

Grant Assistance Program Case Study: **From Route 9 Master Plan to RAISE Grant Success**

INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes funding for hundreds of programs in the realm of infrastructure and resiliency through fiscal year 2026. Facing major infrastructure and resilience challenges, Delaware local governments, organizations, and state agencies are tasked with navigating the complex landscape of federal grants to find opportunities that can improve conditions for Delawareans over the next several years.

In order to assist in this process, the Institute for Public Administration's Grant Assistance Program (GAP) was launched in July 2022 to provide technical assistance and grant writing services to Delaware local governments. GAP seeks to build local capacity for grant administration by highlighting successful examples and best practices to share with local governments interested in funding opportunities.

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BACKGROUND

The Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO) is the regional transportation planning agency for New Castle County, Delaware, and Cecil County, Maryland. The council's *Route 9 Corridor Master Plan* identified the best 20-year reinvestment and redevelopment strategies for the Route 9 Corridor between Wilmington and New Castle, Delaware. The plan identified the existing physical and socioeconomic conditions of the corridor, provided a real estate and market analysis, presented an overview of the community engagement process, and recommended a series of land use and transportation changes. These recommendations focused on improving public health and quality of life, incentivizing economic development, mitigating environmental concerns, addressing safety issues, promoting and enhancing the use of alternative transportation, and managing truck traffic.

The plan aimed to alleviate truck traffic, address the auto-centric structure of the built environment, and mitigate fragmented and unsafe zoning. Existing development lacked public transportation connections and provided for insufficient pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Moreover, zoning arranged industrial centers adjacent to residential areas, which were already segregated by race and income.

The plan addressed public health concerns—including poor access to healthy food, high exposure to dust and odor, and sanitation and maintenance issues—and safety issues like high crime rates and poor street lighting.

WILMAPCO used a set of guiding design principles and expectations for land development to address these concerns. These principles include building bridge barriers, creating identifiable centers, incorporating an appropriate amount of mixed-use land use, establishing gateways, strengthening building frontage, incorporating complete streets strategies, encouraging road diets, and considering unique roundabout solutions. The plan also identified target areas of focus, including Terminal Avenue, Rogers Road, Memorial Drive, and Stamm Boulevard.

In 2022, the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and WILMAPCO collaborated to pursue a grant for planning, engineering, and design work on the corridor. DelDOT was awarded \$6 million in funding through the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program for the planning, engineering, and design of twelve multi-modal projects recommended through the 2017 *Route 9 Corridor Master Plan*. The planning and grant application processes used in this project serve as important guides for Delaware communities to better understand how projects can win competitive funding opportunities.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Discussions surrounding improvements to the Route 9 corridor date back several decades, but recent action on the topic began in the mid-2010s. In 2017, WILMAPCO released the *Route 9 Corridor Master Plan*, which identifies issues and challenges with the current landscape and recommends potential projects that could remedy the issues.

An integral part of the plan's development was community and stakeholder engagement. Residents sat on the steering committee, and over half of the outreach was conducted at community events or locations like grocery stores. WILMAPCO planners engaged directly with civic organizations and with youth in the area through partnerships with the school district, park program, and a basketball league. WILMAPCO used a more expansive and enhanced public engagement model than what had typically been deployed in the past. The diverse set of stakeholders identified across ages and interests led to recommendations that were more responsive to the needs and aspirations of community members. For example, as non-drivers, youth offered a unique set of ideas around bike and pedestrian safety.

In the process of developing the project and plan, WILMAPCO placed significant importance on understanding the history of development along the corridor. According to WILMAPCO's Principal Planner Bill Swiatek, community history should be integral to what a project is, and significant time

is needed to understand that history. In addition, pulling from previous comprehensive plans and using the community's perspectives are key to ensuring a project's objectives are serving an area's needs in the most effective way possible.

GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The project team originally planned to apply for an implementation grant. However, DelDOT realized the road itself needed to be reconstructed, which raised the total cost from \$20 million to \$80 million. The project team pivoted to identify a planning grant, which would allow for a phased, fiscally responsible, and realistic approach that would use concrete design plans carefully translated from the concepts proposed in the master plan.

After DelDOT's financial department identified the RAISE grant as a potential funding source, DelDOT and WILMAPCO spent a few months preparing the grant application materials, which included gathering pre-work information (crash data, needs assessment, etc.). The project team created a monitoring committee to help with implementation and hired a consultant to compile the information necessary for the application. The Route 9 corridor has been historically under-served, which means the project goals align with the Biden Administration's Justice40 Initiative to allocate 40 percent of project benefits to disadvantaged communities. This made the project more competitive for federal funding.

The planning grant requires the applicant to vet each of the potential projects outlined in the *Route 9 Corridor Master Plan*. The RAISE grant is just one of many federal grant opportunities available to Delaware communities. Coordination and delegation are necessary to develop a successful grant application, and the careful integration of data and creativity can establish a compelling case for funding. Be prepared to take a minimum of three months to create a strong application.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Allow for a minimum of three months to create a strong application if the project has already been studied and planned (as with the Route 9 Corridor Master Plan), and budget for longer if the project has not already been thoroughly planned and studied.
- Devote adequate attention to preparing and gathering necessary pre-work material (i.e., crash data, needs assessment).
- Integrate community engagement and history into project timeline and application.
- Keep grant options open—there are many funding opportunities available that could potentially be a better fit for the project.
- Dedicate time and resources to ensuring the final application materials are logically-structured, well-formatted, and filled with as many pictures as possible.

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