

DEVELOPING DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROPOSAL WORKBOOK FOR LOCAL PUBLIC AGENCIES

Keys to a Competitive Grant Application

The following factors are important to keep in mind when considering and developing your grant application:

- Partnerships – the application is organized around a strong partnership approach whenever possible and to the greatest extent possible.
- Positioning and preparation – the grant application is positioned and prepared to develop the grant application to the greatest extent possible prior to the grant announcement and NOFO.
- Data - all possible data sources are used to support the case being made for selecting the grant – not transportation only, but non-transportation benefits, data associated with grant criteria, economic impacts, equity, etc.
- Narrative – the grant application must have a compelling, well-written narrative telling a strong story as to why this grant will make a great difference (the story must have a strong connection to the Benefit-Cost Analysis).
- Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) – the BCA is entirely supported by valid data sources and is complete and described clearly and persuasively in the narrative.
- Letters of Support – letters are obtained from as wide a cross-section of federal, state and local officials as possible, as well as a wide range of stakeholders.
- Visuals – the application makes excellent use of tables, graphs, maps, photographs and other images to enhance the grant application.



Grant Development Process Overview

The high-level flow of major steps of the application preparation and development process.

IN ADVANCE OF THE NOTICE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY (NOFO) BEING ISSUED

1. Identify projects and opportunities

- It is imperative that projects be identified and analyzed in advance of the NOFO. The competitive nature of grants means that many other organizations will be proposing on the same opportunities, so any work performed before the NOFO is an investment that will pay off significantly. Analyzing prospective opportunities will provide a head start for a number of critical and time sensitive activities in the application process, including:
 - Identifying potential partners
 - Identifying likely stakeholder and project champions to eventually provide letters of support for your specific project and educating individuals (in advance of the release of the NOFO) about upcoming projects and their benefits
 - Gathering data on potential projects

2. Understand the timeline and awareness of the program

- Develop an annual schedule for grant applications, as timelines for when NOFOs will be issued are generally known and how long each grant application will be active/open
- Identify the project early
- Ensure identified projects meet the following criteria:
 - Eligible
 - Scope
 - Schedule
 - Budget
 - BCA
 - Readiness
 - Merit criteria
 - Project readiness



3. Review active project lists

- Visit the DOT Navigator through the U.S. Department of Transportation (<https://www.transportation.gov/dot-navigator>) to familiarize yourself with the process and the Home | GRANTS.GOV (<https://www.grants.gov/>) for active and forecasted grant opportunities.

UPON NOTICE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY (NOFO) BEING ISSUED

1. Prepare a grants strategy

- Conduct a Go/No-Go review based on key criteria
 - A careful analysis of the criteria of the NOFO will provide adequate information to determine whether candidate projects will meet all requirements.
 - Thoroughly review the grant, noting:
 - Instructions (deadlines, format, performance data, etc.)
 - Overarching themes and emphasis areas
 - Specific requirements
 - Selection criteria
 - Develop the grant-proposal strategy
 - Develop an outline of the grant application
 - List information requested in each part of the NOFO
 - Identify key win themes
 - Identify critical data and sources
 - Use maps, photos, graphics and other images to support a compelling narrative
 - Develop a high-level estimate of project costs
 - Develop a grant application development summary
 - Identify project partners and their roles/responsibilities

Grant Application Development Summary

NOFO:	
Project Name:	
Owner:	
Key Stakeholders:	
Brief Description:	
Grant Application Workback Schedule	
Key Step	Target Date
Go/No-Go Decision (If Go, proceed with summary)	
Due Date and Time	
Final Draft Application QA/QC	
Final Draft Application Review	
Draft Application QA/QC (Draft with BCA and forms completed)	
Draft Application Review	
Annotated Outline Review	
Annotated Outline	
Data Collection Requests with Deadlines	
Letter of Support Requests with Deadlines	
Outline	
Team Roles	
Application Manager	
Section Authors	
BCA Lead	
Support Letter Coordinator	
Editor	
Review/QA/QC	


