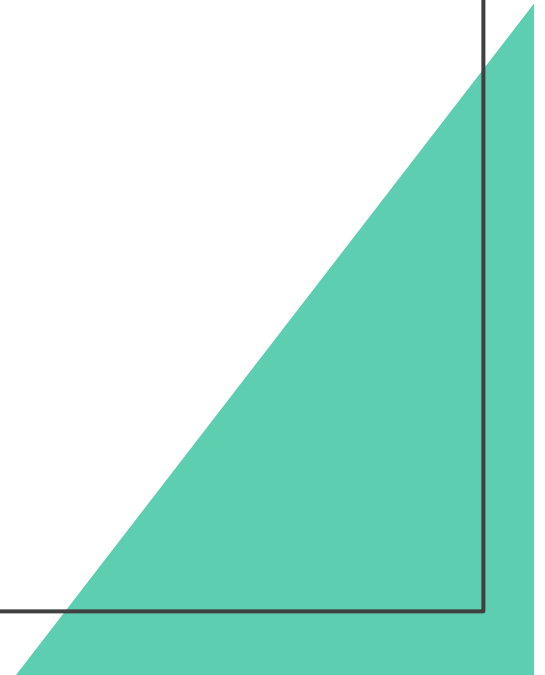


# Writing for Impact: Grant Proposals That Get Funded

How Local Governments Can  
Compete and Win Grant Funding

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Community Development Manager  
City of Winder, GA



# Why Grants Matter More Than Ever

Shrinking general fund capacity

Rising infrastructure, resiliency, and quality-of-life demands

Grants are a way to:

Accelerate capital projects

Reduce taxpayer burden

Advance equity, safety, and economic development goals

# The Competitive Reality



MORE APPLICANTS  
THAN FUNDING



STRONGER  
DOCUMENTATION  
REQUIREMENTS



SCORING  
TRANSPARENCY



READINESS  
EXPECTATIONS  
RISING



# The Grant Ecosystem

Federal

State

Regional

Local

# Common Grant Categories



INFRASTRUCTURE  
(WATER,  
STORMWATER,  
TRANSPORTATION)



ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT &  
DOWNTOWN  
REVITALIZATION



TRANSPORTATION &  
CONNECTIVITY



PARKS, TRAILS, AND  
PLACEMAKING



PLANNING GRANTS  
(OFTEN OVERLOOKED,  
HIGH ROI)

# The Funder's Perspective

- Funders are asking:
  - Is this project ready?
  - Is the problem real and documented?
  - Will this money create measurable impact?
  - Can this applicant deliver?

# What Funders Fear

Unfinished  
projects

Bad press /  
audit findings

Overpromising  
/ under-  
delivering

Weak  
reporting  
capacity

# Core Evaluation Criteria



# The Rubric Mirror Method

- **Write to the Score Sheet**
  - Study the scoring rubric before drafting
  - Mirror rubric language in your headers
  - Answer questions in the exact order they are scored
  - Allocate space proportional to point value
  - Make scoring effortless for the reviewer

# Matching the Project to the Program



Don't force-fit a project



Adjust scope, framing, and outcomes to the NOFO



Sometimes waiting one cycle is the right move

# CDBG Stormwater Improvements

## Project highlights:

- Flooding in a low-income neighborhood
- Public safety & property protection
- Infrastructure + equity alignment

## Key takeaways:

- Strong Low to Moderate Income (LMI) documentation
- Clear nexus between infrastructure and quality of life
- Community need drove the narrative — not engineering alone



# What We Submitted

Initially submitted for the innovative option (more grant \$)

Enlisted our RC

Engaged an engineering firm

Bilingual staff

Community Event Day Documentation

# What We Would Do Differently Next Time

01

Budget more \$

02

Take ownership  
of standing  
with state

03

Start earlier in  
letter of  
support efforts

# Transportation Improvement Program



## Purpose:

Transportation planning grant (not construction)



## Why it worked:

Planning grants are **low competition, high leverage**

Positioned as foundational for future capital funding

Aligned with regional priorities

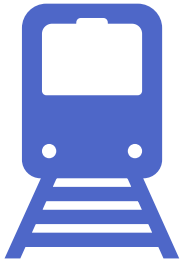


## Lesson:

“Planning grants are how you get ready for the *big grants.*”



