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Community Grants as an Instrument of Planning Practice

Neale Smith

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1. Introduction

Community grants are used by a wide variety of government and non-government bodies at different levels across many jurisdictions. They may be particularly prevalent among local and regional governments and in policy sectors where community development is an approach or goal. Yet there has been little rigorous research into this practice. Few formal evaluation studies have been reported. There is no available synthesis of the rationale behind such programs, effective process designs, or their success in achieving intended outcomes. Planners and other professionals who initiate such programs may have little more than intuition to guide them. Thus, the objective of this Chapter is to review the literature on the use of community grants as a tool for urban and regional planning practice. This review is supplemented with evidence from the author's own experience of these programs within two western Canadian provinces; while these cases are specific to a particular geographic and political context, the findings are likely generalizable to urban governments in (at the least) other Western liberal democratic regimes. The Chapter concludes by drawing on the literature and cases to make suggestions for urban planning professionals about how to effectively use community granting as a community development tool.

A working definition of community grants is as follows: "the provision of funding to community groups or organizations by outside parties through a competitive application process" [1: p. 242]. My focus here is primarily upon what I define as small grants, from several hundred to a few thousand US or Canadian dollars—which is typically a miniscule proportion of the funders' total budget. Micro-grants [2-3] and mini-grants [4-6] are other terms which have been used to describe funding allocations of this size.

2. Community grants in British Columbia: A descriptive overview

There is no exhaustive list or record of community granting programs. Given their widespread use, to prepare any comprehensive inventory is probably a hopeless task and out of date before it is even begun. Nevertheless, to demonstrate how community grants are being used in one contemporary setting, I provide this overview from the province of British Columbia, Canada. A simple web search easily finds these and many other examples.

