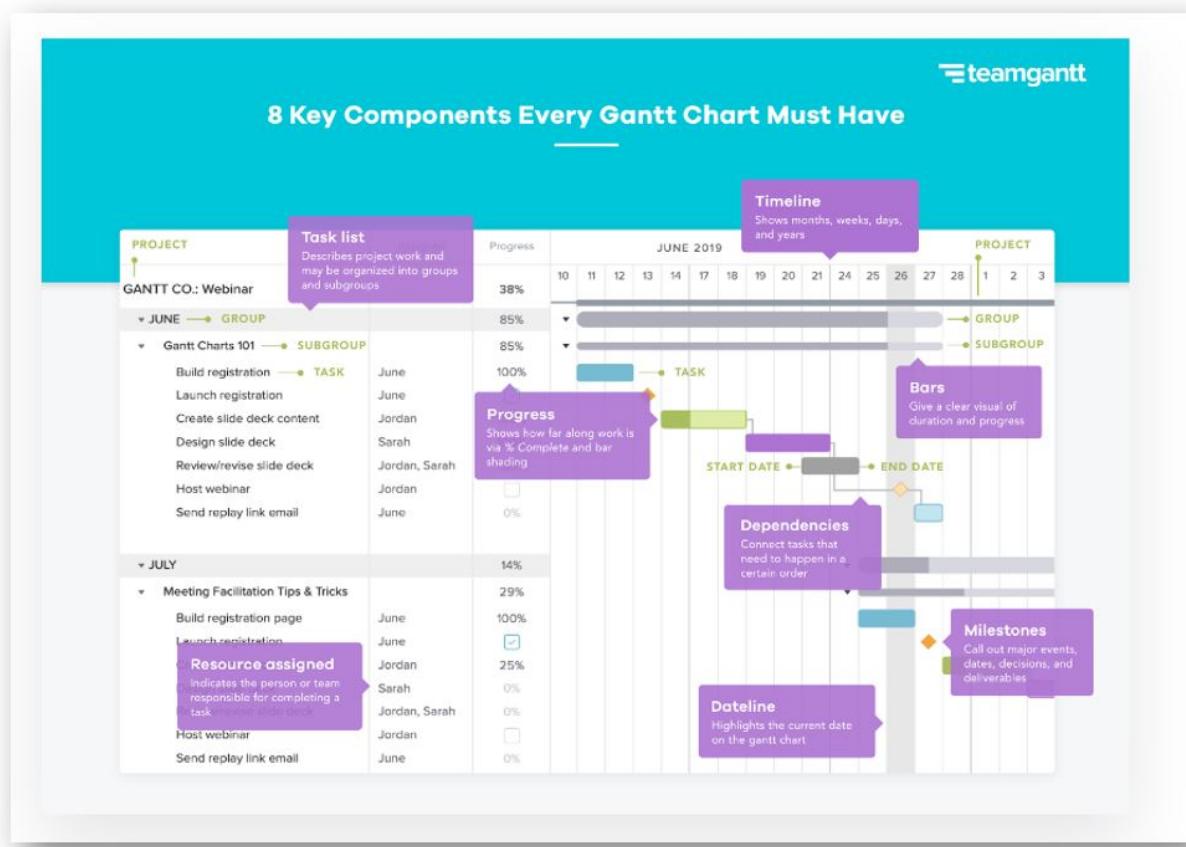


Image credit: www.teamgantt.com/what-is-a-gantt-chart

Project Management: Project Kickoff Meetings – February 24, 2023

What is the momentous occasion that follows securing your project's necessary funding commitments? The **project kickoff meeting!** The project kickoff meeting



