Requests for Proposals:

When to Dive In and When to Pass on Grants

Created by the Environmental Finance Center at the University of Maryland College Park

[click the arrow!]

Instructions for Use

This **interactive** tool is meant to help organizations and local governments decide if a Request for Proposals **(RFP)** is a good fit for them. In order to progress, you need to click on a button that will lead you to the next slide in the progression.

If a slide asks a question, click on your answer to progress. If a slide has no question, there will be an arrow in the bottom right corner that will lead you to the next slide.

Click on the first arrow to begin!

We’ve all been there.

The RFP drops and immediately the wheels start turning.

Do we have a project that fits? Can we do the work for the amount of money available? Do we have the time to write a proposal?

The questions never end, and all too often, we fall down the rabbit hole of chasing money. When working with small communities, and sometimes even larger ones, the most common thing we hear is that **communities don’t apply for as many grants as they should**.

There are three common reasons why…

1. We don’t have enough time to read the RFP, yet alone write the proposal;

2. We read the RFP and started to write, but realized we were in over our heads and didn’t understand all the requirements; and

3. We don’t know who to partner with.

This is often followed by the question,

“How do we know if the grant is a good fit for us?”

Step One: Evaluate the Basic Requirements

Avoid the tendency to dive into an application before evaluating the opportunity to see if it is a good fit. More often than not, jumping in before evaluating results in wasted time and frustration.

So how do you know if an opportunity is a good fit?

Before diving into the details of multiple pages of questions and requirements, start by looking at two key items…

1. Are we an eligible applicant?

Yes

No

1b. Can we work with a partner (e.g., a local non-profit) who is?

Yes

No

Great! It looks like you're eligible.

Aside from determining if you are an eligible applicant, the **proposal deadline** may be the most important thing to take into account.

You need to consider all of the following:

- Is there time to gather all the required documentation?
- Can we secure any required approvals, such as land owner approvals, permission from council, etc.?
- Is there time to line up partners, obtain letters of support, etc.?

And after all of that, will there enough time to develop a compelling, well-written proposal?

2. Can we realistically submit a proposal by the due date?

Yes

No

After determining that the timeline is achievable...

There are still two other basic questions to consider before diving deeper into the RFP. These two questions are:

What is the return on investment?

Do we have the capacity?

3. Is the amount of time and effort that goes into writing a proposal worth it for the amount of funding available?

Yes

No

4. Do we have the capacity?

This means thinking about not only the capacity and skills required to write the proposal, but also the capacity to manage the grant and complete the project if funded.

Yes

No

Great! It looks like you fit the basic requirements for the RFP.

This leads us to...

Step Two: Evaluate if Your Project is a Good Fit

If you’re eligible and feel you have ample time, capacity, and return on investment…

The next step is a thorough read of the RFP to determine if you have a project that meets the criteria.

If you try to shoehorn a project into a RFP where it doesn't fit, chances are it will show. Most RFPs have several project categories, each with specific requirements. It is important to **carefully review these requirements**, ensuring that your project checks all of the required boxes. These may include:

- Mapping requirements
- Nutrient reduction calculations
- Landowner agreements
- Permitting
- A pre-application site visit with the funder (may be required for implementation projects)

Paying close attention to these details is time well spent.

After carefully reading the RFP's requirements…

5. Can we meet all the criteria?

Make sure to read ALL of the RFP's requirements to ensure you have the capacity, know-how, partners, and time to meet them.

Yes

No

What about a partner(s)?

Regardless of whether you answered yes or no to the previous question, consider adding **partners**.

If collaboration is needed to meet a requirement or strengthen the project, **reach out early** in the proposal development process. You need to ensure that partners can work within the existing timeline to provide any information and letters of support.

Even if you don't strictly *need* a partner, it can still be worth considering.

6. Can we do the work in-house?

Or do we need a partner with a specific skillset (i.e. designer, engineer, etc.)?

In-house

Partner

6b. Can we bring on a partner to fill these gaps?

Yes

No

7. Do we need a partner that is an eligible applicant?

For example, if the RFP requires an applicant to be a 501(c)(3), can we work with a nonprofit partner to submit an application?

We're eligible

Partner

7b. Can we bring on a partner to meet this need?

Yes

No

8. Is a contractor required, and if so, do we need to get bids?

Yes

No

No worries! Just keep this in mind.

Getting bids from contractors will likely add **several weeks** to your project's timeline. Keep this in mind if you need to solicit bids – and if you're worried about not having enough time, reevaluate your organization's fit for this particular RFP.

Click the arrow to go to the next question.

9. Do we have an existing partner, or do we need to identify someone new?

Existing

New

9b. Do we have the time, capacity, etc. to identify and obtain a new partner?

Yes

No

Great! It seems like your project is a good fit.

You either have the capacity to do everything in-house, or you have the capacity to bring on partners to fill in any gaps.

It is also important to **review the narrative questions** to make sure you or your partner(s) can address them.

If there are **evaluation criteria** included in the RFP, pay close attention to the **scoring system**, ensuring that the most effort is given to the sections with the highest scoring potential.

Additionally, as you review the RFP…

Make two lists:

One that contains the **required information and documentation**; and

One that contains any **questions** you have.

If you don't think you can meet all of the requirements, stop and reconsider whether you want to move ahead with a proposal.

If you decide to proceed, the next step is…

Step Three: Reach Out to the Funder

Don’t underestimate the importance of this step!

Set up a call with the project manager listed in the RFP to discuss your project idea and list of questions. Some RFPs require this step while others do not.

This is an important step!

Even if this is not required, it is highly recommended. Funders want to hear from potential applicants. This conversation allows them the opportunity to provide valuable input and suggestions for your proposal, and to answer your questions.

Do this before writing the proposal.

Ask questions and get feedback on your idea before writing and submitting a proposal. There is no worse feeling than exerting all the effort required to write a proposal only to find out in the end that your partners can't come through or that your project doesn't qualify.

Remember, **there is no harm in passing on an opportunity**. Don't chase funding just because it is available.

We're done with the questions!

Now all that's left is...

Step Four: Moving Forward with a Proposal

The rest of this tool provides seven tips for setting yourself up for success during the rest of the application process.

Click the arrow to read the first of our tips for success!

1. Clearly establish a project team and project lead.

2. If applicable, establish a point of contact with each partner.

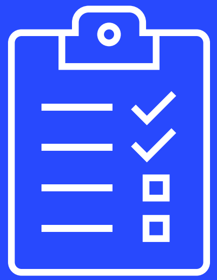
3. Clearly identify the information required from partners.

This could include letters of support, resumes, proposal content, and more.

4. Delegate tasks to team members.

When possible, these tasks should relate to members' strengths. In other words, a field technician may be better suited to develop text related to the methodology rather than developing a budget. Tasks should also be delegated to partners if/when necessary.

5. Set deadlines and check-ins with your internal project team and partners throughout the application period.



6. Set your final due date to be several days prior to the required submission date.

This allows wiggle room for final edits or receiving last minute letters of support.

7. Do not wait until the final hour on the last day to submit!

Many online systems become bogged down with last minute submissions. Submit your proposal early to avoid potential website issues.

Congratulations on submitting your proposal!
When you receive notification about your proposal, there are two final things to consider:

1. If funded, pay close attention to any contingencies associated with the award.

2. If not funded, schedule a call with the funder to receive feedback on your proposal.

Since you answered no to this question, this particular RFP is likely not a good fit for your organization.