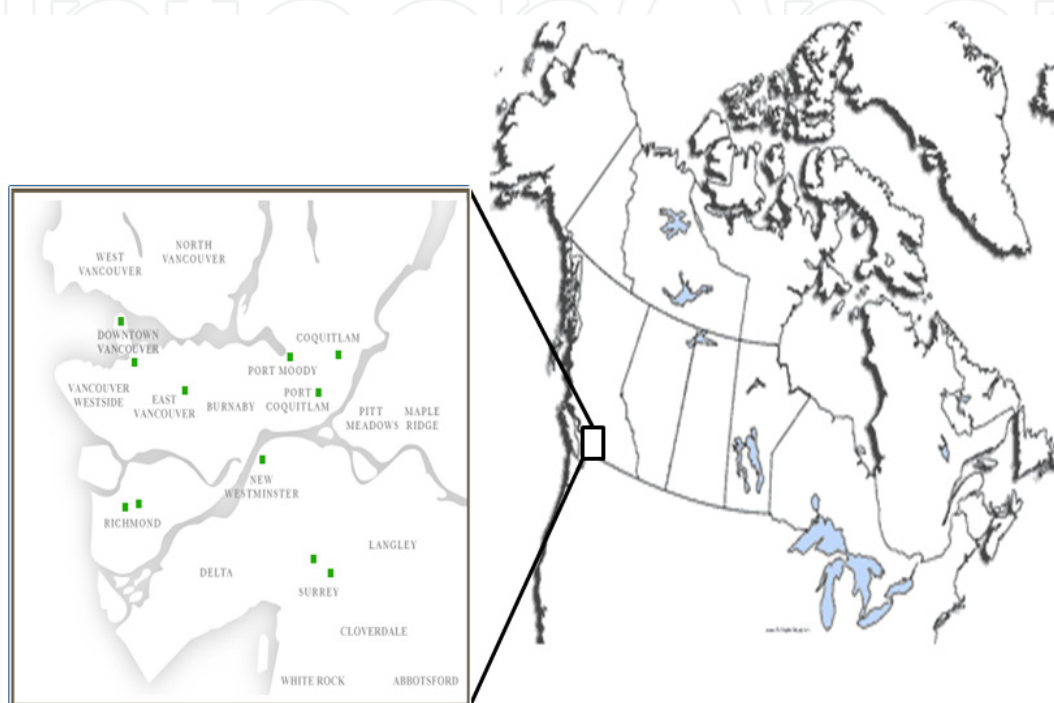


Figure 1. British Columbia's Lower Mainland

A number of local governments in the Lower Mainland region of the province, the metropolitan Vancouver area, have at least one grant program administered by the municipality. For instance, in the city of Vancouver, the Greenest City Neighbourhood Grants¹ most recently funded 16 community groups for projects in areas such as waste reduction, local food, and active transportation. The Community Enhancement Partnership Program in the city of Surrey² offers grants of up to \$3000 to local groups or residents for projects to beautify their neighbourhoods. Gardens and landscaping, graffiti removal, and decorative lighting are some examples of what might be funded. The city of Richmond has a formal policy which sets aside grants in three areas: arts and culture, parks and recreation, and health and social development³. In the city's 2012 budget, the only line item to receive additional money was the grant program⁴. In the city of North Vancouver, an annual grant process distributes money to community groups for both operating expenses and particular project initiatives. Funding is also offered in specific areas such as child care, sustainability, housing, and violence

¹ City of Vancouver, <http://vancouver.ca/ctyclerk/cclerk/20110614/documents/a2.pdf>

² City of Surrey, http://www.surrey.ca/files/cepp_2012_overview.pdf

³ City of Richmond, <http://www.richmond.ca/services/socialplan/citygrant.htm>

⁴ City of Richmond, <http://www.richmond.ca/news/city/2012budgetsapproved.htm>

prevention⁵. The city of New Westminster offers grants for arts and culture, amateur sports, environmental awareness and education, and other areas⁶; this is likely quite typical of the range of activities funded by many other local governments across BC and elsewhere.

The Union of BC Municipalities, the peak association representing the province's local governments, oversaw a Community Health Promotion Fund from 2005-2009⁷. This \$5 million pool of funds was used to support applications on healthy living and chronic disease prevention projects. Over this period, 146 projects were funded; groups within the city of Vancouver received money in three of the four fiscal years. These were larger grants than in many other cases, being up to \$35,000 in some instances. Skill development and partnership creation were some of the outcomes measured across the funded projects [7].

British Columbia's Ministry of Health has also set aside envelopes of funding that could be and were used for community granting. An example is the Community Food Action Initiative, offered in all five of the province's regionally-based health authorities (RHAs). It supports projects related to food security, broadly defined. After a three-year pilot phase (2005-2008) this program was taken up by the health authorities and funded through their core budgets. Some evaluation reports are available [8-10]. Within the city of Vancouver, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCHA) has offered since 2008 health promotion grants through its Healthy Living Program.

Other sectors, too, such as justice or recreation, are involved in the granting game. Thus, the above is an illustrative rather than a comprehensive overview, but serves to demonstrate the range of granting activity which occurs in different sectors often overlapping within a geographic jurisdiction. As it also suggests, there is extensive commonality between urban planning projects with community development intent and health promotion efforts in the health sector. Many of the projects funded through health promotion community grant projects could have equally easily been supported by grant programs initiated by a city or town planning department; many of the same community organizations regularly receive grants from both areas. The social determinants of health, and social sustainability, are concepts around which urban planning and health promotion overlap [11-12]. That local governments have a crucial role in creating conditions for health is an original premise of the healthy cities/communities movement pursued in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere [13-18].

