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Grant-Writers Make The Pitch

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of the Press & Dakotan's monthly series spotlighting occupations, tasks, and duties in our coverage area.

One of the best gifts a community can receive is funding for a special project through a grant.

Although the hard work that goes into the project is often recognized, the behind-the-scenes work of the grant writers is often overlooked.

Planning and Development District III, which serves a 14-county area including Yankton, is one of the organizations that spends a lot of time and effort helping projects get the funding they seek.

"We do a lot of grant writing. It is one of the main services we provide," said John Clem, Planner II with the Yankton office. "We are an association of counties that pay a membership each year for our services. We help with all sorts of federal and state programs, community development block grants (CDBGs), housing and urban development, and other programs administered to each of the states."

Clem said the grants his office works with programs that vary from quite simple to very complex.

"A lot of people don't know what we do," he said. "We don't do a lot of self-promotion but the work varies according to the specific grant. It could take as little as a couple of days. Some could take weeks or a couple of months for complicated projects."

One of the main sections of most grants is coordinating the plan specifications and setting up the bidding process, Clem said.

The first decision is which grant will fit a specific project.

"You have to learn what the specific requirements are and what they are looking to fund," Clem said. "Then you have to look at what projects have a good chance of succeeding with a particular grant. A lot of the work is taking a project and marrying it to a specific grant, but a lot of them are very obvious."

One of the specific types of grants District III works with is CDBG grants.

"Usually, those type go to fund community centers, fire halls and things like that," Clem said. "A community often comes to us with a project or a problem, and we decide which grant source, if any, will fit the problem within each of the different agencies."

After the granting sources have been narrowed down, it is time to get to work on writing the proposal.

"We look at what they are looking for in the application and get the information needed to put it all together," Clem said. "Then we submit it, but obviously it is a little more detailed than that, depending on the grant."

Clem said he has worked with a lot of grants for historic properties, but everyone in his office shares the workload and doesn't focus on just one type of project.

"All the planners here at District III, including myself, are all generalists," he said. "We all have programs we're in charge of and our own areas of expertise, but our office is too small to have separate departments. So, well all tend to end up doing similar things."

"I worked at a development district in Tennessee that was twice as big as District III, and we were much more specialized in what we did there," he said. "For instance, we had one person whose entire job was administering Community Development Block Grants, and another person who only did historic preservation work."

"Our office is too small to function well that way, so all of the planners here are involved in CDBG grant writing and administration. I do some historic preservation stuff, but it's not nearly enough to justify a full-time position."



At Planning and Development District III in Yankton, John Clem is among the people who write grant applications for groups and communities.

-- Photo by Tera Schmidt
