

How to Write a Successful Grant Application

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How-To Guides

Almost every type of historic preservation project will require outside funding in order to be successful. Although there are a few different ways to get funding for preservation projects, this often looks like obtaining grant funding. A big part of your project initially will be focused on applying for and securing grants, so learning how to write a successful grant is key to your project's outcomes and longevity!

Grants are important funding sources for historic preservation work because projects cannot be completed on charitable donations alone – the average donation to cultural organizations like historic preservation is \$334 (source: 2019 Charitable Giving Report, Blackbaud Institute.) Lower level giving does not generate enough revenue to cover the millions of dollars required to preserve sites, places, stories and structures. Nor do most nonprofits benefit from endowments that provide significant funding. Further, preservation work does not always provide immediate tangible results like children's welfare, social justice, or hunger programs do. Grants fill the gap for this much needed funding and since we don't have large donor bases to draw from in South Carolina, it makes grant proposals really essential work.

How preservation grant making works:

There are two approaches you might consider when looking for funding for your preservation project. The first is to look at grants specifically for historic preservation work. There are funding organizations that are dedicated to supporting preservation projects in different stages or categories.

The second is to look for grants that fund history or cultural projects, but are not specific to preservation. These grants are much more broad, so a wider range of work and projects might qualify, although large national funders like National Endowment for the Humanities, are extremely competitive.

1. Grants Specific to Historic Preservation work – There are specific requirements for historic preservation grants and you must meet their individual qualifications in order to apply.

1. Different categories of grants

1. Physical rehabilitation work – These types of grants fund physical preservation work – meaning the nuts and bolts technical work that is required to preserve and rehabilitate historic structures. Typically these grants fund only physical work – not research, planning, capacity building etc.

2. Historical research and interpretation work – Grants that fund research on a historic property/community, exhibits, waysides, interpretive programs, etc.
3. Grants based on specific types of structures/buildings – eg sacred spaces, Civil Rights.
4. Grants based on preserving a specific minority community's spaces – Black preservation projects, Latinx preservation projects.
5. Grants based on a time period or architectural style – eg modernist structures.
6. Capital projects.

1. Grants not specifically for preservation work, but broader cultural/history

funding – Other work related to preservation projects that needs to be funded, but isn't directly rehabilitation/restoration or physical work can be obtained from more broad cultural funders.

1. Capacity building grants – There are some grants from larger national funders that fund capacity building for organizations. This can be extremely helpful for small local organizations that lack funding or a donor base. These grants help you build staff, pay professionals, pay for planning, operational excellence, and transparency (bookkeeping, audits, websites, etc.)
2. Research grants – These grants fund historical research on historical spaces and places. This research is key to understanding your site's history, relevance, and broader importance. It is also key to being able to understand what kind of preservation project you will need to undertake. It forms the basis of justification for further grant funding, especially with high dollar grant programs.
3. Interpretation/Public History grants – These grants specifically fund interpretative work at a historic site – this includes exhibits, waysides, public tours, oral history interviews, public programming, etc. These grants would typically be something you might apply for after applying for and completing physical preservation rehabilitation work on your site.
4. Culture and Arts funding – A broad category of grant making that funds a wide variety of cultural and humanities projects. This can be a helpful way to get funding that applies to a wide array of work that you might need to accomplish, but can't always get funded through a specific preservation grant. There are state agencies and organizations that will pay you to help meet their goals by doing historic outreach and historical projects in the community – this includes things such as the SC Arts Commission, SC Humanities Council, National Endowment for the Humanities, Southeast Crescent Regional Commission etc.
 1. For eg: a State Historical Marker costs several thousand dollars to complete – you can get funding for this through statewide or local dollars rather than going to specific preservation funders
 1. One option might be a Mini Grant through SC Humanities
 2. Another would be applying for county or city funding

Different types of preservation grant funders

Grant funders vary widely not only in what types of work they fund, but also how much money they grant and how big their granting network may be. Be sure to explore all the available levels of funders for your project, as it is often necessary to combine funding from multiple sources – look at national, state-level, and local funding.

