

Program Lessons, 1995 to 2000

Eight years of program development and implementation not only provided a remarkable legacy of accomplishments but has also provided an opportunity for learning. This section summarizes some insights from program staff that we hope will be of use to others who pursue regional urban forestry programs that combine technical assistance with grant support.

Discovery

The early decision to research and be informed by existing regional plans for economic, environmental, and social development provided a sound framework for developing relevant natural resource plans with broad community support.

- Using existing plans and engaging their stakeholders early in the process refined the program objectives in ways that enabled it to “jump start” administratively with informed community support and a committed advisory team.
- Early priority was given to adapting and implementing recommendations from existing plans. This allowed a higher percentage of funds to go to implementation, and for implementation to proceed more quickly and efficiently.

Program Staffing

Staff numbers, skills, and experience should support program goals.

- Every region and community has its own social and cultural heritage. A locally hired full-time program coordinator added credibility and depth to technical assistance and access to local cooperating network opportunities.
- Community groups and many municipalities are managed with various levels of resources, experience, and skill. Dedicating an administrative coordinator to assist grant applicants during application and to assist grantees with administrative issues and requirements transformed grantee expectations of “red tape” into expectations of personal service and learning. This access and assistance built strong relationships and the capacity of communities to work with grant programs.

The Request for Proposal (RFP) and Grant Review Process

- An early decision to parallel, but adapt, federal grant formats and reporting requirements with all sub-awards to grantees not only simplified our reporting but trained grantees in preparing and administering federal and state grants.
- A grant review advisory group of public and private, local, state, and federal partners assured a thorough and well considered review. Applications were reviewed and ranked in advance and then discussed and prioritized as a team.
- A team member volunteered to provide technical assistance to each recommended project where questions were to be resolved or adjustments were recommended prior to contract execution. This was especially valuable in project design and work plans.

Project Design

Designs should be simple and sustainable. Recognize that some projects will be designed and built by skilled project managers and others will require bidding and formal construction documents for implementation done by third-party contractors. Each requires supporting intervention at an appropriate time.

- Good design is a cornerstone for successful projects. The ability to effectively communicate a design with the many diverse participants in a project is a prerequisite for success.
- Technical assistance should be available to review designs during the application preparation so that the concept, plan of work, and budget are realistic when submitted.
- The Grant Agreement required design reviews, at least one at the concept phase and another review during the Final Plan/Construction Document phase. These reviews allowed the program to address design flaws prior to implementation of a project.
- The best projects were designed for survivability. Grant guidelines emphasized maintenance and care during establishment.
- Only appropriate plant material species must be chosen for projects, and planting details in construction documents must be appropriate. The Grant Agreement required a mutually acceptable plant list.

Grantee Reporting

- Many grantee organizations were small, volunteer groups with great enthusiasm but little federal program experience. Some had few resources to manage reporting and invoicing requirements. Grant administrators learned to respect these problems and help grantees through the process.
- Some larger organizations were the most unresponsive and challenging to administer.
- Changes in personnel, due to death, elections, etc. can dramatically change the direction of a project and the ability of a small organization to manage a project.
- Very few grantees required more “stick” than “carrot” to comply with administrative needs. In retrospect, we should have had the contractual option to withhold their last reimbursement until all reporting requirements were met.

Project Plantings

- The soils in the region were a technical challenge, mostly comprised of coal slag, coal ash, construction backfill, rock, and minimal amounts of friable topsoil. To improve the chances of plant material survival, larger diameter planting holes provided space for more topsoil and soil amendments.
- Findings from the Soil Assessment and Improvement Demonstration (Bryce Payne, NEPA Report 1998) were recommended at project planting sites.
- Bare root plantings were a huge success. Significant advantages over the standard ball and burlap plantings included: up to 50% lower costs; ease of moving the trees to planting locations; and an estimated 95% survival rate. These advantages allowed grantees to do more with less.
- All plant materials should be reviewed prior to bid and inspected on site to assure proper planting and quality standards prior to final payment to a contractor.
- Due to weather conditions, roadwork, etc., most planting projects need 4 planting seasons (2 fall, 2 spring) to complete the work.
- Volunteers, landscapers, and even project managers often need guidance on the latest planting techniques, including proper mulching, pruning, and preparing a planting site. Volunteer projects should be simple and closely monitored.
- Treat all volunteers as professionals although they may not have extensive technical knowledge. Volunteer projects almost always take longer than expected to complete.
- Cooperative community plant orders are more cost effective, and potentially more engaging, than individual orders.

Maintenance

- A project that is not maintained will fail.
- Survival rates should be tracked on all planting projects.
- Maintenance begins during installation. Watering during the plant establishment period is critical. Liquid fertilizer performed better than granular during the initial plant establishment.
- Competition from invasive weeds was a constant battle on our sites. Planting sites need scheduled weed control.
- Highway maintenance crews have mowed down landscape beds because they were obscured by heavy weed infestation. It may be more effective to just plant trees along interstate highways.

Hazard Tree Remediation

- Believe and respect that community members do not like tree removals, even of hazardous trees. Documentation, disclosure, and communication are keys to developing support.
- Arborists completing assessments should be ineligible to bid on pruning and tree removal due to perceptions of conflict of interest.
- Municipal tree hazard assessment tends to be more productive over time and can result in more holistic management programs.

Partnerships and Community Support

- Community involvement was required of projects. Grass root support resulted in very successful projects. When communities were introduced to how Urban Forestry projects could enhance and benefit their community, a greater volunteer turnout was more likely. This not only brought the community closer together it also resulted in a great sense of accomplishment.
- Our best projects by far were the ones that had high volunteer involvement.
- The ongoing support of organizations, such as Penn State Cooperative Extension, Pennsylvania DCNR Bureau of Forestry, County Conservation Districts, County Commissioners, and others made this program a success.



Communication and Acknowledgements

- The greatest credit and priority in acknowledgements always belongs to the grantee organization and to the community leaders. This builds capacity and promotes sustainability.
- Clearly acknowledge the source of grant funds whenever possible including all press releases, signs, and awards.
- The press and media are important to promoting a project in a community. Programs with strong press have had greater community support. Respond immediately to all media calls.