Community Foundations and other not-for-profit, third sector organizations such as the United Way also undertake community granting on an on-going basis. Substantial amounts of money can be involved here. Fifty (50) community foundations across the province of British Columbia belong to the national association, Community Foundations of Canada. Several of these, including the Vancouver Foundation, operate in the Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley region of the province. The Vancouver Foundation disbursed \$41

⁵ City of North Vancouver, <http://www.cnv.org/server.aspx?c=3&i=211>

⁶ City of New Westminster, http://www.newwestcity.ca/business/grants/community_grants.php

⁷ Union of British Columbia Municipalities, <http://www.ubcm.ca/EN/main/funding/healthy-communities/community-health-promotion-fund.html>

million in its most recent yearly program⁸. It is important to note that not all foundations limit recipients of their largesse to those operating within their own municipality. To the author's knowledge, whether there are or should be significant differences in the rationale for and design of grant programs between the public and not-for-profit sectors is a question that has not been previously studied.

3. Case examples

This section describes in more detail two of the contemporary Vancouver examples of community grant programs noted above. The information is derived from document review, supplemented with some interviews of government managers and grant recipients. This is meant to give a sense of how such programs operate in practice and how they are received by community members.

3.1. City of Vancouver, Greenest City Neighbourhood Grants

In 2011, this initiative funded 16 community groups. A total of 54 community projects were proposed, with funding requests amounting to more than five times the total pool of \$100,000 available for allocation. This interest was despite the fact that there were only three weeks between the date when information was publicly posted on the city's website and the submission deadline. City social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, were used for publicity. Proposals were reviewed by staff from four city departments, and recommendations on funding forwarded to Council for approval.

Registered not-for-profit organizations and societies based in the city of Vancouver were eligible to apply. Priority was given to proposals that were innovative, included community partnership, leveraged additional resources, and had plans for sustainability. Grants could range between \$2000 and \$25,000 and projects had a one-year period for implementation—actual allocations ranged from \$2000 to \$15,500, with an average of \$6250. The largest projects were required to submit a completed Outcome Measurement Framework (identical to one used by the United Way and Vancouver Coastal Health Authority). This required identification of inputs, activities, outputs and short-term outcomes, along with associated indicators—that is, a form of logic model [19-20]. For all projects, a written evaluation report is required, including submission of digital photographs illustrating program success.

The Greenest City grants were funded during a civic election year. Because they appeared to be closely associated with the philosophical agenda of Vancouver's governing municipal party, some of the grants were seized upon by the mayor's opponents in an attempt to create controversy. One particular grant of \$5000, which had been awarded to the Environmental Youth Alliance for "Lawns to Loaves", was particularly contentious. While this project aimed to educate urban children about agriculture and food production, one component (in which volunteers turned their front lawns into miniature wheat fields) was derided as 'silly', 'wacky' and 'goofy' [21-22]. William Rees, well-known local professor of

⁸ Vancouver Foundation, <http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca>

community planning, argued that the project had symbolic rather than practical value, in that it might generate conversation about sustainable food systems; one participant called the mini-fields a 'living billboard' [22]. Conversely, the symbolic aspect was precisely what many critics, such as City Caucus blog, attacked⁹. Clearly however, the program fit the criteria established by city staff, and it is enthusiastically championed in some quarters.

3.2. Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, Healthy Living Program: community grants

Since 2008, this program has funded 22 community groups, out of 86 applicants in total. Approximately \$134,000 has been disbursed; the available budget for this program has been less than 15% of the amount requested by interested community participants. This substantial response indicates great local interest and support.

Grants are presently available for a maximum of \$8000, for discrete project activities to be carried out over a planned one-year time span. Projects are mandated to focus on at least one of the Healthy Living Program (HLP)'s priority areas of healthy eating, active living, and tobacco reduction. Projects must substantially target individuals between 35-64 years of age, from an identified disadvantaged or vulnerable population: e.g., low-income, aboriginal, or high-risk ethno-cultural communities. Eligible recipient organizations are non-profit community-based groups or organizations located in (and/or primarily serving a population within) the geographic boundaries of the city of Vancouver. Applicants are expected to obtain support of community partner agencies. A mid-term report and final report are expected, as is participation in a Showcase event, during which each project can highlight its activities and accomplishments.

