Making Your Community Development Project More Competitive

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The principles summarized on this webpage can help any municipal or community project sharpen its competitive edge for funding.

Set your municipality's community development project and grants up for success by incorporating these top takeaways from our November 12, 2025, *Grants and Funding Chat: Community Development.*

Seasoned community development experts Nicole Gratton (Preservation Trust of Vermont), Kelley Stoddard Poor (AARP Vermont), and Gretchen Havreluk (Town of Wilmington consultant) shared practical insights, answered questions, and walked through real-world projects that successfully leveraged funding to strengthen local communities. Their know-how can help you to align your community's needs with funding opportunities.

Making Projects Fundable and Competitive

Make your project and application stand out.

- **Keep your eye on your goal.** Timelines for these projects tend to be long. Don't lose sight of your goal as the project progresses: focus on matching the funding you pursue with your project goal.
- **Build community buy-in.** Discussions at municipal meetings are one avenue for building community buy-in. What else works in your community to reach residents who don't attend meetings?
- **Grants aren't always the answer.** Crowd funding and capital campaigns can help you fill funding gaps.
- **Test your ideas.** Demonstration projects are a great way to get community input. With input, you can tweak or change the project to pave the way for a successful permanent project.

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- **Leadership and partnerships open doors.** Projects that involve partnerships between municipal government and community organizations – regardless of who leads – stand out.

Avoid common mistakes and missed opportunities.

- **Have a shared vision among municipal and community leadership**. Funders notice if only one entity is engaged. One entity can lead, but both need to share the vision.
- **Read the grant guidelines!** Know what the funder's priorities are and speak to them in your application. Notice if your project isn't the best fit for a grant.
- **Tailor your application to the funder.** Your project may have many stories to tell. Know the funder's focus and use the stories that speak to the funder.
- **Check your timeline.** You might need to phase your project if a grant's timeline doesn't match your project's. Ask experienced people to double-check whether your project's timeline is realistic.
- **Align your project with other municipal actions.** Coordinating within the municipality (with boards, committees, and plans) helps ensure that municipal actions are aligned and mutually supportive.
- **Use a proofreader who has written grants before.** Give them the grant guidelines so they can see the context for the question when they edit your text.
- **Read all the application questions before you begin answering.** If questions seem similar, consider what depth is needed to answer each. Asks the funder if you aren't sure of each question's purpose.
- **Make sure the applicant and your project fit the grant.** Check the eligibility of both.

Managing Grants Effectively

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Stay grant compliant when navigating challenges.

- **Communicate, communicate, communicate!** Before the application, during the award, and after the award. With your funder, with your local government, and with your community.
- **Discuss significant changes or redesigns with your funder.** Funders need to buy into scope changes because they'll need to approve them.
- **Know when an extension will help.** When challenges happen, don't wait to tell the funder progress has slowed or stopped. Returning grant awards isn't fun for anyone. Discuss the potential for an extension when you think it's a possibility. Some grants agreements can be extended; others can't.
- **Overcommunicate!** Floods happen, community concerns emerge after a grant award, grant rules change mid-project. It's better to over, rather than under, communicate – with the funder, community, local government, etc.
- **Keep all funders in the loop.** If your project has multiple funders, make sure every funder has the same information. Share all documents and plans with all funders as they are updated.

Best practices for managing someone else's money.

- **Understand the funder's post-award requirements.** For instance, if quarterly reporting is required, when does the quarter end? Is an end of grant report required too?
- **Ask if you're unsure.** Funders are happy to clarify. Vermont's a small state, and people are friendly.
- **Share your successes.** Help the funder tell their success stories and understand your community. Share your success stories, quotes, and photos from the community and the project.
- **Ideas need support to become realities.** Build support for your project one person at a time.

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- **Reporting – Do it!** Reporting is necessary. It helps the funder understand how your project is progressing. It helps you see progress too!

Preparing for the Future

Be proactive to position your municipality and project for success.

- **Prepare for the demographic shift.** It is happening now. Take into account how your community can foster aging in place through walkability, bikeability, public transit, housing variety, and connectedness.
- **Funders are collaborating; you should too.**
- **Hire a project manager.** An experienced project manager can help keep the project moving smoothly, saving you time and money.
- **Projects costing more than $200,000 are more complicated.** You'll need to handhold more people. Hiring a project manager is especially important for these projects.
- **Start with clear and concise goals.** Write them down. If you are working with a committee, know the roles and responsibilities for each person. Write those down too.
- **Know the big picture before you begin.** Have a plan for the whole project before you begin moving it forward.
- **Phase projects.** Funding stacks are more complex and less certain. Make sure you know how your project can be phased so it can adapt to available funding.
- **Partner with local organizations.** When building in the public realm, don't just talk about projects at local government meetings. Local organizations can bring new community voices to your effort.
- **Capital campaigns have power!** Philanthropic giving can be one-third to one half of project funding.

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If you missed the chat, you can visit our Grants & Funding Chat Recordings and Resources webpage to access the recording, which includes a brief presentation about community and economic development.

Publication Date

11/17/2025

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