

Delray Beach...GRANTS TEAM!

Cross Departmental Grants Team

10 January 2011

In 2008, the Delray Beach local economy began to feel the significant effects of our state's and country's most significant economic downturn since the Great Depression. In addition, the City experienced a severe devaluation in commercial and residential property values that were felt even harder due to a recent voter approved change in Florida's Constitution (Tax Reform), which provided for a doubling in residential homestead exemptions. In January of 2009, as the City of Delray Beach was preparing to begin the budget process, general fund operating revenues for Fiscal Year 2009 were projected to result in a \$10.8 million shortfall. Then on February 17, 2009, President Obama signed into law The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), commonly known as the Federal Stimulus Bill to immediately address our country's economic crisis.

Less than one (1) month after the Stimulus Bill was authorized by the President, the City of Delray Beach identified a need to bring all of the City's departments and community based organizations together to ensure ongoing communication and application for "good" grant programs that would benefit the community. As a result, the City Manager recommended and advocated for the creation of an innovative "Grants Team."

Although Grant Teams are not unique, the City of Delray Beach set itself apart by creating a multi-departmental employee Grants Team which met weekly to remain informed and to track and apply for the numerous stimulus grant opportunities that were being offered. This new concept also provided for the vetting of numerous grants that were inundating the City; new grant information was being received daily along with an overwhelming number of stimulus grant related e-mails from citizens, professional organizations, the federal and state governments, etc. notifying the City of various grant opportunities. The Grants Team became the method by which the City remained organized and ensured that all key department staff would be informed and collaborate throughout the process to secure as much "good" Federal Economic Stimulus Funding as possible.

The Grants Team Concept Included Four (4) Main Goals:

Goal #1: Develop a Grant Culture within the City of Delray Beach

The Grants Team would make grants a priority and encourage daily thought and conversation. Information about the City's efforts and awards would be prominently displayed within the following: City's Budget, City's Web Site, Community & Employee Newsletters, and Strategic Plan.

Goal #2: Develop a Grants Team

The Grants Team would be comprised of employees charged with the responsibility and oversight of all grants within their department and would search for appropriate grants for the City. The Grants Team would become extremely proficient with identifying potential grants for their departments and evaluating their department's resources and potential limitations if awarded.

Goal #3: Obtain Grants that Retain/Improve the Levels of Service provided by the City

The Grants Team would evaluate the potential grants based on the application process, funding availability, required match, effect on the City's provision of services, ability to expend funding timely and ability to provide all requisite reports.

Goal #4: Advertise/Promote Our Successes

The Grants Team would determine the City's return on investment (ROI) – compare cost to obtain grants with financial and non-financial (i.e. public benefit) revenues and provide grant award reports to the City Commission. Grant award information would also be provided within the City's community and employee newsletters and included within press releases issued to the local news media.

Who Championed the Innovation?

Implementation of the Grants Team was overseen by the City Manager's Office, which included the City Manager, an Assistant City Manager and a contracted ICMA Member in Transition (MIT) that was working for the City. The City Commission unanimously supported this innovation during a Regular Commission Meeting and charged the Team with the responsibility of overseeing and administering the grant opportunities/awards within their respective departments.

The Grants Team was established with nine (9) internal or smaller Department Grants Team/Groups that included 5-7 key City personnel. The departments included: the City Manager's Office, Community Improvement (Housing, Code Enforcement, Building, etc.), Environmental Services (i.e., Public Utilities and Public Works), Finance/IT, Planning and Zoning, Fire-Rescue, Parks and Recreation and the Police Department.

In addition to the Staff component, the Team was uniquely designed to incorporate, if they desired to be included, community non-profit partners such as the Delray Beach Community Redevelopment Agency, the Delray Beach Housing Authority, local cultural (i.e. museums) organizations and the Delray Beach Library. In addition, the City Commission committed funding to support the cost to bring in a grant consultant, which included the opportunity to secure the services of a former State of Florida Representative who maintains significant working relationships with the various granting agencies and other local governments throughout the state and brings a strong history of securing grant funding. This component of the Team also provided the requisite assistance that was needed to ensure that a "grant culture" was created within our organization while providing on the job training for our Staff to learn how to properly track, write, submit and administer grant applications/awards.

