

Grant Application Strategies for Capacity-Constrained Communities

On November 28, 2023, the Local Infrastructure Hub hosted a session to support smaller, capacity-constrained communities in developing competitive applications for Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding—a historic \$1.2 trillion over the next 10 years. The session featured Michael Close, Department of Transportation Policy Analyst, ROUTES Initiative; Michelle Thomas, CEO of the Thomas Consulting Group (TCG); and Jen Cecil, Director of Data Analytics and Project Management, TCG, who highlighted relevant resources cities can leverage to prepare successful applications.

Key Insights

Understand your city's needs

Tip #1: Start from your city's existing priorities; understand your community's needs

Look at your community's capital improvement plan and long-term strategic plans to understand what projects you need funding for and what projects fit in with your city's vision. Plans and projects can be grouped by categories like what stage they are in, how critical the need is, what funding is currently available, and the type of project (energy efficiency, transportation, drinking water, broadband, etc.).

Research grant opportunities and decide whether to apply

Tip #2: Monitor upcoming grants for relevance to your city's plans and priorities

Many resources exist to help communities understand what grants they are eligible for within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and to provide updates on when applications are open. A few key resources below:

- [Local Infrastructure Hub Funding Opportunities Database](#): Searchable database of grants with open applications. Best use: Find upcoming deadlines for competitive grant programs.
- [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Guidebook](#) and [BIL Rural Playbook](#): Lists all of the different grants within BIL and eligible applicants for competitive grant programs. The Rural Playbook highlights opportunities most relevant to rural communities. The National League of Cities has also published a resource highlighting [six BIL grants that are a good fit for small cities](#). Best use: determine which grants fit in with your community's plans and priorities.
- [DOT Discretionary Grants Database](#) and [Anticipated Dates Calendar](#): The U.S. Department of Transportation maintains lists of open and upcoming BIL funding opportunities. Best use: Monitor for NOFOs for which your community plans to apply

Tip #3: Be prepared to address the themes that the administration is highlighting in every NOFO

While the turnaround time between a NOFO being released and the application deadline is often just a few months, many BIL and IRA NOFOs are now in their second round of funding; this means that the previous year's NOFO can be used to predict the content of those that are upcoming. Some themes that are included in nearly all BIL NOFOs are: [using data and evidence in policy and project design](#), [promoting workforce development](#), increasing equity in [underserved and Justice40 communities](#), advancing [climate readiness and resilience](#), and utilizing a [community engagement process](#) to inform projects.

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Tip #4: Take advantage of your Washington delegation.

Connect early and often with your Senators and Congressperson so that they know the challenges facing your community. Fostering these relationships will result in your representatives actively supporting your city's pursuit of applicable grants and offering valuable guidance throughout the application process.

Prepare to apply

Tip #5: Determine feasibility & identify “pre-requisites” of grant programs that must be prepared in advance

A city can increase the likelihood of receiving a grant if they are able to demonstrate that a project will be completed within the designated time frame. Agencies may look to your city's past performance in managing infrastructure projects in your grant application. Ensure that your city has completed other projects on time—and on budget—while providing effective and timely reporting.

All grants will require your community to have an up to date Unique Entity Identifier (you can register at <https://sam.gov/>) and grants.gov account for submission. Registration can take a few weeks, so apply as early as possible.

Some BIL grants like the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity, or RAISE Discretionary Grant program, require that things like permitting, approvals, or a benefit-cost analysis be completed prior to applying. Looking at prior years NOFOs can help communities get a head start on preparing these items, even before a new NOFO is released.

Tip #6: Use regional, statewide, and community partnership approaches whenever possible

For [small communities in particular](#), it can be helpful to propose projects in partnership. Partnerships increase capacity for applying to and implementing grants and allow applicants to expand the scope and impact of their project in order to better compete for federal investment. Partners can include: state agencies, philanthropic organizations, nonprofit and community organizations, regional organizations, and/or institutions of higher education, etc.

Tip #7: Get creative with matching requirements and/or look for match waiver opportunities

If matching requirements are a financial barrier for your community, don't automatically assume that means you should not apply for a grant. Many programs offer waivers for communities that meet certain requirements. If this is not applicable or your community isn't eligible, there are [creative ways to make the local match](#), such as through partnering with states, business improvement districts, or local foundations. Further, some grants allow other federal funds—such as those from Regional Commissions or State Water Revolving Loan Funds—to count as matching funds; reading the NOFO carefully can help you identify these opportunities.