HLP initiates each call for proposals 3 months prior to deadline. The grant is promoted through health promotion websites and newsletters as well as by health authority staff. There is some evidence that communications are being re-broadcast through community channels; e.g., community agency blog or Twitter feed. Technical assistance, in the form of consultation with HLP staff members, is available and potential applicants are encouraged to avail themselves of this support, though it is not a requirement for successful application. All received applications are pre-screened by HLP staff to ensure that they address the health promotion pillars and target disadvantaged groups. Projects out of area, asking for ineligible items, or incompletely documented are also excluded at this stage. Those which qualify are further assessed by HLP staff. Applications are ranked on the basis of points, and most highly ranked applications are funded until the available grant monies are exhausted. The current scoring tool consists of 11 questions, of which nine are ranked on a scale of 0-2 and two are rated on a scale of 0-1. The range of possible scores is thus 0-20.

Unlike the Greenest City grants, the media attention provided to this health authority program has been largely positive. One physical fitness initiative, Healthiest Winner, which

⁹ City Caucus Blog, <http://archive.citycaucus.com/2011/07/foi-reveals-green-grants-about-thought-experiments-and-symbolism>

was aimed to draw non-traditional members to community recreation facilities, was lauded by one newspaper columnist, herself a participant [23-24]. The program manager has suggested that this coverage brought a cascade of interest. The program has been sustained and expanded since its initial funding, but continues to be unable to meet all the public demand.

4. Conceptual rationale(s) for community grants as a planning tool

Previous research has found little documentation or formal assessment of the rationale for and objectives of community grant programs [1, 25-26]. Literature, however, does suggest that the following conceptual arguments can serve to justify community grants as a policy instrument: community organization and mobilization; devolving or decentralizing decision making and increasing public engagement; and social capital formation and community capacity building.

Often, decision makers have issues which they perceive to be priorities (e.g., as identified through social or epidemiological statistics and other forms of scientific evidence). They may wish to garner community and public support for action on this agenda. Grants, then, can be a means to identify others in the community who are concerned about these same issues and willing to put their own efforts towards addressing them. They might also identify those who can be persuaded to adopt these government preferences as their own. That is, grants might be a means of mobilizing the community behind policies and programs focused on the funder's priorities [27]. Many grant programs appear to do this through articulating a handful of areas upon which eligible proposals must be based, such as described above for the Greenest City priorities of transportation, local food, trees/greening and zero waste, or the VCHA Healthy Living Program's emphasis on eating, physical activity and tobacco reduction. Only rarely do grant programs leave problem identification entirely up to community applicants. Those originating in the healthy communities model or focused on broad determinants of health seem to be the main exceptions [15, 17].

Advocates of decentralizing or devolving decision making are constantly seeking ways to bring key choices within the scope of those closest to the 'grassroots'. Grants can do this, in a limited way on particular issues, by giving community groups and organizations some ability to decide how public resources are spent. Of course, because grant amounts are quite small and projects which they fund typically time-limited, they seldom have the potential to result in dramatic community transformation. Grantees are also constrained by the terms of their grant, which typically are aligned in support of existing government or funder preferences, as described above. Peer allocation, or involving community representatives directly in judging the competitive applications, rather than leaving this solely in the hands of paid bureaucrats or political leaders, would be a further step in empowering local decision making but this appears to be relatively less often undertaken.

Community organizations can be an important locus of social capital [28]; they create venues in which citizens can meet, build relationships, and create social networks. Access to grant money can catalyze the formation of new groups and energize existing ones. In

this sense, granting programs may be less interested in the nature of projects which are planned and more concerned with bringing people together and building skills [29]. This can fall within the rubric of community capacity building, where generalized skills and problem-solving ability are often highly valued outcomes [30]. It appears to be common in Canada; according to Phillips, “most large municipalities help build community capacity by providing grants to community organizations and by co-production of services” [31: p.66].

