

Grant Preparation Tips

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TUG HILL COMMISSION TECHNICAL PAPER SERIES

TUG HILL COMMISSION

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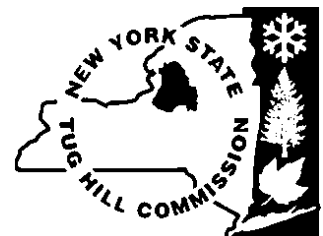


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For information on specific grant sources, please refer to the Local Government Topics paper, *A List of Common Funding Sources*, available from the address on the cover.

The Tug Hill Commission *Technical and Issue Paper Series* are designed to help local officials and citizens in the Tug Hill region and other rural parts of New York State. The *Technical Paper Series* provides guidance on procedures based on questions frequently received by the Commission. The *Issue Paper Series* provides background on key issues facing the region without taking advocacy positions. Other papers in each series are available from the Tug Hill Commission at the address and phone number on the cover.

Introduction

As local officials struggle with increasing demands for limited budget dollars, they often look for outside assistance to make community improvement projects work. Whether it be repairing a water system, installing a community sewer system, developing a new town park, or revitalizing a downtown, the cost of these projects is often not affordable unless some outside aid is received. In working with towns and villages throughout the Tug Hill Region, the Tug Hill Commission has had the opportunity to explore the different funding sources that local communities most often look to for assistance.

Because each funding program operates differently, it is often difficult for the community to understand what is expected. Are we eligible? Do we need a local share to match the funds we are requesting? What is the deadline? These are just some of the questions that Tug Hill leaders ask. While each assistance program is different, there are common elements or steps that a community can take so it will be better prepared to compete for these funds.

This paper is a guide to help communities understand the availability of these commonly accessed funding sources and to share some “tips” learned through efforts with other towns and villages in the Tug Hill Region.

General Tips

There are several elements of fund-raising that seem to improve a community’s chances in applying for outside assistance. By completing these steps, a community may also find itself better prepared to get a project done through alternative means, should a grant request be unsuccessful.

A local plan

One of the key elements to a successful community development project or funding application is good planning. A community should have a **priority list**, or wish list, in place, which clearly states the community’s greatest needs. In addition to listing general community needs, a local plan could include more detail on the highest priority projects including:

- A full description of the proposed improvement
- The purpose and need for the specific project
- Demonstrated public support
- Potential economic impacts of the project
- Potential funding sources for the project (including local funding)
- Locator map of the proposed project site, if applicable
- Analysis of how the project complements other projects in the area, both within and outside the community.
- Identification of likely partners for cooperative efforts

- Drawings and pictures of how the completed project will look (sometimes provided by an artistically talented volunteer).
- Preliminary cost estimates

When the **need for a project is documented** in a local or regional plan, that project may be given greater consideration by the funding source. Also, by having a plan in place, a community will be better prepared to apply to any new funding programs that come along.

Local Support and Involvement

A working committee including local officials and interested citizens is helpful when putting together a local plan for a specific project. (e.g., park or recreation committee). A thorough plan may take some researching of old documents, picture taking, surveying, etc. Each committee member could be assigned a certain task to help in the planning process.

It is critical that a community project obtains endorsement from the town or village board and general public before applying for funding. Conceptual approval ahead of time will reduce public concerns as the project gets underway. Citizens want to know, “What is the project going to cost me?” A town or village could issue a news release or hold a public hearing to explain the project, its goals for community improvement, and potential funding sources. Public involvement is both practical in small communities (people might volunteer to help) and often required by funders.

Local Resources

Some funding programs require a specific **local match** — meaning a certain percentage of the project funding must come from sources other than the funding program. Match requirements vary. One program may require a local match of 20% while another requires a 50% match. Some programs allow in-kind services (such as administrative time or site preparation by the DPW) as part of the match. Other programs require that the match be in cash.

Regardless of the match requirement, a town or village should be prepared to assess how much or what part of the project can be funded locally. By securing local funds, the community will be able to demonstrate its commitment to the effort and, if unsuccessful in its application for outside assistance, perhaps it would still be able to implement a part of the project and buy that first piece of equipment for the park, do the first section of sidewalk, or buy the new computer for the clerk. The community’s **list of priorities** can help in deciding which elements of a project should be addressed first.

Choosing a Funding Source

Once a town or village has **obtained public approval, formed a working committee, put together a plan, and secured local funding**, it can now look for the extra financial help needed to cover the shortfall and complete the project. The first thing to do before submitting a request for funding is to thoroughly review the criteria of the program to be sure that the proposed local project is eligible. Some sources only fund certain types of projects or projects in a specific geographic area. When possible, it is to the community’s advantage to meet with potential funders before submitting a formal request.

In addition, the community needs to determine if there are currently funds in the targeted program. Often funds are depleted and the programs are waiting to be recapitalized by the federal or state government or other source.

Writing A Grant Application

The task of writing a grant application or filling out a loan application can be very complicated or very simple. For some funding sources, a letter of request describing the project is sufficient. Other programs require completion of an application form backed up by an enormous amount of supporting information. There can be an advantage in a community using a professional grant writer to assist in the application process. This assistance can be accessed through the private sector as well as through various public and not-for-profit agencies. Remember to try to fully understand the goals of the funding program, and then match them as close as possible to the community's needs.

Record Keeping and Reporting

Grant work does not end when the grant is awarded. Once a community receives a grant, it must maintain accurate records of the overall project and how money is spent. Some grant programs award funds on a reimbursement basis – meaning proof must be submitted that the expenditure has already been made. Other programs award the grant money up-front, but require a thorough auditing of how funds were spent once the project is completed.