1. Major national funders: There are several major nonprofits, organizations, and endowments that fund projects nationally. These grants tend to be higher award amounts and more competitive, but are also looking to fund projects in underserved corners of the nation like South Carolina, so they are a good opportunity. For more information on specific grants and funders see our Grants Database
 1. [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) and its [African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#)
 2. [National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund](#), specifically the [African American Civil Rights Grants](#)
 3. [National Endowment for the Humanities](#)
 4. [1772 Foundation](#)
2. State and Local Funders: There are also a variety of regional, state, and local grants available. The [State Historic Preservation Office](#) designates money towards statewide and local preservation projects specifically, but there are also many other state funders that are not preservation specific that are interested in preservation related projects. (The list below is not inclusive. If you are aware of a funding source that's missing in this round up, please contact us at info@wegoja.org)
 1. Statewide government agencies and organizations that might offer small grants
 1. [SC Department of Archives and History](#)
 2. [SC Arts Commission](#)
 3. [SC Department of Education](#)
 4. [SC Humanities](#)
 5. Find more at the [State Library's Grants Resource Service](#)
 1. Regional family foundations – find based on your specific region

[The Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation](#) provides grants specifically for the Lowcountry of South Carolina

Get your organization grant ready

1. The goal – you want to present yourself as a sound, transparent, and reliable organization
2. Do you have a 501(c)3? Is your organization a non profit? Do you have your federal EIN number?

This is not necessary in every case for every funder, but it can be a requirement. Additionally, having the 501(c)3 status makes receiving the grant easier, makes transparency more reliable, and makes your project more competitive in the running to receive funding.

- Are you registered with SAM.gov and do you have a unique enterprise id number or UEI?
 - This is required for all federal grants.
 - Can be required for state and regional grants that rely on federal funding.
- Do you have a board of directors in place that demonstrates diversity and levels of authority and accountability?
 - Diversity has become a valuable element in competitive grant scoring.
 - Accountability and transparency is what funders want to see, including audited financial statements, tax forms, and board meeting minutes easily accessible on your website.
- Internal policies – many funders want to see that you have diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, whistleblower policies, and conflict of interest policies.
- Join an accountability monitoring service that funders rely on, such as Guidestar or Candid.
 - Their seals of transparency take out the busy work of assessing your organization and can boost your appeal in a funder’s grant process.
 - Organizations like Candid’s Guidestar have resources and lists of funders who are outside the normal list who are always looking for new and unique projects to fund.
 - PayPal Giving Fund also serves as conduit between funders and projects.
- If you cannot form a non-profit, find a reliable nonprofit that has all of these policies and procedures in place to serve as your fiscal agent.

These nonprofits can manage funding/money for you and help provide legitimacy and transparency.

Finding a grant/Understanding Funding Cycles

1.

1. Use our Grant Match tool to find grants that may align with your project.
2. Ask people in your community.
3. Ask folks who have done similar projects to yours how they secured funding – use our Project Map tool.
4. Understand when grant makers have deadlines – how the funding cycle works – diligently research funders and plan ahead for application deadlines.
 - Generally many accept applications in spring, starting in Jan – March/April.
 - There is typically another cycle in Fall.
 - Some have ongoing grant application windows.

Outreach to a grantmaker or funder

1. Outreach to the funder before applying is helpful – ask them to answer questions you did not find in their online description or application.
2. Tell them about your project, ask if it fits into their grant criteria.
3. Ask what you can do to make your application successful.
4. Ask what exactly they are searching for or looking to see in applications this funding cycle.
5. You might be able to request a meeting with the program director or administrator if it is a smaller regional funder as well – this is helpful for them to get to know your project better and put a name with a face. This is also a great opportunity for you to orally present your project to them and emphasize why it is important.

Preparing for your grant application

1. Define a specific ask for why you need this grant.

Be specific and tangible, not broad.

