

**NJ Future
Green Infrastructure Toolkit
Grant Writing Module
Prepared by BRS, Inc.
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One of the first questions asked is how and where can we get funding for our project? Here are some tips, tools and concrete steps to answer this question and help navigate the way:

Finding Grant Opportunities

Identifying grant opportunities is all about **research and networking**. Sources for information include internet searches, using paid membership funding databases such as the Foundation Center or GrantStation, exploring government web sites, and regularly monitoring funder web sites. Sometimes, just looking at projects similar to your own and seeing who funded them is a great place to start. Attending funding workshops and meeting with funders are excellent ways to learn about upcoming and new opportunities before they are posted and to network with potential funders so that they will think of your project when they are looking to promote grant opportunities. Ask the funding contacts you meet to add you to their email list so that you hear about new opportunities right away. Here are some go-to places and sources:

Insert link to funding research module

www.grants.gov

www.nj.gov/nj/gov/njgov/grants.html

<https://foundationcenter.org/>

<https://grantstation.com/>

Cast your research net wide. Create a spreadsheet of potential funding sources, including criteria and due dates, and then do a deep dive on the opportunities that rise to the top. Think broadly - consider all the different kinds of financing support available and how these can be best combined to make a successful project. Also, consider the different aspects of the project. You may be planning a green infrastructure project, but there may be funding for streetscapes or open space that can address all or part of your project funding needs. Read application guidelines carefully. It is important to identify grant opportunities that are a **good fit**, meaning the goals and outcomes of your project are aligned with the goals of the prospective funder and grant program you are thinking about. Putting together a competitive application is a time-consuming endeavor so it is a waste of everyone's time if your project does not meet the eligibility criteria or intent of the grant opportunity. If you are not sure whether your project or organization meets the eligibility requirements, contact the funder – preferably **before** the request for proposals is issued. Some funders have restrictions on what they can discuss with prospective applicants once that request is public.

You will want to **weigh the costs versus benefits** of applying. That is, the time, effort and costs necessary to prepare and submit an application versus the amount of the possible funds, as well as the

prestige and support that may come with receiving an award. It is also important to consider the strings attached – every grant comes with obligations that could include reporting, procurement restrictions, extra compliance with regulations, project monitoring requirements and, in some cases, up-front costs for reimbursement grants. In addition, use of public funds requires compliance with federal and state wage rate requirements, which could increase project costs. For municipally owned projects, State prevailing wage already applies, but for other projects this can be a determining factor as to whether or not the funding is worth the increased project costs. Finally, make sure that the timeframe works for your project. If your project is on a fast track and funds won't be available for a year from the application date, it may not be a good fit. Conversely, if you still have a lot of work to do in design and permitting, it may make sense to wait until you are further along before applying for a construction grant, if you are likely to not be able to complete the project within the grant project period.

An excellent source for financing for green infrastructure projects in New Jersey is the **New Jersey Water Bank**. New Jersey Future, in partnership with the I-Bank and NJDEP, has developed an “Applicant’s Guide” for obtaining financing for green infrastructure projects through the New Jersey Water Bank. The Applicant’s Guide provides an overview of the types of financing available from the Water Bank for green infrastructure; clarifies the sequence of required application activities, and defines the standards that must be met at each step along the way. It also includes helpful tips from past applicants and agency staff that will make the application process easier for new and first-time applicants.

Water Bank financing can be used for all types of infrastructure projects that involve water, including

- Wastewater
- Drinking Water
- Stormwater
- Brownfields
- Landfills
- Land Preservation

For specific guidance on applying for Water Bank financing, [click here](#) to access the Applicant’s Guide.

Developing a Competitive Application

Once you have decided to take the plunge and apply, it is important to go back to the application and guidelines to determine *all* of the information and supporting materials you will need to develop a complete grant application. Incomplete applications are not acceptable and most likely would be removed from consideration. Read the application guidance cover-to-cover & follow directions. **Set up a timeline, process and team** to manage a grant application. You may need board resolutions, support letters, community notification periods, subcontractor proposals, project experts, photographs, plans and/or quotes for budgeting. All these things take time. **Here is a chart of typical grant application requirements to give you an idea of the grant writing process for planning and scheduling purposes.**

1. Identify funding source and establish eligibility.

2. Sketch out your project budget and scope using the funder's guidelines; make a list of requirements, documentation and/or price quotes you may need.
3. Get any resolutions / Board approvals necessary for applying.
4. Generate transmittal memo (if required), if there is a lengthy process for getting executive signatures.
5. Establish submission credentials if electronic submission is required (ie, via grants.gov).
6. Complete any community notification requirements, ie public meeting.
7. Allow sufficient time to get support/commitment letters.
8. Gather data needed for the application, which could include conceptual documents, design drawings, sampling results, community demographic or health data, watershed information, water quality data, etc.
9. Obtain any approval letters needed to demonstrate match, leveraged funds, site access, municipal support, etc.
10. Establish your team, including partners outside your organization if appropriate.
11. Refine your budget with detailed information.
12. Develop your narrative.
13. Double check that you answered everything; if a checklist was provided, use it.
14. Request a read through / edit from someone new to your project.
15. Submit your application.

