RESULTS FOR AMERICA

5 Winning Strategies for SMART Grant Applications

Application Deadline: October 10, 2023

The Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) program supports innovative demonstration projects that use advanced and emerging technology to improve the safety and efficiency of a community's transportation infrastructure.

#1 Check your basics

Because it is a demonstration program, SMART works differently than many other Department of Transportation (DOT) grant programs. First, DOT is only allowing applications for Stage 1 grants, which are for planning, prototyping, and partnership. However, the project should be ready for Stage 2, which consists of implementation, scaling, and eventual replication, upon completion. This means that cities should demonstrate in their application that they have considered how they plan to eventually operationalize the project.

Second, DOT has created a specific list of advanced technologies, one of which must be used for a project to be eligible for SMART funds. Make sure that your project fits into one of the project areas listed on page 10 of the SMART Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

Lastly, DOT has explicitly stated that SMART grants cannot be used for traffic or parking enforcement or license plate readers.

#2 Promote equity through a community-centered approach

SMART project design should be tailored to the needs of the community, and USDOT will prioritize applications that benefit disadvantaged communities in particular. Competitive applications will demonstrate how the benefits, solutions, and technologies used match with a specific community need. As such, it is crucial for applicants to engage frontline community stakeholders early and consistently throughout project planning and development, which will help to ensure that the effort is well-targeted and promotes equity.

#3 Be prepared to show how you will manage data and make it publicly available

Because SMART is a demonstration program, the intention is for eventual scaling of successful implementation of technology solutions and building data and technology capacity for local governments. For this reason, USDOT will prioritize applications that "promote public and private sharing of data and best practices and the use of open platforms, open data formats, technology-neutral requirements, and interoperability." This includes incorporating data management into your application's budget appropriately.

#4 Design program evaluation from the outset

Program evaluation works best when it is incorporated into a project from the beginning, rather than being an afterthought. This is especially important for a demonstration program because the evaluation and its results are an essential outcome of the investment. While the requirement is for recipients to submit an evaluation plan within 3 months of receiving the grant, understanding how you will track and measure success as you develop your application will strengthen and clarify your overall proposal.

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#5 Get to know the new requirement to demonstrate workforce impacts

For this year's NOFO, USDOT added a question about how SMART funding would "support and grow a strong, diverse, and local workforce." Specifically, applicants will be asked how implementing the proposed technology may impact the quantity and quality of jobs and how the applicant will address any potential changes. This is an excellent place to showcase related workforce development efforts, including those that might be funded by other Bipartisan Infrastructure Law programs. For more information, see this checklist from USDOT on how to develop a strong workforce and labor plan.

Additional resources that may be helpful for your application:

- Example SMART projects from DOT
- List of projects that received SMART funding last year