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Federal Funding Programs

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Making The Recreation Trails Program Work For You

How States Solicit And Select Projects for Recreational Trails Program Funding.

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Before the Recreational Trails Program the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania did not really have a "Trails Funding Program." The state had some other funding available for recreation facilities and municipalities could apply for trail projects along with other types of recreation projects.

When the Recreational Trails legislation was first passed in 1991, Pennsylvania's Governor designated the Department of Environmental Resources as the state agency to administer the program. Then in late 1993 state legislation was passed to establish the Keystone Recreation, Parks and Conservation Fund. This legislation, which is referred to as the KEY 93 program, dedicated 15 percent of the state side of the real estate transfer tax for park and recreation grants to local entities.

This legislation also stated that up to 10 percent of these funds should be used for rails-to-trails projects. The rails-to-trails portion of the program was also given to the Department of Environmental Resources (DER) to administer. The other recreation and park grant programs authorized by KEY 93 were given to our Department of Community Affairs (DCA), Bureau of Recreation and Conservation to administer.

In 1995 the Department of Environmental Resources (DER) was divided and the regulation side of the DER became the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the resource side of DER became the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR). The Bureau of Recreation and Conservation was also transferred to the new Department of Conservation & Natural Resources.

The Bureau of Recreation and Conservation has had a long history of administering a variety of park and recreation grant programs for local governments, such as the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund. Therefore, it was decided that the Recreational Trails Grant Program and the Rails-to-Trails Grant Program would be housed in the Bureau of Recreation and Conservation with the establishment of DCNR. This re-structuring of the program provided some distinct advantages, especially with regard to our ability to reach out to municipalities and trails groups with our trails grant programs.

In Pennsylvania the KEY to soliciting and selecting "GOOD" trail projects focuses on our ability to get out among our constituents and work closely with potential applicants upfront. This is primarily through our regional recreation specialists. Although we have a regular grant application cycle our regional specialists are available throughout the year to assist applicants in taking their project from the conceptual stage to a viable grant application and subsequently to a viable trail project.

Our current goal in the Bureau is for the regional staff to become even more proactive in working with communities and trail groups to identify needs and develop projects that will further the goal of a statewide network of greenways and trails.

Our Department (DCNR) is working closely with the PA Department of Transportation in the preparation of a Statewide Greenway Plan. As a major part of this planning effort we are

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inventorying all greenways and trails and putting the information in a GIS format. This information will be analyzed and gaps will be identified and strategies and priority actions for filling the gaps will be identified.

As I mentioned earlier, we do have a definite grant application period and a process for selecting projects. Over the last few years we have tried to be consistent regarding the application period. This gets everyone accustomed to expecting when the grant round opens and helps communities and organizations to better plan their projects and their resources.

We begin each grant round with a notice in the PA Bulletin. (This is PA's version of the Federal Register.) At the same time, we have a mass mailing of the notice of the grant round to all 2600+ municipalities and countless trail organizations and user groups. We also host a series of pre-application workshops throughout the state to assist applicants with the grant process and give them helpful hints and tips in filling out their application. Both our central office staff and our regional staff participate in these workshops.

Until this year we have had separate applications for the various types of projects. However, in an effort to streamline the grant process for the applicants, we have combined all the grant types under one manual and one application. This will be more advantageous to the applicant because they can concentrate on the project and not what TYPE of funding will be used for the project.

In addition to the announcements and workshops, the manual and application form are available on our website (www.dcnr.state.pa.us). Although applicants cannot submit the applications electronically, all the information is available on the web and can be downloaded. The application and the supporting documentation must still be submitted in hard copy format.

In Pennsylvania the Recreational Trails Advisory Board reviews, rates and ranks projects and then selects a slate of projects that are recommended for funding to the Department. Although the Department reserves the right for final selection of projects, it has always gone with recommendations of the Advisory Board.

The PA Recreational Trails Advisory Board (PARTAB) is composed of representatives from the various trail user communities: hiking, cross-country skiing, off-road motorcycling, snowmobiling, horseback riding, all-terrain vehicle riding, bicycling, four-wheel driving, water trail users and the physically challenged.

We also have specific project selection rating criteria that the board uses in evaluating projects for selection. Because of some of the priorities in the TEA 21 legislation regarding recreational trails projects, applicants are required to submit additional project information for the board to evaluate. One of which relates to using Youth Conservation or Service Corps.

Another major component of the selection process for the Advisory Board is comments received from our Regional Staff. Since these individuals work closely with project applicants upfront and they are very familiar with what is happening in their region, they are aware of how a specific project relates to other projects in the region. The board also takes into consideration comments given by county and municipal planners. Each applicant must submit their project to the municipal or county planning office to give them opportunity to comment on the project.

The demand for projects is very heavy in Pennsylvania. Last we received 67 applications with a total project cost of over \$6.5 million and requesting over \$4.1 million in grant funds. We were able to fund 39 of those projects. Pennsylvania is very fortunate in that we received slightly more than \$1.0 million in federal TEA21 funds for the Recreational Trails Program. Last year the Pennsylvania State Legislature also gave the program another \$1.0 million to fund recreational trails projects. As a result, we were able to provide over \$2.0 million for Recreational Trails Projects. The Legislature has provided another \$1.0 million for the current grant round as well.

Another exciting event in Pennsylvania is the new Growing Greener funding program, which will provide adding funding for the planning, acquisition and development of all types of conservation and recreation projects, including recreational trails. This new initiative will actually allow us to expand the scope of recreational trail projects that can be funded. Trail organizations will now be eligible to apply for planning or feasibility studies, which is currently not allowed under the federal Recreational Trails program.

With this new funding initiative Pennsylvania has a very effective "trails funding program." And we look forward in expanding this program when the new Greenways and Trail Plan is released in 2001. The original ISTEA legislation played a pivotal role in helping us to get this program off the ground.

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