brings key participants in the project together, helps them get to know each other and build a mutual understanding of the project. The kickoff meeting's agenda will include building a common understanding of the project's background, purpose, activities (a.k.a. scope of work), deliverables, and schedule. The project kickoff meeting is typically run by the project manager. This is either a consultant who is hired to serve as the project manager [PM] or a municipal person (staff or official) or local person who will fill the role. As with anything in life, preparation is the key to success, so holding an internal pre-kickoff meeting is highly recommended. This meeting will include the "internal" (municipal) project team - those in town government or the community who will be involved in and/or responsible for project and grant administration, like signing agreements, managing money, procurement of goods and/or services, compliance and reporting, etc. This internal pre-kickoff meeting helps your team understand the goals of the project, and the role that each teammate plays in achieving these goals. It often results in adjustments to the scope of work or schedule based on team needs (ex. vacation schedules, holidays, regular Selectboard meeting dates). In both meetings, be sure to ask about potential stumbling blocks that could hinder the project as well as activities that will help it succeed. If you want to help ensure successful outcomes for your project, make sure to offer stakeholders at both meetings opportunities to **ask questions**. **Project pre-kickoff and kickoff meetings reduce the odds of misunderstandings** as projects progress by aligning project expectations, setting the overall tone, creating momentum, and establishing big-picture goals.

[Project Management: Determining Prevailing Wages – December 30, 2022](#)

Two types of wage requirements may affect construction projects that receive state and/or federal funds. The Vermont State Prevailing Wage may apply to projects authorized or funded in whole or part by the State of Vermont Capital Construction Act. Public construction projects using federal funds may be required to conform to the Davis-Bacon Act. Vermont's State Prevailing Wages are available under the Publications section at www.vtlmi.info. Requirements for Federal Prevailing Wages,



informally known as "Davis-Bacon," are available via Sam.gov. When both apply, the Davis-Bacon takes precedence. Need more help in determining Davis-Bacon wages? Then check out VLCT's new "[**Guide to Obtaining Federal Davis-Bacon Wage Determinations**](#)" to walk through the SAM.gov access process.

Resources: Valuing Volunteer Time – March 3, 2023

Local match, sometimes referred to as cost sharing, is cash or other contributions that a grantee contributes to a project. Most grants require a local match contribution to demonstrate local commitment to the project. When volunteers provide critical contributions to a project's success, funders often allow the grant recipient to count the volunteer's donated time towards the grantee's local match. The grant guidance may specify an hourly amount that must be used to value volunteer contributions. If it doesn't, most funders will accept the rates published by [Independentsector.org](#)'s webpage, [**The Value of Volunteer Time**](#). You can download a 1-page report to find Vermont's current rate. Vermont's volunteer rate is \$28.14 as of April 2022. The rates are updated annually in April. ***Don't forget to save the downloaded report in your project file as documentation of how you obtained the volunteer rate!*** Check the site each April to update your files for the current volunteer rate. The rate usually increases, and you can use the increase to increase the hourly rate of your project's volunteer time.

Resources: VTTrans Grant Resources - February 10, 2023

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT) [Municipal Assistance Bureau website](#) includes resources, links to grant programs, and materials for grant award management. Looking to fund a municipal transportation project? Read [Show Me The Money](#) to learn about AOT grant programs for municipalities. Want to avoid the stress of putting together a last-minute application? Review the [Annual Grant Program Timelines](#) to learn when AOT grants will be announced and awarded. Does your municipality already have a grant? Use the [VTRANS website](#) to link to common documents and templates used for grant awards. This one-stop spot for municipal



transportation grants can help your municipality organize its grant writing activities and avoid a last-minute, application writing scramble.

Resources: Use VTransparency to Align Project Schedules - January 13, 2023

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT or "VTrans") maintains an online resource for publishing its important and useful data, called [VTransparency](#). It allows the public to have access to and use the Agency's data to help make informed decision at all levels, including on the most local level. If your community has a project that involves working in the state highway right-of-way, you can search the [Current VTrans Projects](#) for VTrans' current projects and what's planned for the next two (2) years in your municipality (and across Vermont!). Working with VTrans to align the timing of your project with theirs might result in efficiencies that could reduce construction costs and, at the very least, a headache or two for you and your residents. Planning ahead just got a little easier, thanks to this valuable VTrans tool!

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