Tip #8: Gather relevant data about community needs

Some federal resources for determining need and demonstrating that a community is historically underserved:

- [EPA's Environmental Justice Screening Tool](#)
- [CDC's Social Vulnerability Index](#)
- [DOT's Area's of Persistent Poverty & Historical Disadvantage](#)

Keep in mind that, for small communities especially, local data and evidence and locally-tailored strategies are welcome if they provide more detail than federal sources.

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Tip #9: Identify available application supports

Once your community has decided to apply for a grant, there are many resources available to assist you with crafting the strongest application possible. Some key resources include:

- [Local Infrastructure Hub Bootcamps](#): The Local Infrastructure Hub offers technical assistance around navigating the grant application process and assembling a strong program-specific application through 3-month bootcamps that are designed to support cities with populations of fewer than 150,000 residents. Bootcamps feature individualized coaching sessions, office hours, and peer-to-peer learning, as well as tools including templates and example submissions. Reach out to LocalInfrastructureHub@nlc.org with questions about the upcoming bootcamps:
 - Charging and Fueling Infrastructure (CFI)
 - Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Direct Pay
 - Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation Program (PROTECT)
 - Climate Pollution Reduction Grants (CPRG)
 - Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF)
 - Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A)
- [Local Infrastructure Hub Bootcamp Materials](#): Key resources from six past bootcamps are shared publicly on the Local Infrastructure Hub resources page.
- [Local Infrastructure Hub winning applications](#): Provides examples of applications that communities submitted to win competitive grant funding. Best use: Learning what an excellent application looks like, facilitating peer-to-peer learning for similar projects or grant programs.
- Use this [technical assistance guide](#) as well as a searchable database of [technical assistance offerings](#) by grant program to find opportunities for technical assistance from the federal government. Best use: Find resources available to support applicants by specific grant program.

Tip #10: Take advantage of your Washington delegation

Mayor Matthew Tuerk of Allentown, PA highlighted the importance of connecting early and often with your senators and congressperson so that they know the challenges facing your community. Fostering these relationships will result in your representatives actively supporting your city's pursuit of applicable grants and offering valuable guidance throughout the application process.

Write and submit a competitive application

Tip #11: Establish roles and responsibilities for both project management and application writing

Drafting applications can be an intensive process with many moving pieces that requires work within and across local government agencies as well as with external partners. Use established project management tools like a [MOCHA](#) or [RACI chart](#) to define roles and responsibilities and ensure each part of the project has an owner and each stage receives approval from the appropriate parties; create project plans to ensure that all of the necessary steps for submitting applications are accounted for and have corresponding deadlines back mapped to the final submission date; and keep the project management role separate from the person who is the content lead.

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Tip #12: Incorporate the cost of compliance in your budget

Overhead costs, indirect spending, tracking grant spend down, reporting, participating in audits and evaluations should all be accounted for in the grant budget so that your community does not incur additional unplanned costs as part of obtaining a grant.

Tip #13: Go beyond responding to each question and work to craft a compelling narrative

In addition to ensuring the application is complete, applicants should use their narrative to help reviewers to understand their “why.” This storytelling element can make a big difference in demonstrating your project rationale and commitment to and readiness for implementation.

Tip #14: Pay close attention to the application’s scoring criteria

As you draft your narrative and application, address each part of each question directly, matching the NOFO request as closely as possible. Monitor how your answers track with the scoring criteria to make sure that you will earn maximum points.

As part of the process of revising your application draft it can be helpful to have someone (or a group of people) external to the writing process review the application and evaluate it according to the NOFOs scoring criteria. This will ensure you avoid a scenario where you lose points that you should have received because you did not respond to the question clearly or with sufficient detail. It may be helpful to ask another city that has already won a grant to review your application.

Highlighted Resources Shared During the Webinar and in Discussion:

- [Information on LIH grant application boot camps](#)
- [Examples of winning applications](#)
- [Rural Grant Application Toolkit](#)
- [Technical Assistance Guide](#)
- [DOT Discretionary Grant Dashboard](#)