There are reasons for maintaining a good paper trail other than just to comply with reporting requirements. Keeping funding organizations informed on the progress and completion of a successful project lets them know their money was well spent. Establishing a good relationship with a funder also enhances the applicant's credibility as an organization, which can get things done. This may pave the way for receiving additional funding from that funding agency in the future. Keeping a copy of the original grant application, particularly the project budget helps manage expenditures and makes it easy to compare a project's estimated and actual costs.

Specific Improvements

Water and Sewer

When considering the construction or repair of water or sewer systems in a community, the town or village must **start with a plan**. The plan must clearly and comprehensively lay out the steps that need to be taken to fix the problem, like the leak in the water main, or to seize the opportunity, like trying to figure out how to develop that new industrial park. As stated earlier, the plan should **estimate all possible costs and benefits** to the community. A plan helps the public and potential funders to understand how the project will meet the community's needs.

A **consulting engineer** usually needs to be involved in putting together the plan. The community should choose an engineer based on the firm's qualifications, their cost estimate, and their experience in working with similar sized communities. For information on Qualification Based Selection (QBS) of design professionals, contact the Central New York QBS Council at

315-252-8214.

The community should always **check the references** of professionals they are considering hiring. Call a town where the firm put in a water system or the village where they built the new village hall. Project leaders might also want to review one or more of the papers available from numerous sources, including the Tug Hill Commission, on “Choosing an Engineer.”

Involve those state agencies that need to be involved, like the Health Department for water projects or DEC for solid waste projects, early in the process. These agencies are some of the best sources for technical assistance, and most if not all have become far more than enforcers of regulations. Also, **involve the potential funders** as early in the process as possible. They will often provide advice on what they look for in a competitive application, and will already be familiar with the project when the application comes in for their review. Assistance is also available from the Rural Community Assistance Program of Winchendon, Mass.

Capital planning and aggressive utility management is essential. Regularly review rates. Make sure that enough is being set aside for repairs and improvements. Early intervention on repairs will cost far less in the long run than replacement. See the Comptroller’s Information on Establishing Capital Reserves.

Involve the public. Less expensive solutions to costly community problems can often be found in the ideas or energy of its residents. Do not hesitate to form a citizen’ panel to help complete the plan and get the word out about what is going on. Several major funders require a citizen participation component in the community’s work plan.

Control of the effort throughout is critical. Keep good records, assign responsibilities, and try to run efficient and effective meetings. See the Local Government Topics Paper on “Conducting Public Meetings and Public Hearings,” available from the Tug Hill Commission.

Downtown Revitalization

Downtown improvement projects can run from small-scale projects, such as planting trees or creating a small sitting area, to large-scale projects involving the rehabilitation of building facades. Funding for such efforts may come from a variety of sources. There are few programs that specifically focus on commercial revitalization. One such program, whose future is presently uncertain, is the NYS Empire State Development Corporation’s Commercial Revitalization Program. In the past, this program has provided matching grants to property owners for improvements to the visible part of their storefronts. However, the program has not been funded for several years.

Most communities make improvements to their village centers through a combination of volunteer labor, local fundraising efforts, grants from private foundations, support from merchant groups, and in-kind work by the local DPW crew. Each of these funding sources, alone or in some combination might actually fund different portions of the downtown improvement effort.

Even when much needs to be done, a downtown revitalization effort can actually begin with a number of smaller projects. These may include erecting welcome signs, planting flowers, placing a bench on the street corner, or creating a small sitting park between two buildings. Little improvements such as these make a visible difference and help generate local pride and momentum for larger projects. Larger efforts could include new sidewalks, replacing streetlights, or restoring the village square bandstand.

Park Projects

Most park projects are undertaken to meet local needs, which can vary depending on the age of the residents, area population growth, distance to other recreation programs or facilities, or even climate. A park project can range from the development of a five mile interpretive trail for safe walking and exercising to the construction of a little league baseball diamond that supports a local youth program. It can also include the acquisition of a site for swimming or boating access. Community involvement in identifying needs and setting priorities is a critical part of park planning.

As with downtown revitalization projects, funding for local park projects usually is raised through a combination of local government support (cash and in-kind), volunteer labor, business contributions, foundation funding, or fundraising events. While there are some outside funding sources available through New York State, such as the Environmental Protection Fund Program (EPF) and the CleanWater/Clean Air Bond Act, the competition is intense. Those projects that do receive funding tend to have more regional or statewide significance. A stronger case can be made for a park project that is part of a recreation plan with well-defined priorities.

Whatever the park development needs may be, this is typically an area of community development where citizens want to be involved because they see the benefits accruing directly to themselves and their children. This involvement leads to a commitment to see the project succeed, often without outside funding assistance. In such instances, communities are often able to complete individual portions of the plan through volunteer labor, local contributions, and in-kind site work by the municipality.

General Community Improvements

If the community is considering improvements such as a new town barn or new storm sewers, it is important to shop for the best financing available. In addition to contacting the regional office of the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Economic and Community Development Administration, local banks should also be contacted to see what sort of a deal they might be able to give a community. Remember to look for partners. For example, maybe that salt storage shed the town is thinking about building can be built along with DOT and the county highway department. Some communities have found it beneficial to refinance their original loan part way through the useful life of a project. A municipality should review its debt every once in a while to see if there is cheaper money out there.

File all plans with the clerk. Maps, original applications, and contacts might prove very beneficial and often essential to future community leaders.