The grant writing process is a great opportunity to **develop your project idea**. It requires you to think through all the components from beginning to end. Take the time to think creatively and identify the ways your project is unique, innovative, leverages partnership, builds upon community resources and most of all, is destined for success in meeting both the objective(s) of the potential funder as well as the project objective(s). If your project has collaborators or partners, add more time for their input and feedback. Be aware of your project weaknesses or gaps and look for ways to overcome them. Depending on the funder/program, you can make the discovery process or problem solving a part of the project.

Next step, **the budget** is the brains of the operation. While it is tempting to begin with the narrative of your project, establishing a budget first will provide you with clarity of exactly what you can accomplish within the parameters of the grant, and can result in a much more targeted and relevant narrative. The budget is where you lay out in black and white what tasks will be completed, who will complete them, and how much they will cost. It allows you to demonstrate to the reviewer that you have a well thought out, organized project that makes sense. Specify what money will be allocated to each task and then back it up with breakdowns. Make sure you strike a balance between a realistic budget and a competitive budget. Tie the costs to the project goals and ensure that the costs are consistent with the narrative. Beware of setting off red flags with too much salary, overhead or expenses you have not explained, and make sure the items in your budget are eligible under the funding source. For example, if acquisition costs are excluded, do not include them in the grant budget. Some funders may have flexibility to fund only a portion of the project. If you think that is likely with your project, consider presenting the budget in a phased project approach to provide funders with that flexibility, assuming that would make sense with your project.

Double check for math errors! Develop your budget on a spreadsheet and then import the spreadsheet into the document you are working on, so that even if you tinker with the budget later it is still nested within a spreadsheet. Nothing says “I don’t have the capacity to manage this grant” like submitting an application rife with mathematical errors.

Some grants require **matching funds**. This is typically expressed as a percentage of the grant award. For example, if you are applying for a \$400,000 grant with a 20% match requirement, you would have to demonstrate \$80,000 in matching funds. These funds typically have to cover costs that are eligible under the grant guidelines, and they typically cannot be spent prior to the grant award date. For instance, if the application is due in May, decisions are made by August, and the grant agreement is executed in October, any funds spent prior to October would not be able to be counted as a part of your match. Some funders allow you to include in-kind services as a match. These typically would need to be broken out and documented, so make sure in the application process that you will be able to do this. In kind might be the value of the land the project will be situated on, or volunteer labor for plantings or other work, or the salary for employees working on the project.

Matching funds are different from **leveraged funds**. While matching funds must be documented, be for eligible activities, and be expended within the grant period, leveraged funds have much more flexibility. They can be used to demonstrate to the funder that you have the commitment, capacity, and the ability to complete the project. Read the grant guidelines carefully, but often in a narrative describing leveraged funds you can use funds already expended and funds expended for activities not eligible under the funding source. This is typically not a requirement, but will improve the competitiveness of your proposal.

How much do you apply for? Just because you can apply for the maximum grant amount, doesn’t always mean you should. Different funders have different formulas for determining their awards so return to your research or have a discussion with the program officer if possible. Look at the history of past grant awards and determine what the average award for a similar project has been. You may need to adjust your budget, phase the scope of your project and/or identify potential matching funds to balance your budget and make an appropriate request.

Once you have your budget established, you can go back and really **tell your story**. Outline your narrative using the questions and criteria requested in the application. Some questions or sections may seem repetitive or overlapping. Are the goals of your project the same as the proposed outcomes? Don’t repeat or reword the same information. Instead take the opportunity to provide more nuance and detail about your project. Think about why the funder may be asking a similar question in a slightly different way and highlight that aspect in your response. Do not skip questions! If a question doesn’t apply to you, respond with an “N/A” or explain why it doesn’t apply, don’t just skip over it. Be sure all the pieces of your story fit into the framework.

The first sentence and the first paragraph, **like writing a novel** are paramount in setting the stage. You need to declare your purpose and make the reader want to read on. Write as though the reader knows nothing about your community and stress what makes your community/project different from all the others in a relatable way. Pull these threads through the entire narrative, providing context and consistency between the application's questions or sections. Keep it realistic and ensure your assertions are backed up with data or examples. Grant reviewers are experts at spotting vague and meaningless hyperbole. Make every sentence count and keep extraneous information out that will just distract from your story.

Pull at reviewers' heartstrings! Emphasize the problems your community is facing that will be improved by your project. While it is tempting to talk about the strengths of your community, it is typically better to limit that to the section where you talk about your capacity to manage the grant, and sometimes within the context of the potential your community has. Remember, the funder isn't looking to provide you with funds because you have a great community; they want to help you solve a problem. Make sure the focus on the application is on the problem and the proposed solution.