2. Secure support

- Securing critical support for the project and the grant application itself is an early action item in the application process. Letters of support from project stakeholders are essential for an application to be competitive. In addition to identifying target support organizations, consider the “political” implications when seeking support. A given opportunity may be highly visible in the communities affected, and the support requested should be consistent with support organizations’ own interests, objectives and positions.
- Groundwork for this support should have been laid out in the pre-NOFO stage, at which time the opportunities would have been introduced to stakeholders and their benefits emphasized.
- Local agencies may also consider providing letters of support for other grant applicants, such as the Nebraska Department of Transportation, as requested. When appropriate, supporting a project will entail:
 - The requirement of reviewing a draft of the grant application prior to providing the requested letter of support.
 - Willingness to consider draft letter of support text provided by the requesting grant applicant, signed by the highest-level executive or administrator.
 - Recognition that these entities may choose not to provide a letter of support.
- Identify key decision makers early.
 - Consider various agencies, local governments, MPOS and elected officials, local civic and neighborhood associations, businesses, chambers of commerce and other key stakeholders.
 - Identify one appropriate member of the grant team as the primary point of contact for the various stakeholders. This ensures requests are consistent and communication can continue throughout the grant process.
 - The identified individual will also collect all letters and apprise the grant team of progress on the letters of support. It is important to inform stakeholders of the deadline for the letters, which should be several days prior to grant submission, so that any outstanding letters can be contacted while there is time before submission.
- A template letter (for the various stakeholders to use as a model letter) should include the following information:
 - Name of the grant opportunity.
 - Any identifiers in the NOFO that are mandatory to add to the letter of support (i.e., unique number that is provided when the application is opened in the grant portal).
 - Correct official and address of grantor agency.

- How the grant project satisfies and achieves the criteria of the NOFO.
- How the grant project benefits the individual stakeholder and/or their constituents. Encourage and allow the stakeholder to create this language to personalize the template.
- The template letter should be transmitted with basic background information on why the request is being made, the importance of the request, whom to contact for any further questions, due date and other relevant details. In addition, a one-page cut sheet summarizing the project and its benefits can provide useful content for stakeholders to use in customizing their letters.
 - Once the request is made, those providing letters of support should be asked to submit drafts of their letters well enough in advance to allow revisions, as necessary.

3. Gather and analyze data

- Data collection and analysis is a key element of the grant application process as the information feeds directly into multiple areas of the application. The data reinforces the application and is the foundation of the BCA. Optimizing the various data is essential to “telling a compelling story,” a critical component of a successful application.
- Engaging in the data identification, collection and analysis process early is paramount in the completion of the application.
- Data needs vary and are discussed within each NOFO. Data should be analyzed and displayed as maps, charts, and/or graphics to inform and reinforce the grant application.
- Thoroughly review NOFO, noting:
 - Data needs:
 - Data types
 - After-award evaluation data needs
 - Develop data collection methods/sources:
 - Internal data collection plan:
 - Current data
 - Historical data
 - External data collection plan (provide lead time for external agencies):
 - Current data
 - Historical data
 - Data analysis – the assessment of data and information requirements is an ideal activity to coordinate with the MPO/RPO, who may have a rich



repository of detailed information that will strengthen the approach. The MPO should be considered throughout the datagathering process outlined below.

- Analytics needed to support the project
- Modeling
- GIS
- External big data analytics
 - Use of third-party vendors to gather and analyze big data
 - Mobile device data, Direct-from-Vehicle data
 - Data visualization needs
 - Mapping (mapping needs should be identified as early as possible to allow time for development/obtaining the mapped information)
 - Graphic design
- Review BCA needs, noting:
 - Proper scope of the analysis
 - Data type need

4. Determining mapping requirements

- Grant applications can be enhanced substantially using maps. Maps of the project location are invaluable and most effective when they present the project in both a local and broader regional context.
- Determine the mapping requirements as well as mapping enhancement at the start of the grant development process.
 - Some maps may be required, such as those that document underserved population, etc.
 - Maps should be drafted as early as reasonably possible to ensure data completeness and accuracy.
 - Maps should be part of the overall strategic messaging
- Consider the GIS resources of the variety of organizations involved to determine what data layers might help in telling the story of the proposed project.

5. Draft grant proposal

The sections below address a typical NOFO. To the extent permitted by the grant applications' instructions in the NOFO, the grant proposal should make use of eye-catching graphics and formatting to persuasively make the case for the grant award to this project.

