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Grants for Big Projects in Small Libraries

by Aletha Bonebrake
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There you are, blueprints in hand, brimming with gratitude that the voters have passed a million dollar bond measure to enlarge and remodel your 30-year-old library building. You have fostered expectations in the process of selling the bond measure for more people space, new furniture, enough computers to meet the needs of every age group and a certain aesthetic beauty beyond the rectangular box you started with. These expectations become your own.

The size of the bond, of course, was based on your architect's estimate of the project's cost plus all the costs of bond issuance. There is plenty to go around. Then the project goes out to bid and a \$900,000 project comes in at one and a quarter million dollars, low bid, no furnishings. Once you get over the shock and, to tell the truth, the anger, you begin to look for funding sources. Diminishing the project is no longer an option since the public bought the dream. You certainly can't give them their money back.

It Happened to Us

We immediately turned to seeking grants. And, for the most part, this solution did the job. In the end, over a 6 month period we were granted a total of \$130,000 from four separate foundations. There was the probability of \$70,000 more, but unique circumstances prevented an award. It is interesting to know about the failures, though I'm not sure they can be avoided. In the instance of our second largest request of \$56,000 for computer upgrades and expansion, the grant would have been awarded, we were told, had we been the library up the road. Our community had just received \$1 million from the same Foundation not three months earlier, and the Foundation thought that was enough for now. In the other instance of failure, we had submitted two grants to the same local Foundation in the same grant cycle, albeit for wholly different purposes; their rules said we were allowed only one. They asked me to choose, and we chose books over a security system.

What we learned from the first failure was, whenever possible, to partner with other community groups that are pursuing the same funding sources. We tried to enter the Partnership when the shortfall became known, but they were too far into their process and we had a

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political agenda to pass the bond that they wished to avoid. They did write a letter of support about how our project enhanced their goals and why we weren't a member, which answered the first question a funder might ask about why this renegade was not part of the Partnership. Beware, however, of strings that might be attached to partnerships. I have since discovered that the Partnership set the agenda for prioritizing needs and certain of the partners' needs have not yet been addressed in grant applications in the three years of its existence. I saw some tempers running high and was glad our hands weren't tied.

The second failure holds a similar lesson. Bind two needs into one grant, as logically as is possible, to help the trustees give you all the money they want to without breaching their own rules. When I sat before our local trustees they were truly torn about not giving us money for both needs. I am sure, as I look back, that had I said we need book support for this third recovery year from Measure 47/50 and a security system to protect these and all our materials, they would have granted it. But then, that is our local foundation and they have supported us in several projects over the years.

When I bundled requests for building components together with furnishings needs in other grant applications, in two out of three we were given less than requested and permitted to choose which among our needs to fund. We chose the building components each time, since we could add the unfunded furnishings to another grant request and try again, or do without. Not so with the building.

Interestingly, the Partnership connection failure and the ability to bundle requests to our local foundation resulted in our second largest grant for the building. One of the Partnership members was the Leo Adler Memorial Pathway committee, which is developing a bicycle path from the Sports Complex (grant-funded) to the park and beyond, which happens to pass by the library. On our behalf, because we were excluded, this committee added \$50,000 to their application to our local fund to pay for the fancy walkway and exterior lighting outside our new meeting room that faces their proposed pathway across the river.

We had two categories of funding needs to address: a shortfall on the building, and another on the furnishings. We went aggressively after the building needs first,

because timeliness is paramount. Grant funds may not be used to reimburse money already spent or pay for work already completed. We parceled the service areas of the building looking for grant-eligible components and came up with several: the divider curtain for the meeting room (\$6,500) to get more public use of the space; drive up window for winter and handicapped service (\$10,000); built-in seating for children's storytime (\$3,500); four tutoring rooms to support literacy programs (\$18,200); an electronic security system (\$20,700); and retrofit and installation of Spacesaver shelving (which was a gift of used equipment valued at \$54,000, used as matching funds) for periodical and branch room storage (\$12,700). We worked with the builder to avoid completion of these components until the grant money came in; in some cases it was touch and go.

The Library Board authorized \$3,500 for a grantwriter to help with the process. I highly recommend doing this for smaller institutions without in-house expertise or the time to do it right. A grantwriter knows the ropes for finding a good funding match to your needs and will write your application as the funders wish to see it, but they will rely heavily on you for the decisions, the background information, corporate information, statistical data, budget documents, anecdotal evidence and the passion of the cause.

Mid-project, I went to a two-day workshop with my grant writer in the U.S. Bank room at Multnomah County Central Library. The workshop, sponsored by TACS (*Technical Assistance for Community Services*) was entitled *Foundation and Corporate Grant Strategies* and was given by Rick Levine. This was an indispensable exposure to philanthropic philosophy, and a practical blueprint for establishing a fundable grant. Believe it or not, foundations want to give you money. It is the reason for their being. Do not go hat in hand, but project in hand, passion in hand, and they will welcome you. This belief makes your job much easier. They want to help you protect, expand and fully utilize what you have and to expand your successes for the greater good.

During the course of raising funds for our Library remodel project, I discovered two powerful levers for success. First was that matching funds (in our case, \$1 million from the voters) show the public buy-in that funders want to see. Second was to involve many funding partners in achieving the total project; that is to say, spread the grant requests around. I was asked many times by program officers who else had been approached for project funding, and whether they had yet committed funding, and if so, how much. They especially wanted to see major buy-in from our local

foundation. When we were turned down by the one major Oregon foundation for reasons not bearing on the merit of our request, that foundation's staff helped us out by sharing the reason with another foundation's program officer so as not to begin a domino-effect of failure. This second foundation gave us our largest grant of \$60,000 to buy all the new furnishings needed for the public areas.

This brings to mind the last, and possibly the most important, piece of advice I learned and pass on for success, and one that was reinforced time and again at the TACS workshop. That is, develop a relationship with your potential funding sources before you submit a grant request. Find out if what you have in mind meets their goals, and how to develop a narrative that will address these goals. Some funders like infrastructure development, some like service programs. Most encourage you to call and discuss your project with them first. It makes the job easier for both of you, and greatly improves your chances of success.

What would I do differently? Follow my own advice: plan the grant requests at the same time as the building project is being designed, knowing what is reasonable and what matching funds are in hand so as not to be caught short by an inadequate contingency when the project is too far along; definitely make a preliminary approach to the major regional funders to tailor the request to their interests and establish the personal relationship that will guide the request through the process. We learned this too late in the process. Our very first request for funding was sent out cold and we received one-third of the request. We never knew what part appealed to them and why we didn't make a successful case for the rest. Now I know to call and ask what we could have done differently, and to establish that relationship. Funders will tell you they are likely to fund requests from entities with whom they have worked in the past, so it is never inappropriate to seek guidance, even if you have not been successful with them.

Training, planning for timeliness, hiring a supportive grantwriter, partnering with local civic projects and agencies you serve, having matching funds, in-kind gifts and a good cause will lead you to success. **Q**

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