Frequently grants require **letters of support or commitment**. Make sure you read the guidelines to understand what types of organizations the funder wants to hear from (just community organizations, or would a letter from the Planning Board, or your Congressperson be welcomed?) Also understand the difference between letter of support, which simply show support for your project, and letter of commitment, which specify a way in which the author will participate in the project. Make sure you cover the obvious sources; is there a church next door to the project that you reference in your application? There should be a letter from them. Does it make sense to get a letter from your local environmental organization? Are you claiming leveraged maintenance support from your local Downtown Association? What about the MUA? Make sure the letters aren't just cookie-cutter form letters, but that they actually describe the organization and why they support the project or what they are offering to the success of the project. This obviously takes time, so make sure you start on this early and you budget sufficient time for outreach, letter writing, and follow-up.

Double and triple check your work. The best idea or innovative project cannot overcome a poorly written, mistake-filled or difficult to understand proposal. **Be kind to your reviewers** who are often reading numerous applications and minimize the use of acronyms and jargon. Having someone from outside your program to give you a reality check on how well your message is coming through is never a waste of time. Have fresh eyes standing by to review the entire application before you hit submit. If all that seems overwhelming, you may want to consider hiring a **professional grant writer**. While you are an expert on your community and your project, a grant writer is an expert on the ins and outs of putting together a successful grant application. Together you may make a formidable team!

Professional grant writers can do the research for you, help with vetting the most suitable opportunities, advise on how to shape your project scope to make it more competitive and manage the entire grant

application process, including writing, budgeting and preparing all support materials and documentation. **Consider hiring a grant writer if:**

- The potential amount of funding is large enough to justify the additional expense of a grant writer (the cost of writing a grant will not be an eligible expense under the potential grant!)
- You don't have the in-house resources, both in terms of time and experience, to do a good job in pulling together the application

When looking for a grant writer, ask the following:

- How much would you charge to develop the application? (They should give you a lump sum fee, based on the anticipated time the grant will take to write. As a result, fees should vary depending on how complex the application is, with federal applications typically costing more than state or local applications. Professional grant writers do not make their payment contingent upon the receipt of funds or charge as a percentage of the funding received. Additionally, if a firm is offering to write a grant for free, they are probably expecting to receive some work on the back end, once the grant is secured. This may be in violation of procurement laws.)
- What is your experience in writing these types of grants?
- What is your success rate?
- What services will you include? (ie, developing support letters, handling community notification, submitting the final grant)
- What support will you need from me? (ie, providing contact information for partner organizations, establishing credentials for application submission, obtaining executive director signatures on transmittal memos, obtaining resolution authorizing application)

Note that grant writers can only work with the information they are given. If you do decide to hire a grant writer, you will still need to budget time to provide source materials, approve budgets, assist in identifying / contacting partner organizations, and talking through your vision of the project. If you are hiring a grant writer, development of design documents would typically not be included, and these would have to be accounted for through contracts with design / engineering firms as appropriate.

Exploring other Types of Funding

In some cases, your project may not be ready for the grant you want. Applying for **Technical Assistance** is a way to keep your project moving ahead and gather the credentials you need for the larger grants. It is usually a quick turnaround and simpler application for a smaller focused activity such as planning, financial assessment, or design services. Technical assistance can also get you in front of funders, demonstrate you have done your homework and can serve as leveraged funds. Look toward universities, regulators, federally funded technical assistance programs.

Loans and loan guarantees may be good sources for funding, particularly if your project has elements that include transportation, building reuse or business development projects with a repayment stream. The Water Bank financing (<https://www.njib.gov/>) mentioned previously fits into this category.

For some projects, you may be able to make use of **tax credits**, such as Low Income Housing Tax Credits and Historic Tax credits, if a portion of your project qualifies. These credits are designed to provide an incentive for a particular type of project. They can either be used directly by the project developer as tax credits, or they can be used to attract investors to a project. The investors provide the necessary cash infusion in return for credits that they use to reduce their tax liability.

Managing Your Award

Getting notification that your application was successful is just the beginning of a relationship with your funder. Executing your grant agreement and any other forms in a timely fashion will be further evidence that you're a reliable grantee who will successfully execute the grant-funded project. During the grant period it is also important to comply with all applicable grant reporting requirements, which will be unique to your funder and generally spelled out in your grant agreement. Successfully managing your grant will make your organization more competitive in securing additional funds in the future.

A Grants Manager....

- Knows what is in the grant agreement and ensures that requirements are met
- Makes sure procedures are followed and resolutions are passed
- Follows through on grant agreement execution
- Ensures grant is inserted into the budget so funds are available
- Keeps records on invoices and correspondence for tracking and auditing
- Processes invoices and reimbursements
- Performs all required reporting, including financial forms and programmatic forms
- Ensures that activities are eligible
- Works with the funder to keep them informed
- Develops requests for budget modifications if required
- Develops requests for no cost time extensions if required
- Performs close out activities at the end of the grant

Feeling overwhelmed? Outsourcing the grant management process is one way to overcome time constraints AND add some expertise to your team.