- Cover Page/Title Page
 - Follow the required format for the cover page.
 - Use specified forms/templates to summarize administrative and fiscal data.
- Project Description/Abstract/Summary
 - The Project Description highlights the most important content from each section.
 - Tips:
 - This section should be no more than a half of a page and a few paragraphs in length.
 - Every critical point of the proposal should be found in abbreviated form.
 - This area should provide a brief overview of the project, the request, the match/community/local investment and the benefits.
 - This is the opportunity to “sell” the project’s value and benefits as though it might appear as the news release upon selection (covering the major benefits should also be reinforced as elaborated in the BCA).
- Project Location
 - Provide locational context.
 - Make strategic use of mapping as possible for visualization and reference.
- Project Sponsor(s)/Organizational Background/Qualifications/Introduction
 - Describe the organization in terms of location, demographics, mission, relationship to the service and past successes.
 - Document the capability to successfully accomplish the goal and objectives of the grant.
 - Establish credibility with relevant organizational information.
- Challenge and Solution/Problem Statement/Statement of Need/Needs Assessment
 - Document the problem, opportunity, or need with hard data, linking it to the funding source’s goals and priorities.
 - Provide options to address the problem and their expected outcomes.
 - Conclude the statement of need by summarizing how the proposed project will address the documented needs.
- Project Requirements/Program Goals and Objectives (Outcomes)

- Identify anticipated outcomes and benefits in measurable terms. How is the situation expected to change as a result of the grant?
- Summarize the goal, or goals, into one sentence that describes the foundational purpose for addressing the primary need within the target population or audience.
- Goal tips:
 - Make the goals SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound).
 - Describe the primary need from the target population, user, or audience's perspective.
 - Identify the geographic area this grant will serve (if applicable).
- Project Outcome Criteria/Methods/Implementation Plan/Work Plan
 - Explain how the grant will be accomplished.
 - Include a timeline for critical activities and responsible parties.
- Evaluation Plan
 - Present a plan for determining the success of the project at interim points and completion.
 - Provide a framework to measure/monitor grant adherence and goal achievement.
- Financial Plan Update/Future Funding/Sustainability
 - Describe how expenses not supported by the grant will be covered and how the project effort will continue after the grant ends.
 - Provide evidence of financial sustainability, including documentation of funds budgeted/committed to cover the non-federal share of project expenses.
- Grant Funds, Sources and Uses of all Project Funding/Budget
 - Description:
 - Complete the budget worksheet/table and budget narrative.
 - Define project costs and provide an explanation of each expense. Attempt to address all cost related items as early as possible and recognize that there may be key considerations such as the level of non-federal share that may be strategically important to the competitive position of the grant.
 - Identify the costs to be met by the funding source and the methods used to determine costs.
 - Tips:

- Use a worksheet or table to list budget item
- Check and recheck the NOFO instructions, with careful attention to allowable allocations for salary, equipment, travel, marketing, and other items.

BCA CHECKLIST

- Document all assumptions and methodology used to produce the BCA.
- Use present-value methodology in analysis.
- Link benefits with expected outcomes.
- Review and reference the current BCA Guidance for Discretionary Grant Programs (<https://www.transportation.gov/mission/office-secretary/office-policy/transportation-policy/benefit-cost-analysis-guidance>).
- Ensure that those assigned to draft the BCA are fully qualified with the requisite experience of preparing BCAs.
- Establish a list of all known direct and indirect benefits and the associated data (quantitative and qualitative) that will be used for each.
- Link to the “win narrative” for the overall proposal, typically presented in the project overview, and ensure BCA alignment.
- Review the list of benefits with the work group as early as possible to identify the associated data sources (quantitative and qualitative) and the contacts for each.
- Prepare a schedule for BCA development that fits with the overall grant proposal schedule and that is completed in successive drafts as early as possible, as the completed BCA can positively shape the narrative.
- Verify data accuracy and reliability. Verify the calculations in the spreadsheet and its completeness and logic.
- Present the BCA to the work group for review and comment.