# Transportation Alternatives Program

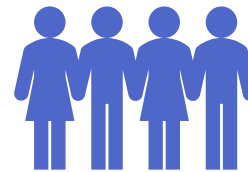


## **Pedestrian bridge connecting:**

State Park

Local park & trail

Downtown



## **Winning factors:**

Multi-jurisdictional benefit

Safety + economic development + recreation

Clear connectivity story

Long-term community impact

# What These Wins Have in Common



Strong problem statements



Clear public benefit



Alignment with program goals



Narrative + data worked together

## Pre- Application Phase



Project definition locked



Cost estimates prepared



Mapping & photos collected



Stakeholders aligned

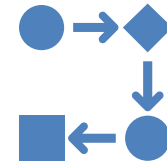


Matching funds identified

## Writing the Narrative



Use plain language (not engineering or planning jargon)



Lead with impact, not process



Tie responses to funder priorities



Answer the question behind the question

# Weak v. Strong Narrative

- **Weak Example**

“Our stormwater system needs improvements. The area has experienced flooding for several years, and residents have expressed concerns about drainage problems. This project will help improve conditions and reduce flooding in the community.”

- **Strong Example**

“Over the past five years, the Maple Street corridor has experienced seven documented flooding events, impacting 42 residential properties and resulting in two FEMA claims totaling \$186,000. The existing 24-inch storm pipe, installed in 1978, is undersized for current runoff volumes and regularly exceeds capacity during 2-inch rainfall events. According to City maintenance records, Public Works has responded to 18 drainage complaints in this corridor since 2021. Without intervention, increased upstream development will continue to exacerbate flooding risks for low- and moderate-income households located within the project area.”

