

Secrets to Writing Great Grants

Originally appeared in *ReNews Vol. 20 Issue #2*

Five insiders give their tips to earning federal and state money for brownfields redevelopments

For communities with the drive to undertake a brownfields redevelopment project, there are many good sources of federal and state funding out there. However, to earn funds like the Wisconsin [Department of Natural Resources' Brownfield Site Assessment Grants](#), the [EPA's Brownfield Grants](#), or the [Wisconsin Department of Commerce's Blight Elimination and Brownfields Remediation Grants](#), a local government needs a strategy to stand out in the crowd.

Whether your community is interested in federal or state funding, now is the time to prepare for the late-autumn deadline for most grants. ReNews spoke with five experts who have experience awarding and applying for grants, to provide tips for communities and environmental consultants looking to fund a new project in 2011.

The Big Earners: Tory Kress & Karen Dettmer

Brownfield Project Managers
Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee

The city of Milwaukee has invested \$20 million in brownfields, primarily funded by federal and state grants, since 1998 for projects both big and small. Tory Kress and Karen Dettmer have been leading the grant application process for the City's Brownfields team for over four years.

On picking the best sites:

"We've learned to be pretty good at picking our sites. [If we're applying for a DNR Brownfield Site Assessment Grant (SAG),] we look at how the SAG scores out and what the eligibility requirements are. If you don't understand the requirements of the grant up-front, there are so many snags you can hit in terms of eligibility – for example, responsible party issues. It seems pretty obvious, but we spend a lot of time finding sites that are eligible and will score well."

"At the city, we have a few different lists we use for selecting sites that need brownfield grants. Primarily, we use our tax delinquent brownfields list and a list of properties that the city owns or has acquired in the past year. We also look at lists of condemned properties, which may have a brownfield component."

On filling out grant applications:

"We fill out our own applications rather than get help from consultants. We feel we can do a better job because we're closer to the projects, and have all the information right at our fingertips. We've been doing it a number of years and have old applications we can use as good starting points. Since Milwaukee has brownfields staff, we are able to spend time and gather the information."



Communities interested in brownfield grants for 2011 will want to start developing their strategies now.

On the intangibles of earning a successful award:

"For the EPA grants especially, the story becomes more important than the particular contamination or history of the property: 'What's the bigger picture? What are we trying to accomplish?' A couple of our most recent grants were focused on sustainability and greening. We have one project where we're planning an urban garden and one site where we'll be implementing phytoremediation. Painting the picture of what the end result is has become really important to us in our grant applications."

"I think another intangible is the importance of talking to the people from whom you're applying for the grants. They can give you a lot of perspective about properties you have and how they think the application may be presented."

"Having a plan, or some previous work, that shows you have a grander vision for a property [is key]. If you can show how the site is part of an overall plan, like a comprehensive plan, it gets you a long way – especially on a federal level."

The Sub-Granter: Darsi Foss

Brownfields and Outreach Section Chief
DNR RR Program

Under Darsi Foss' watch, the DNR has been awarded millions of EPA dollars targeted for brownfields, which her staff then award to many Wisconsin communities, in addition to the state brownfields funds they administer..

On what DNR looks for in a Site Assessment Grant Application:

"I think one of the first things they have to do is do a good job of telling "the story." Approach it as if they were someone who didn't know a lot about the property, and fill in all the blanks to come up with a compelling story. It's the holes or blanks where a community can knock points off of applications. For example, when we ask them on a state grant 'Do you know who caused the contamination?' the applicant should do as complete a job as possible. I think sometimes they skip over some key details and leave questions we can't answer, so they score less. For

example, what about the manufacturing company that owned the property for 30 years? Are they still in business, and financially viable? Why did the applicant mention the company, and then not discuss in the application their possible contribution to the contamination at the property? We can't make an applicant eligible for an award. They have to tell the story completely themselves."

On tips for applying for an EPA grant:

"I think EPA wants to see you take each section of their application guidance and answer their questions, even if sometimes it's duplicative or repetitive of another section that you already answered. Take each section and fully answer the question, because those sections may be parsed out to different people to score."

"I also think EPA is looking for unique ways [for grant-interested communities to] engage the public. Examining how the public is impacted by this brownfield is part of the actual process of actually selecting projects or what gets done on that brownfield property. That is very important. [It is also crucial to] have partnerships with community groups or non-profits in that impacted community, or near that site, as part of your team. I think projects that do that will probably score higher today than it would have five years ago."

