

Environmental Commissions' Grant Primer

By Kerry Miller, ANJEC Assistant Director

One of ANJEC's 2005 Environmental Congress workshops brought together information on grants available for environmental commission projects. Speakers included Mary Arnold, executive director of the Teaneck (Bergen) Creek Conservancy, Joseph Rogers, program manager of NJDEP's Environmental Services Program and ANJEC assistant director Kerry Miller who manages ANJEC's Smart Growth Planning Assistance grants.

New Jersey's environmental commissions give untold amounts of time to their communities, planning and executing projects that help to conserve resources, protect health and preserve quality of life. Although their time doesn't cost their towns a cent, materials and professional services do, and active commissions eventually find that a finite municipal budget limits what projects they can undertake. This often spurs a search for grants.

Most grants available to local governments come through federal or state programs or non-profit organizations, as opposed to grants from foundations, which are generally reserved for nonprofit organizations. For many years, environmental commissions in New Jersey have utilized modest matching grants (up to \$2,500) from the NJDEP Environmental Services Program. These grants help cover the costs of projects such as developing an Environmental or Natural Resource Inventory (ERI or NRI), printing environmental education materials, or buying supplies for monitoring, cleanup or trail programs. A number of ambitious commissions have procured USEPA grants for stormwater projects or streambank restoration, or helped their towns acquire a Green Acres grant to preserve land. Since 2002, commissions have also obtained matching grants through ANJEC's Smart Growth Planning Assistance

Grant Program, funded by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation (www.grdodge.org). Whatever the source, an environmental commission will encounter unique challenges in obtaining and utilizing grant funds.

Advantages of Environmental Commission Involvement

Typically, a designated staff professional does not support an environmental commission in the way that the planning board has a professional planner and engineer, or the board of health has a health officer. As a result environmental commissions are more likely than other boards to develop their own grant applications. This is hard work, but can be a blessing in disguise. In developing a grant application, the commission hopefully gains a clear understanding of its role in the proposal as well as all aspects of the project. These understandings can help to avoid problems down the line.

A professional such as the town planner or manager/administrator can be a valuable resource in developing a

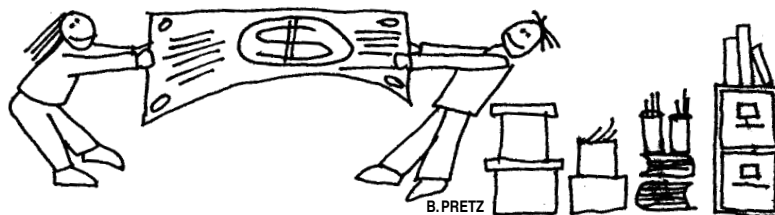
grant application, but a commission should not abdicate the grant-writing task, even if the professional is willing to do it. Better for the commission to develop a draft proposal, and then have the professional help edit and refine it.

The worst-case grant scenarios result from applicants who, intentionally or not, commit to tasks, a budget, or a timeline that they don't understand or cannot follow through on. This is more likely to happen if the commission does not have complete "ownership" of the application.

Putting Together Key Information

To avoid problems, commissions considering a grant application must *do their homework thoroughly*, and be completely honest in assessing what resources members can and will contribute to a project. Applicants should read and re-read the application guidelines, and then talk to as many relevant sources as possible, including town professionals, consultants, and other commissions or groups that have done similar projects. This will help to uncover potential pitfalls and eliminate uncertainty.

Commissions frequently overlook the best source of information – the staff of the funding organization. In most cases, the person or team who administers a grant program is accessible by phone. A brief personal conversation with the organization



is time well spent, to let them know that an application is in process, and to get a sense of whether the application is off-track in any way.

A typical tactical error that applicants make is to take a “get the money first, figure it out later” approach, or to ask for more funds than they need, under the mistaken assumption that the funder will automatically cut any budget. Grantor organizations work within annual budgets, just like any business. They are looking for accurate project budgets that will be spent as promised. Odd as it may seem, unused or returned funds can be a real problem for grantors, so they will select applications that have well documented, itemized budgets.

Additional Environmental Commission Grant Opportunities

Environmental Services Program, NJDEP. For more than 10 years, NJDEP has provided matching grants of up to \$2,500 to local environmental commissions and soil conservation districts for projects including environmental resource inventories, educational materials, trails design, stream and water quality testing and GIS mapping. Unfortunately, NJDEP has made no funds available for the current fiscal year. For more information, go to (www.state.nj.us/dep/grantandloanprograms) or contact program manager Joseph Rogers at 609-984-0828.


National Recreational Trails Program, NJDEP For more than 10 years, the federal Department of Transportation has funded 80 percent grants of up to \$25,000 through state agencies for governmental and non-profit agency landowners for developing and maintaining trails and trail facilities. Applications are usually due in mid-December. For more information to (www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/natural/njtrails.html#grants) or contact Larry Miller at the Office of Natural Lands Management at 609-984-1014.

2006 Environmental Commission Smart Growth Grants

Thanks to funding from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, ANJEC is offering Smart Growth Planning Assistance Grants to municipalities with environmental commissions for a fifth year in 2006. This program offers matching grants of up to \$20,000 to fund land use planning projects that protect natural resources, open space and quality of life in New Jersey communities. Over the past four years, the program has contributed more than \$725,000 toward 81 local planning projects involving 70 municipalities and their environmental commissions.

Eligible projects include Environmental and Natural Resource Inventories (ERIs and NRIs), open

space plans, master plan conservation elements, brownfields plans that include new open space, buildout analyses, septic and groundwater studies, critical areas protection ordinances, zoning, cluster and conservation design ordinances, and tasks that lead to *State Plan* Endorsement.

ANJEC mailed application packets to environmental commission chairs, mayors, administrators and planning boards in mid-January 2006. The grant application and information are also on our website at (www.anjec.org). Call ANJEC (973-539-7547) for a paper version. Applications are due by March 31, 2006. 

Some matching grant programs allow a portion of the grantee’s contribution to be in “in-kind” services – the hours commissioners and other municipal volunteers and staff spend completing tasks related to the project. If so, the grantor will provide a rate at which those hours can be valued for purposes of the grant. If a commission does commit to in-kind services, it must project the contribution of time as accurately as possible, because the grantor will likely require an accounting of in-kind hours before reimbursing.

Most grant application guidelines are extremely specific as to what information should be included and in what order, length and format. There is a good reason for this! The grantor organization will likely receive dozens, if not hundreds, of applications. If they are standardized (i.e., all the same format, as per the application guidelines), it makes the daunting task of comparing applications much easier. If an applicant doesn’t care enough to comply with the terms of the application, why would the grantor expect that it would follow through on the terms of a grant? Failing to read and follow all instructions is a foolish gamble that may cause an application to be eliminated out of hand.

Results of Receiving a Grant

Once a commission has a grant, members may be inclined to think that the hard part is over. Not true! Following through by keeping to the schedule, keeping good records and submitting periodic reports to the grantor is a much greater challenge. Above all, grantees should maintain contact with the funding organization, and ask for (and follow!) its advice if things look like they may be getting off track.

In addition to financing a project, procuring a grant can raise the status of a commission as a “player” on the municipal team, bringing in additional resources for the town. But it also carries with it a significant responsibility to fulfill the expectations of the grantor agency or organization. Environmental commissions that understand that grants are a two-way street will have a “leg up” on the competition, and will have the best chance for success in obtaining and using grants to do good work in their communities. 