# Budgets, Match, and Readiness

Tell

Budgets must tell the same story as the narrative

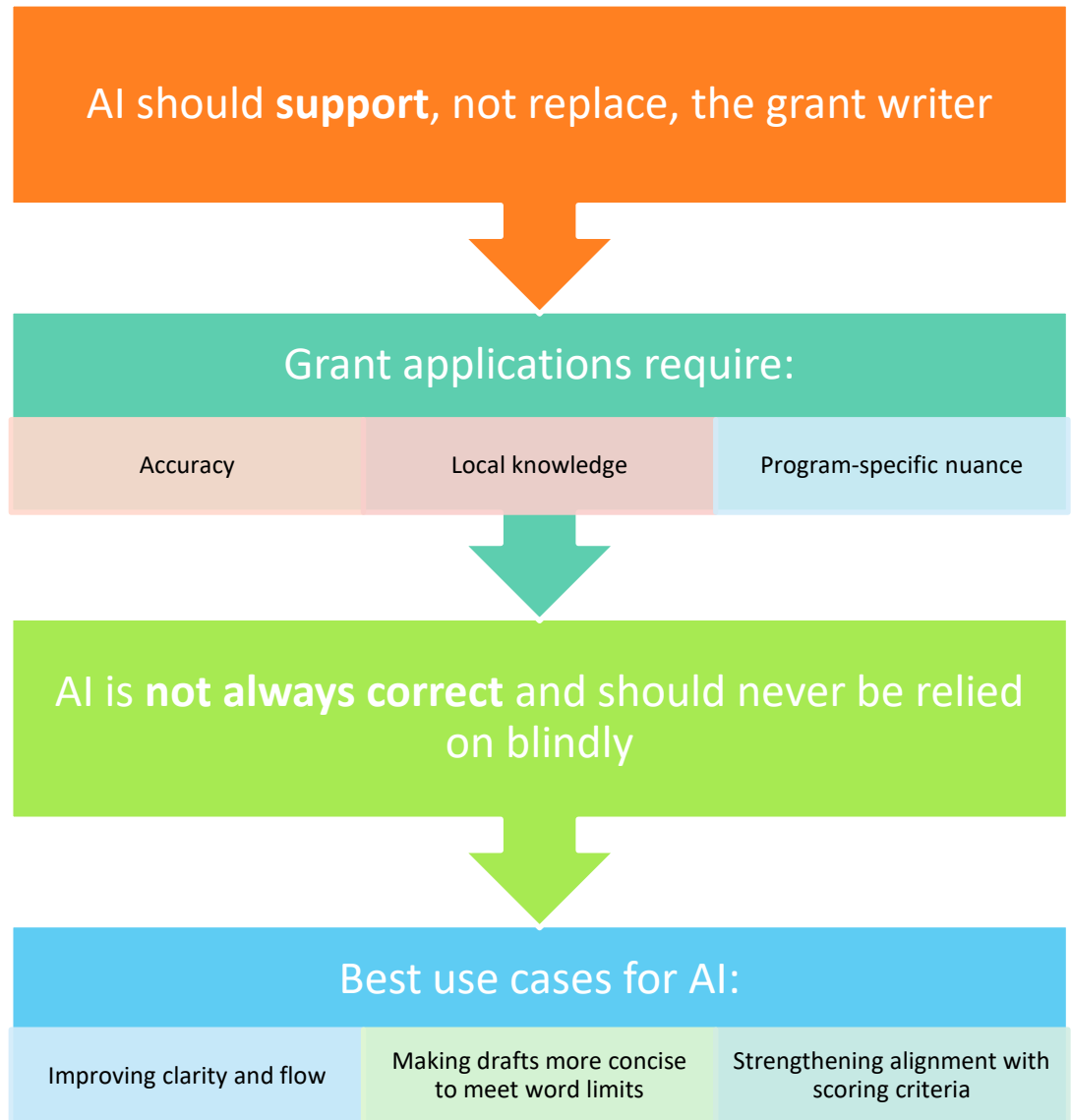
Match

Match = commitment, not just compliance

Show

Show procurement, timeline, and staffing readiness

# Using AI in Grant Writing



# Common Grant Killers

Applying before  
the project is ready

Weak or generic  
problem  
statements

Missing  
documentation

Ignoring scoring  
criteria

Over-engineering  
the response

Treating grants as  
“free money”

Not aligning with  
regional plans  
(ARC, RCs, MPOs)

Underestimating  
public engagement  
requirements

Missing state-  
specific  
compliance items

# Creating a Grant-Ready Organization



Maintain grant-ready project list



Track capital needs continuously



Build relationships with

State agencies  
Regional commissions  
MPO staff



Treat grant writing as ongoing function

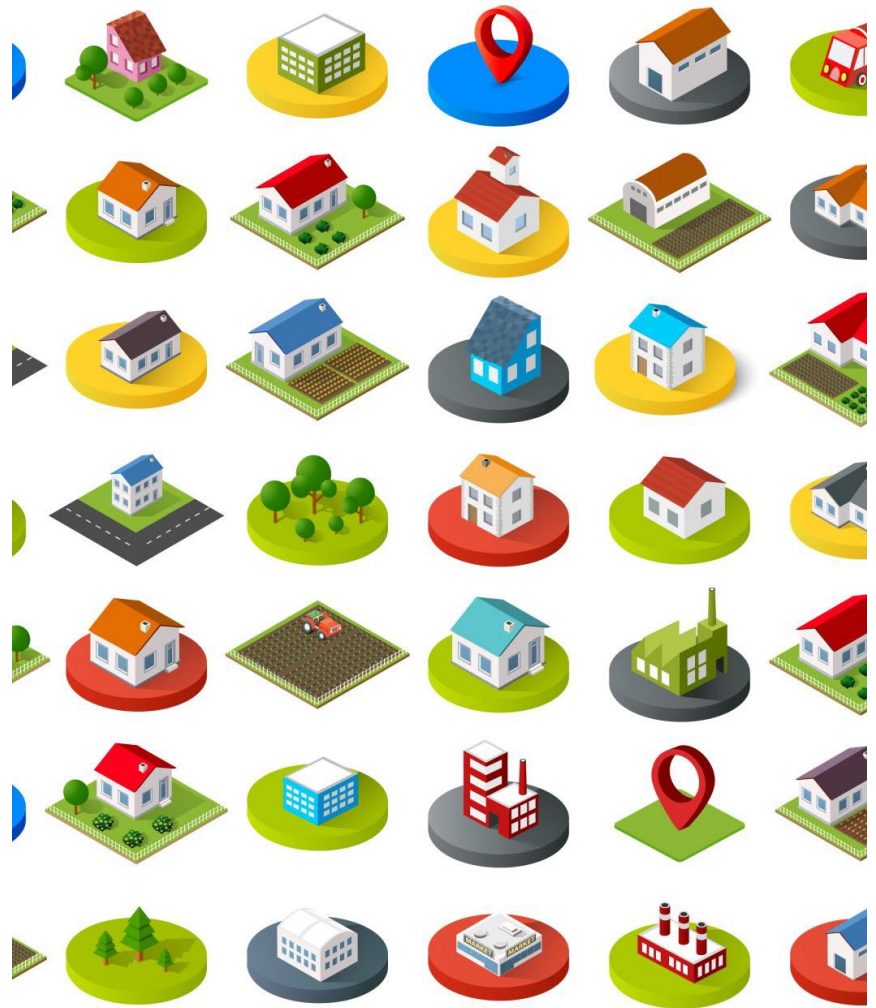


Identify an individual who is not just a good writer, but also a good project manager.