On seeking out multiple resources for grant dollars:

"I think the biggest thing people can do is not just look to one source of funds. You're never going to find 100% of the money from one single program; apply for multiple sources of funding, including grants, loans, tax incentives, etc. I think some communities that are successful are committed to the project whether they have the full funding or not, and are willing to take their time and look for pieces of money here and pieces of money there. They're willing to work through that project and be patient, and that's where we see successful programs."

The Business-Backer: Al Rabin

Finance Specialist

Wisconsin Department of Commerce

Al Rabin assists in managing Commerce's Blight Elimination and Brownfields Redevelopment (BEBR) grant program, which grants between \$5-\$7 million dollars annually to Wisconsin redevelopment projects. (Note: BEBR grants have a year-round open application period.)

On the keys for a successful application:

"One of the most important things that delays the approval of an application that is [the lack of ability] to demonstrate a financial commitment. Because tax payer dollars are so scarce, we need to know that, if we're going to be investing in a project, it's going to be completed. Sometimes it takes a mixture of resources between public financing, [tax incremental financing] TIF financing, and private financing through a financial institution. We can't really move a project forward unless we have documentation that lenders are participating in the project, and that the work proposed in the application is going to be accomplished."

"To successfully be approved at Commerce, one of the things we look for is a committed end user for a project. If there is not an end user in place for a project, so that we know what the final development and investment is going to be, chances are an application will not be competitive. The larger the ratio between dollars going in – for each dollar invested by the state – has a pretty big impact on our willingness to participate.

"Because Commerce is an economic development agency, we do consider economic development factors. Under the statutes, economic development is 50% of the scoring process. We look at things like the economic impact of a project on the community, which includes things like how much the property value is going to increase once the project is completed, and what kind of job creation is going to take place. We look at the number of jobs and we really focus on full-time employment, wages and whether health insurance is going to be offered in the package for the new employees. We focus in on the over-all investment that's going to be made on a project."

On filling out an application:

"The application is generally written for a lay person to fill out. They may need some help from an environmental consultant to fill out parts on the contamination issues. It's really important for them to pre-screen their application with Commerce staff. If an application comes out of the blue without talking to representatives of the department, it's not going to be the most efficient way to get an application completed. Our staff can give some advice to make sure everything that's needed is submitted, because we really do look for every thing that's asked for in the application. The greater the effort to give us complete information, the greater the chance we can give you a quick and speedy decision."

The Federal Officer: Mike Gifford

Brownfields Project Manager

U.S. EPA

Mike Gifford is a key player in managing U.S. EPA Brownfield Grants awarded to Wisconsin communities. Gifford is actively involved in the selection of projects which are submitted for funding, and ensuring those projects meet EPA guidelines, once the awards are made. Brownfields grants from the EPA are distributed into four categories: Assessment, Cleanup, Revolving Loan Fund, and Job Training.

On tips for submitting an effective application to EPA:

"Some of the stuff is so basic: answer the questions and follow the instructions. Put some thought into your responses. Often times we see some responses that simply restate or reword the [request for information] that's in the guidelines, and that's really not going to garner much from the reviewer. It's so critical to answer all of the questions. If a part of [the] criteria doesn't apply to an applicant, the applicant should say it doesn't apply, and maybe briefly state why. Otherwise, it's probably going to cost them the application some points during the national panel review.

“An applicant shouldn’t put the reviewer in the position where they have to search the proposal to find a response to a particular criterion. Some reviewers will do that, some won’t.”

On what applicants can take away from the review process, before applying:

“The [EPA regional offices] first look at applications to make sure that they pass threshold criteria: is the entity that’s applying eligible? We also look at the programmatic capability – now amounting to about 20% of the score – which is their ability to manage the grant. How have they managed past brownfields grants? Have they managed other federal funds or state grants? Then it goes on to the national panel, and we [in the region] have zero input into how the national panel evaluates and scores the proposal. You have to assume, when you put your proposal together, that the reviewer knows nothing at all about [your program or community]. There are several opportunities to briefly summarize how the program operates, and that’s probably worth including.”

On what to do before submitting an application:

“Talk to us. We can give [a community] general guidelines, general tips, but because of the competition policy, we can’t get into the nitty-gritty of an [EPA grant] proposal like a state can. The other thing to do is go on our website and see which communities have received funds – maybe received funds repeatedly – and take a look at their proposals. Often times, we get calls from communities, and we can make proposals available for them to take a look at, and maybe give them some insight on what it takes to write a good proposal.”

For information on applying for brownfields redevelopment grants, check out our [Financial Resource Guide for Cleanup and Redevelopment](#). Contact information is available for each program.