Public administration and management literatures in the past years have increasingly concluded that many of the issues facing governments are ‘wicked’ problems which frequently are beyond the means of any one jurisdiction or sector to resolve. Thus there have been calls for community governance [31], and the strengthening of collaborative and cooperative multi-sector networks which can mobilize resources from many sources [32]. Community grants may be seen as in line with this prescription, though they go only a small ways towards its realization given that they manifest large differences in power and authority between the funder and the recipient. There is similarly literature around the concept of co-production; this argues that it is increasingly necessary for the public and society at large to contribute with formal governments to the design and implementation of services [33]. Again, while community granting accords with this line of thought, it cannot be seen as more than a small step in that direction, as grant projects provide only small-scale and narrowly targeted programs which are supplemental to the established programming activity of governments and institutionalized community agencies.

While community organizations seem most commonly to obtain grants in order to carry out specific activities (for example, to promote active living through walking clubs, or healthy eating through community kitchens and gardens), they can also be awarded for the creation of community plans [6, 34-35]. However the latter is less likely to be a regular feature of grant programs as it would encourage more frequent challenges to the professional expertise of the funders themselves.

5. Common challenges

Based on the experiences above and the literature in general, we next consider some of the key challenges which must be addressed if community grant programs are to be effectively implemented by municipal planning department staff and others.

To begin with, funders must carefully think through the process which they have in mind. Several important aspects should be addressed, only the most prominent of which can be identified here. One of these is timeline. It seems clear that very short timelines between the issue and close of a community grants call will disadvantage the least established community organizations, those with few full-time staff, or those which are least connected to the current political leadership and least likely to be tuned into the themes and language with which it sympathizes. Many granting programs require projects to be implemented and completed within one calendar or fiscal year; however it is important to recognize that preparation, recruitment and other activities can fall behind schedule in under-resourced

community groups. Grant recipients, in the author's experience, appreciate flexibility to adjust to unforeseen circumstances.

Clear criteria matter. This allows all potential grantees to develop their best applications in light of what is deemed important by the funder; it allows those determining which projects are to be funded to compare one application against another in a meaningful way; and it makes the decisions transparent to outside observers who might wish to review or question them. But clear criteria matter only when they are consistently applied. Those who rate submitted proposals should, as much as possible, share an understanding of how key ideas are defined and what values they reflect. When committee members bring different and previously unarticulated values to the table, problems ensue [1]. It is probably easier to ensure consistent application when the decision makers come from the same organization, but having intersectoral participation enables a broader range of perspectives to be considered and a wider range of knowledge to be drawn upon. As noted above, community engagement might be most advanced when representatives of potential grantees or their constituencies are directly involved in allocating the available money. However, conflicts of interest might need to be controlled for.

Government spending in the present day is under much more scrutiny than may have historically been the case. New Public Management philosophies have been one source of this change [36]. Offering community grants thus becomes somewhat of a risk because the funder gives up the ability to directly manage projects for success. There are thus many questions about how accountability might be maintained [26]. Public-private partnerships might be one model; these typically are based upon detailed contract specifications with clearly defined deliverables. However, it may be hard to apply the same degree of formalization to agreements with modestly-resourced and semi-professional grantees. Grant programs appear more likely to rely upon requirements for performance measurement and evaluation. But these too can be overly onerous for community groups. In addition, they do not necessarily acknowledge different ways of knowing. Planners and other professionals may prefer quantitative measures which appear to give an objective account of whether or not changes are resulting at the community level, while for lay actors their knowledge of impact may derive from the experience of day-to-day immersion in community life, and the stories it generates—embedded experience to which government employees may not have access [26]. A particular challenge is that grant programs fund many different projects at the same time, efforts which target different audiences and employ distinct sets of activities. What kind of common measure might be applied to assess effectiveness across these contexts? Community capacity building might be specified as a common metric for grantees to report upon.