- Talk with experts – consult with any experts or get advice from community members on how much it cost them and how long it took them to achieve their projects.
 - Helps you better define a reasonable timeline and budget.
 - Shows funders you have done your research and are prepared.
- Developing a timeline/schedule:
 - Make sure your timeline includes detailed descriptions of what you expect to accomplish in each phase.
 - Give as much information as you can.
 - Be realistic – it always takes longer than you think so plan for extra time in the schedule for the unexpected and delays.
 - Consult experts on the timeline – find out from professionals how long it actually takes to do the work you are envisioning – you may not be familiar with their field and how long their work usually takes (this information is often what professionals will include in a proposal of work to you along with budget/cost estimates).
- Developing a budget:
 - Be realistic with how much you can do with the amount they fund.
 - Be willing to show if you are combining funding from across multiple sources.
 - Be prepared to tell them how you came up with your costs.
 - Include a budget breakdown by line item in a spreadsheet style so it is easy for them to see what each exact item costs and how you are applying their funds to it.
 - Budgets that also have additional funding sources (projects that combine funding from different sources) usually are priorities for funders.
 - Include in-kind funding in your budget – estimate the cost value of services you might be getting donated or receiving as volunteer participation (aka in-kind services). This strengthens your application.

- Staff
 - Budget fairly and equitably for salaries and staff costs for the people who will do the work you're proposing.
 - This will require you to get estimates or proposals from any professionals you want to hire beforehand.
 - Funders expect you to have fair and equitable salary costs. They do not like to fund organizations who are proposing to underpay the people doing the work.

Writing your grant application

1. Have reasonable and clearly achievable goals and show exactly how you are going to achieve those goals.
 - For eg: don't ask for a complete rehabilitation in a grant that only gives you \$10,000.
 - Narratively describe the goals and why those are the goals.
 - Include any longer term goals and how these specific goals will help further the long term goals.
- Writing a compelling narrative:

You need to demonstrate the historic significance and relevance of the space you trying to save – there several ways to do this:

 1. Connect your space to statewide history/events/relevance.
 2. Connect your space to national history /events/relevance.
 3. Connect your space to why it matters in the present – what has been the long-lasting ramifications of this space? How/why has it impacted the community to this day?
 - Demonstrate the social and emotional impact to your community of this space:
 1. What has this space meant to the community?
 2. How has it changed their lives?
 3. How has it served as a refuge/place of inspiration/place for organizing/site of resistance against racism and hatred?
 - Justify why your project needs this funding:
 1. What is your need?
 2. Why is it urgent?
 3. Are there people/spaces/stories that are going to be lost soon if not saved?
 - Clearly state the outcomes of the project:
 1. What will their funding impact/change?
 2. What will the measurable deliverable be after the project is completed?
 3. Some grants will want to know how exactly you plan to measure success – make sure to define what success will look like at this stage and then after the project is done, be prepared to show that.

Post submission process

1. Follow up if allowed – some grants ask that you do not reach out to them after submission, but some do not – if they do not, you can send a polite email a few weeks after, but do not bombard them with contact.
2. If accepted – congratulations!

Find out grant requirements

1. How are you receiving the money? (in lump sum, in installments, etc).
 2. What do they require in the way of grant reporting? (many grants require you to submit grant reports tracking your progress, updates, and how you are using their money).
 3. What do they require at the end of the project period?
- If rejected:
 - Find out why they didn't choose your project and what you could have done differently to be selected.
 - Keep in touch with the funders and keep them apprised of your project, so they are familiar with you next time you apply.

Closing out a grant project and grant reporting

1. Follow their guidelines
 - Submit all required documentation before the deadlines.
 - Many funders will require a grant report at the end – keep this in mind from the beginning.
 1. Documentation you should keep track of from the beginning – recordings of meetings, budgets, actual expenses and receipts, photos of the process.
 2. Auditing/Financial statements
- Maintain a relationship with them
 - Send a thank you card.
 - Invite the funder to any public announcements, programs, press releases, events etc.
 - Ask them if it is ok for you to add them to your newsletter/distribution list so they can receive updates on the project.

Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit

Need help researching & writing your nomination?

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

Want to explore funding opportunities?

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?

[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)