# Grants as a Strategic Tool

- multi-year capital planning
- bundling projects into phases
- using small planning grants to unlock capital grants later

The best communities plan years ahead, not weeks before a deadline



# Key Takeaways

Preparation  
beats luck

Impact beats  
perfection

Alignment  
matters

Small wins  
lead to major  
awards

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# Grant Killer or Smart Strategy



We'll finalize  
engineering after  
award

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Grant Killer or Smart Strategy

Our problem statement  
includes five years of  
documented crash data  
and state DOT statistics

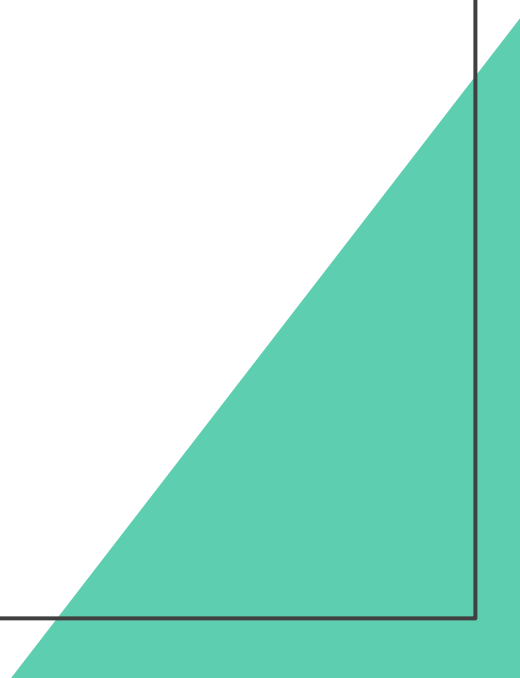
Grant Killer or Smart Strategy

Our budget includes line  
items labeled  
'Miscellaneous' and  
'Contingency – TBD.

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Grant Killer or Smart Strategy

# Score the Grant

- **You're the Review Panel**
  - For the next few minutes, you are scoring this grant application.
  - Score honestly.
  - Be tough.
- 
- A teal-colored triangle is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, pointing towards the top right.

## Scoring Rubric

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Points</b>
Documented Community Need	10
Project Readiness	10
Measurable Outcomes	10
Budget Credibility	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

# Application Prompt

Describe the need for the project, project readiness, expected outcomes, and budget justification.

---

# Narrative

Our downtown corridor has experienced ongoing flooding issues that have negatively impacted residents and businesses. The City believes improvements are necessary to address stormwater challenges and improve overall conditions. The project will replace aging infrastructure and improve drainage capacity. Once funding is awarded, the City will move forward with engineering and construction planning. This investment will reduce flooding and benefit the community. The proposed budget reflects anticipated construction costs and associated expenses.

# Describe the need for the project, project readiness, expected outcomes, and budget justification.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Points</b>
Documented Community Need	10
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Our downtown corridor has experienced ongoing flooding issues that have negatively impacted residents and businesses. The City believes improvements are necessary to address stormwater challenges and improve overall conditions. The project will replace aging infrastructure and improve drainage capacity. Once funding is awarded, the City will move forward with engineering and construction planning. This investment will reduce flooding and benefit the community. The proposed budget reflects anticipated construction costs and associated expenses.

# Improved Narrative

Between 2019 and 2024, the Maple Street corridor experienced seven documented flooding events affecting 42 residential and commercial properties. Two FEMA claims totaling \$186,000 were filed within the project area. The existing 24-inch storm pipe, installed in 1978, is undersized for current runoff volumes and exceeds capacity during 2-inch rainfall events.

Final engineering plans (100% complete) were approved by Council on March 4, 2025.

Environmental review is complete, and right-of-way acquisition has been finalized. Construction bid documents are prepared, allowing advertisement within 30 days of award.

The project will increase stormwater capacity by 45%, reducing flood events in the corridor by an estimated 80% during 5-year storm events. Outcomes will be measured through post-construction drainage modeling and documented maintenance call reductions.

The \$2.1 million budget is based on a sealed engineer's estimate dated May 2025. The City has secured \$800,000 in local match through capital reserves, with remaining funds requested through this program.



# Q & A

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