



## **Crafting Strong, Collaborative Applications for HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants: Tips from 2010 HUD grantees**

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In anticipation of the release of the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) for the 2011 round of HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants, Reconnecting America did a series of interviews with successful applicants from the 2010 round of HUD Regional Sustainable Communities Grants to understand what has led to the formation of strong collaborative efforts that were successful in winning a highly competitive grant. These interviews included winners of both the Category 1 grants to support the creation of Regional Plans for Sustainable Development and Category 2 grants for Detailed Execution Plans and Programs. We asked interviewees for key tips around convening multidisciplinary consortia, identifying the lead applicant and developing an agreed-upon scope of work. *The following tips were compiled by Reconnecting America independently of any involvement of HUD staff and should be taken as general best practices in forming regional planning partnerships, not universal or official recommendations on how to win Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant funding.* Here is what we heard:

1. **Start early, meet often.** Most of the applicants we spoke with started meeting and discussing their applications before the HUD NOFA was released. Many of the interviewees met at least every other week, if not on a weekly basis. One applicant said the core group of leaders in the process met every Friday morning for two hours at a time, consistently. In another case, the lead applicants for a Category 1 grant issued an open invitation to groups interested in the process and held conference calls every other week, where as many as 60-70 participants learned and gave feedback on the evolution of the application scope. This region formed subcommittees that gathered information and worked on ideas related to specific issues like housing, transportation and equity. Other applicants worked with smaller and more targeted groups to

develop the application but then built in substantial funding and a detailed process for grassroots engagement and outreach as part of the work plan. Completing the application is a detailed process, so getting to the necessary level of specificity about what you want to do will require regular conversations.

One Category 2 grantee shared that they found it helpful to focus on a few key decisions at each monthly consortium meeting. The lead applicant would start each meeting with a presentation about what decisions had already been made and what specific decisions would be made that day.

This year it may be easier for applicants to solidify partnerships and form consortia because jurisdictions and NGO's will have already spent some time thinking about what a collaborative effort will look like and who it will involve. Regarding building a consortium for the grant, many interviewees mentioned the importance of expanding upon existing relationships or partnerships if possible. As one interviewee put it, "people have to want to be at the table and have a basic level of trust with one another in order to have productive conversations." While new actors can be added throughout the process (and some may drop out), many successful applicants seemed to start with a core set of people who had some history of working together.

2. **A trusted and "neutral" convener can help overcome political issues (and save you time).** Due to the multidisciplinary nature of these grants, it may help to have a "neutral" player convening meetings and helping to develop the scope so that it doesn't become too heavily focused on any one issue (i.e. housing, transit, equity, jobs, etc) or geography to the exclusion of others. In one region where there wasn't an existing organization that represented the entire geography that would be part of the application, the interviewee stressed the importance of "reiterating throughout the process that this was a collaborative application that belonged to everyone at the table, not just to us (the lead applicant)." Although many places will not have the resources to do so, some successful applicants from 2010 hired professional grant writers to facilitate the process and write the application. Having a grant writer who can also serve as a facilitator can help make the proposal come together faster, and help everyone feel like equal players. The grant writer can also ensure that the proposal is competitive and compliant with the application requirements, especially if that person has experience with federal NOFAs.
3. **Be as explicit as possible about your work plan.** Being explicit about what you plan to do will not only give HUD more information but will

also help various partners feel clear about their roles and activities. Especially for Category 2 grants, successful applicants were highly specific about proposed activities and the intended outcomes of these activities. It may be necessary to be vague about exactly how some projects will be implemented, so long as you are specific about *who* is going to implement these projects. Establishing a detailed organizational chart is a great tool for adding specificity. Especially in Category 2 applications where the place-based nature of a proposed activity might benefit one jurisdiction or group more than another, you may need a creative process for identifying what to include in your application. One successful applicant used an open process to solicit project ideas from a core application team and then used a scorecard to evaluate how well these projects would meet the goals of the region and the NOFA.

4. **Expect different “cultures” between public sector and private-sector/nonprofit groups.** While cross-sector consortia are a key part of the HUD regional planning grants, expectations around timelines for moving a project forward can be very different between the public sector and private sector or nonprofit players. Private/nonprofit partners may also not be used to the laws and practices around public process that public agencies use. While some entities might feel the need for an open and transparent process for crafting the application, others might be concerned that this will slow down the process and open up for too much debate given the timeline of the application. Some regions compromised on this issue by having certain processes or meetings that were open, and others that were limited to a core group. This issue also came up regarding the launch of programs after grants were awarded; interviewees said that the regional or local bureaucracy required to initiate work under the grant had led to frustration amongst some partners. Minimize these challenges by planning for that start-up period in your timeline and helping all partners understand why it may be a necessity.
5. **Don’t lose sight of what matters.** When thinking about what might be included in an application related to sustainable regional planning, it is easy for the scope of work to be expanded to unmanageable proportions. Especially for Category 2 applicants, it was not always easy for regions to narrow down the list of projects and keep to the core objective of writing a winning application. Interviewees suggested staying focused on what would make the most competitive application. Regions used different approaches to keep themselves focused. In one case, the weekly meetings of the application team included a “cheat sheet” of the specific outcomes HUD was looking for, and the team devoted more time to talking about items that were worth more points

in the application process. Another region struggled to maintain an equity focus in its application, and had to remind consortium members that affordable housing would be a core component of a competitive application.

In sum, while creating collaborative and multi-sector consortia can be difficult, the diverse perspectives that different partners bring can strengthen the work and the outcomes of regional plans and efforts to advance sustainable communities. Collaboration is an ongoing process that may require adjustments - in who is involved or how they work together - along the way. Reconnecting America will continue to track progress and share stories as the HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant program evolves.