Benefits of the Innovation of Creating a Grants Team

To date the City (including the Delray Beach Housing Authority) has been awarded \$3,442,213 with \$10,742,000 in a pending transportation grant application which would provide for improvements to US Federal Highway 1 and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, as well as the construction of a Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) fueling station and the purchase of CNG Trolleys that would replace the Downtown Shuttle buses.

Just a few of the many benefits of the ARRA awarded dollars that were received through the efforts of the City's Grants Team include: workforce investment youth activities (summer youth jobs), community infrastructure improvements (sidewalks, bus shelters, roadway improvements, park lighting, green areas, etc.), the provision of low income housing, retention and increased public safety presence (police personnel), energy savings from City building retrofit projects that may lead to property tax reductions, educational projects to promote sustainability, and energy efficiency which in turn helped develop an environmentally friendly culture within the City.

Challenges, Risks and Lessons Learned

The major risks that were identified up front included: remaining organized and tracking all of the opportunities to ensure that the City did not miss a "good" grant opportunity deadline; potential financial matches within a shrinking budget environment; increased reporting that resulted in significant staff time; and the need to have "shovel ready" projects. In an effort to overcome these risks, the City's Grants Team established the priority to convene on a weekly basis and ensure that all opportunities were vetted. This has led to good discussion on the merits of applying for a grant as well as creating ownership upon development of the application and award of the grant.

One of the major challenges faced was the difficulty of submitting grant applications through the various federal websites. The federal government was not equipped to deal with the high number of applications being submitted and the team expected that some of the City's applications would not be accepted due to their electronic infrastructure challenges, even when they were submitted prior to the grant deadline.

Further, most if not all of the grant applications provided for a primary organizational representative to be notified of any issues that may develop during the grant process; application submittal, award notification, reporting, etc. This created one of the biggest concerns among the Grants Team which was how to ensure that one person would be able to keep multiple staff members in the loop on a grant opportunity. Various scenarios were discussed that could arise and lead to the City missing a deadline and/or not providing information on a timely basis and included the primary staff member being on vacation, sick, not receiving emails or not able to check emails regularly.

Innovative Concepts

As a result, the Grants Team along with the City's Information Technology (IT) Department developed group email accounts to serve as the primary contact person's email. This ensured that when the granting agency submitted an email to the City's primary representative, all of the members of the Department Grants Group/Team had access and was apprised of the information throughout the grant process.

Further, all grants groups are listed individually by the group name within the City's Outlook Global Address List and access is provided to any member of the City's staff with email access. Additionally, all of the grants groups are included under a single distribution list which allows anyone to send an email to all members within each of the City's grants groups.

Weekly meetings have resulted in the City and other local community agencies coming together and reviewing Stimulus Funding Activity Reports to track possible grant opportunities as well as submitted applications. In addition, the Stimulus Funding Activity Report was developed to provide information on awarded applications along with those the City did not receive and/or did not pursue.

Summary

The innovation of creating a Grants Team has led to the awarding of millions of dollars benefiting the community. The four (4) original goal areas identified at the development of the Grants Team process have been met and/or are on-going. The weekly meetings (now bi-weekly due to the reduction of available ARRA funds) have established a grants culture within the City and many of successes have been promoted through the local media, City publications, social media and press releases. These efforts have also created a more transparent environment and understanding of how aggressive the City has been in securing grant funding during these lean budget years.

As a result of the changes that have occurred due to the implementation of the Grants Team and meeting the four stated goals, the Team is well prepared to meet future challenges. The City will continue looking for grant opportunities benefiting neighborhoods, youth employment, sustainability and public safety.

Learn more about the City of Delray Beach Grants Team by visiting <http://www.mydelraybeach.com/> or contacting: Richard J Reade, Sustainability Officer/Public Information Officer, 561.243.7009, reade@mydelraybeach.com