APPENDICES MAY INCLUDE ITEMS SUCH AS:

- Letters of support
- All data/information gathered throughout the process that supports the narrative and approach
- Maps and data sets
- Links to data platforms (e.g., SharePoint) to facilitate access to and the exchange of large files

6. Review

- The schedule should be developed and managed to ensure ample time for quality review and the identification of any flaws.
- The review should be conducted by those knowledgeable individuals who are not so close to the drafting that they would miss problems. The review must ensure that all NOFO requirements have been satisfied. Draft elements of the proposal should be reviewed against the initial win themes identified to ensure that each has been sufficiently demonstrated in the proposal.
- NOFO direction may result in some repetition of text between the project application and the supporting narrative. It is important to minimize text duplication to only that which is necessary to reinforce key win themes or major points. Redundancy could detract from an otherwise strong proposal by undermining the clarity of the message.

7. Submit grant proposal

- Submission of the proposal must be done by confirming that all elements are completed and ready for uploading. This includes but is not limited to:
 - Project Application
 - Supporting Narrative
 - Letters of Support
 - Forms

8. Performance post-award activities

- After grant awards are announced, recontact project champions/stakeholders to thank them for their support and inform them of the grant decision, whether the project is selected or not.
- If not selected, keep stakeholders/champions apprised of the intent, if appropriate, to pursue the project at a later date, but maintain confidentiality on details.


Key Items to Consider When Applying For a Federal Discretionary Grant

- **Start early.**
 - Review and use the U.S. DOT's FY2023 Discretionary Grant Preparation Checklist for Prospective Applicants (<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/dot-navigator/fy-2023-discretionary-grant-preparation-checklist-pdf>) to determine when to apply and for resources to prepare a successful application.
 - If you are applying for a BIL discretionary grant that is not through U.S. DOT, review all requirements for that agency's unique grant process. This will ensure that your specific project can meet all requirements and be able to use the federal grant funding (if awarded and made available).

- **Plan ahead.** A good rule of thumb is to apply for a grant when a project is 1-2 years prior to project construction. If you are planning to apply for a grant to be used on a transportation infrastructure project, coordinate with a WisDOT region representative.
- **Use calendar** to see the discretionary grant schedule, including last year's and current releases, as a planning resource for when to apply.
- **Anticipate.** Grant agreement can take 6-12 months to be executed after grant award announcements have been made.
 - Grant award funds aren't available to spend until the grant agreement has been executed.
 - Grant funding can't be used to cover costs prior to the date of agreement execution.
 - Federal funds have additional rules and requirements (watch for specifics on reporting, tracking and monitoring financial systems and grant activities) that differ from local and state requirements. See [Federal 2 CFR 200 Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements](#) that govern all U.S. DOT awards.
- **Be prepared for additional requirements.** U.S. DOT grants are generally made on a **reimbursement basis**. Typically, the grantee incurs the costs and seeks reimbursement from U.S. DOT.
 - U.S. DOT funds in general can't be used as the non-Federal match for other programs.
 - Ensure your project is included in the STIP/TIP.

Steps in the Grant Application Process

1. **Review** the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) above. Watch for:
 - Eligible projects and recipients
 - Grant award, including minimum and maximum amounts
 - Special set-asides or allocations (e.g., for planning studies, projects in rural areas, etc.)
 - Required local match
 - Scoring criteria and emphasis areas
 - The statutory deadline for obligating funds
 - Grant application deadline
 - When grant awards will be announced
2. **Select a project or projects** based on eligibility criteria and requirements as outlined in the NOFO.

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3. **Begin an application** based on the program requirements. Solicit technical assistance from U.S. DOT in developing an application as needed.
 4. **Create an account** then upload application materials at Grants.gov (<http://www.grants.gov/>). Do this early to become familiar with the site and organize your application materials.
 5. **Submit** all materials as required by the grant and note the deadlines. Tips:
 - Respond to each scoring criterion or note when it is not applicable to your project
 - Support statements with data or documentation whenever possible
 - Conduct a Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) by following U.S. DOT guidance
 - Note local matches to show a strong local commitment to the project
 6. **Wait and debrief.** U.S. DOT reviews all applications and provides decision notification of projects selected for funding. Tips for projects not selected:
 - Carefully review any feedback provided
 - Sign up for a debrief meeting with U.S. DOT
 - Consider re-submitting the project during the next cycle but address any deficiencies in the previous application.

