

Sustainability Planning in Las Vegas

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In 2011 the City of Henderson, Nevada led a local coalition to apply for a \$3.5 million Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grant from HUD. As a planner with the City of Henderson from January 2008 to April 2013, CRP alumnus Richard Rojas authored the grant application besides working in the city's Sustainability Plan and in various long range planning projects. In this article he discusses these experiences.

I suspect that in the past few years, the mantra of “doing more with less” has taken hold in just about every planning agency across the nation. The abrupt halt in development meant the revenues that supported our jobs disappeared as well. As a planner in the public sector, this meant navigating the omnipresent specter of layoffs by taking on unfamiliar assignments, trying to exceed expectations as much as possible, and inevitably picking up the slack when coworkers were “reassigned” or left on their own will to pursue more secure opportunities. While the instability has been stressful, it has also opened up many opportunities to expand my own knowledge base and skill set. More often than not, “doing more with less” means pursuing the goals of the community, elected officials, and city administration without the financial resources (i.e. paid consultants) to offer specialized knowledge and expertise.

The economic downturn has challenged communities to be more efficient with increasingly limited financial resources. Coincidentally, national interest and momentum has been coalescing around the concept of sustainability. At the City of Henderson, Nevada, this interest was manifested in the form of an interdepartmental “green team”, led by planners, including myself, that helped the City develop strategic priorities for energy, water, waste and recycling, transportation, buildings, parks and trails, and public health.

Using a combination of local networking and research of national activity, our green team gained insight on the policy options available to Henderson. Ideas were prioritized for implementation utilizing a collaborative process that evaluated political feasibility, resources accessible to individual city departments, and benefits to the community. Once implemented, progress was measured, publicized, and distributed to the community through annual green reports.



Fortunately, this process that the green team utilized for collaborative decision-making served as a great model for developing a grant application for a regional planning grant. While Henderson was able to achieve small-scale success on energy efficiency retrofits, residential recycling, and turf conversions, the Las Vegas region as a whole was not making collective steps toward sustainability. In order to address the larger issues of the economy, social equity and the environment, in the midst of steep cutbacks to local government, we needed to find additional resources. The option with the most potential was a federal grant program known as the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) initiated a partnership for sustainable communities. This federal agency partnership between HUD, U.S. Department of Transportation, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offered grants to support planning efforts that integrate housing, land use, economic and workforce development, transportation, and infrastructure investments.

While HUD's program offered the resources needed in the Las Vegas region, the process for requesting funding was daunting: the criteria were extensive, the application window was very short, and perhaps most important, the grant writing expertise that seemed critical to success was not available. In spite of these concerns, the leadership at the City of Henderson decided it was a priority. With Henderson as the project champion, the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition organized a group of business, nonprofit, and government stakeholders to pursue the planning grant.

As project manager for this assignment, my initial response was to evaluate my opportunities and constraints. Opportunities

included recent transportation improvements, interest from potential partners, my own knowledge of best practices in regional planning (e.g., Sacramento Blueprint and Envision Utah), and support from my managers. My constraints were a limited timeframe (thirty calendar days), limited staff resources (my supervisor and me) and our complete lack of experience with grant writing.

In an effort to appeal to potential partners, I decided from the beginning to make the process open and accessible. Working my way back from the deadline, I created a schedule of meetings. I would draft ideas to address the application criteria (statement of need, project proposal, governance structure, budget, etc) based on what was successful in planning efforts I was familiar with in Sacramento, Salt Lake City, Denver, and San Diego. In response, my colleagues and potential partners could critique and revise the draft material in person or remotely via web chat, conference call or email. All comments would be considered and a consensus process would help resolve conflicts.

The best opportunity for sustainability in Southern Nevada and the foundation for the grant application project proposal was the bus rapid transit (BRT) infrastructure that was recently developed to serve the entire region. In recent years, the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada, the region's metropolitan planning organization, successfully planned and constructed the most expansive regional BRT network in the United States to complement its local services. These improvements connected the largest employment center (Las Vegas Strip) to suburban areas including the downtowns for Las Vegas, Henderson, and North Las Vegas. In order to maximize the utilization of BRT, changes to land use were needed to improve access between current and future urban housing, employment, and recreation opportunities. Thus, project funding would be directed toward public outreach and education (i.e. scenario planning, public workshops, opinion surveys, and public events) with the general public, elected officials and influential business, nonprofit, and public agency stakeholders to build interest and support for revising planning policies that could make implementation possible.

To assist with grant writing, I relied heavily on my network of colleagues. For example, a grant administrator I met and assisted during an American Society of Public Administration conference presentation helped me develop cost estimates for the budget. A university research fellow who expressed particular interest in public health and planning issues with a previous regional work group was critical to identifying nonprofit and private sector partners to whom to reach out. A human resources analyst from the Henderson Green Team helped me verify salaries and benefits for project staff estimates. A coworker from a previous job connected me with the Southern California Association of Governments Compass Blueprint regional planning program to brainstorm the scope of a key project component I was evaluating. And, most important,

a grant writer at the University of Nevada Las Vegas proofread my application draft and provided strategic revisions.

Less than two months after our completed application was submitted, we received an email from the Secretary of HUD, Shawn Donovan, informing us that our proposal was accepted and awarded \$3.5 million. The days that followed were a blur of joy, excitement, disbelief, and concern for the unknown. A press conference at the university attended by local dignitaries was a nice pep rally for everyone who was now officially committed to seeing this project through. In the weeks that followed, we were introduced to a HUD grant administrator (financial representative) and grant technical advisor (general liaison) who would guide us through processes and procedures for reimbursements, developing a detailed work plan, and completing progress reports. And in the months that followed, we recruited and hired project staff and selected consultants to coordinate the studies and activities we proposed.

As I look back on this experience, I am very grateful. It was rewarding to turn an idea with potential into a multi-year planning project designed to bring about positive change. It was equally rewarding to learn from dedicated individuals locally as well as nationally. Though Las Vegas may not transform into the mecca for sustainable development overnight, I'm optimistic the project will help to improve the development pattern, building product choices and location and integration of land use and public infrastructure in Southern Nevada in the near future.

Tips for Grant Writing:

- 1. Pay attention to details. Federal grant announcements are complicated. Read closely and match your response to the request as much as possible.*
- 2. Utilize your network. Many people enjoy assisting others and appreciate the chance to be included, especially if they can potentially assume a bigger role in the project. This is especially important for collaborative projects that rely on partnerships over control.*
- 3. Set realistic expectations. Create a strategy that effectively responds to criteria within the available timeframe.*
- 4. Emphasize the positive. Clearly state why you need resources without being overly critical. Include examples of strengths and potential to improve in the future.*