Acceptance of community grants also poses both short-term and long-term risks to the recipient. That is, concerns have been expressed in the literature that community agencies might be co-opted by their participation in such programs. For one, they might end up 'chasing dollars' and so directing their efforts toward actions which fit with government funder priorities rather than those which might suit their community and client stakeholders best. Consistency and continuity in programming might be sacrificed in order

to grab grant money which is targeted to ever-changing priorities and the desire to back new, innovative, and pilot projects rather than the less exciting task of maintaining existing operations. Secondly, there is concern that community groups become dependent upon government funding and so suppress their political advocacy activities [37-38]—for fear of ‘biting the hands that feed them’.

Too much service delivery responsibility cannot be placed upon community grantees – they cannot be downloaded the obligation to assume what governments would normally be called on to do, if they are not also to be given the stable resources and authority required. Program and service delivery grants are prone to this weakness, since they occur outside of community participation in the larger social and economic planning decisions which set the context.

Though seemingly an uncommon opportunity, grant funding might be used for ‘counter-planning’ – providing community groups with resources to look in broader terms at how systems might be aligned to their needs. Advocacy planning is a historical precedent which urban planners might draw on when considering these issues [39-40]. Social action planning [41] and Alinsky-style organizing are other community-based efforts which tend not to fit within the scope of community grant efforts because they might also produce direct challenges to the funders’ own established policy ideas.

Not all community organizations are created equal. A certain degree of organizational capacity is normally needed in order for groups to successfully compete for grants. Being able to interpret requests for proposal and reframe an organization’s priorities in those terms – grantpersonship – may be a self-perpetuating skill. Likewise, designing, implementing and evaluating programs to improve community well-being are capacities which are not equally distributed across groups [5]. In recognition of such limits, funders can offer technical assistance to potential grantees. This can take a multitude of forms. One is logic modeling, another may be evaluation planning; many other options are possible. Another way to assist potential grantees is to provide standard data collection instruments. Assistance has been well-received by grantees as reported in the author’s experience in both Alberta and British Columbia. Of course, when grant programs incorporate a technical assistance component, they require longer timeframes and more resources contributed upfront on the funders’ part. This affects process design considerations as described earlier.

Grant funded programs commonly wrestle with the issue of sustainability [42]. Grants are term-limited – one year for instance in the case of Greenest City and Healthy Living Program funds as described above –and rarely can recipients then apply for continuing or bridging funds. Yet a lot of groundwork is required in order to establish programs which can be taken up and maintained afterward; such work is seldom acknowledged or built into grant systems as an eligible category. Also, what it is that should be sustained?—it may be less important that a program be institutionalized than its benefits be continued [43]. Again, this might be a reason why capacity building is identified as an objective for grant programs. Finally, note that the absence of longitudinal research related to community grant initiatives makes it impossible to reach data-driven conclusions about the nature of efforts which may or may not lead to continuation of funded project efforts.

6. Conclusion

Community grants are widely used by local governments and other jurisdictions in Canada and beyond. Yet there has been very little effort to systematically study these processes and their outcomes. In this chapter, I have looked at the conceptual rationales for why planners and other professionals might wish to use this tool, and the challenges and risks associated with it. I end with the following suggestions for planning professionals who may wish to use community grants as part of a suite of community development instruments.

Targeted dollars – providing community grants for projects that meet a set of priorities determined by the funder – may be the best for community mobilization objectives. Open-ended calls might perhaps better serve community building. This could include ‘counter-planning’, in which grants might be provided for communities to develop their own visions for physical, social or economic development. Restricting grant proposals to topics determined by the funder is more likely than an open call to co-opt the voluntary sector into carrying out a government agenda, while unrestricted competitions may run a greater risk of funding projects that diverge from public and political preferences and are harder to justify from an accountability perspective. Any grant scheme then needs to consider these different risks and possible strategies for balancing them.

Community grants involve the allocation of public money, raised from the taxpayers’ pockets, and so they must not be given out with wild abandon. But community organizations also may have limited skill and time to produce detailed performance measurement and evaluation reports. The sorts of quantitative measures which suit bureaucratic mindsets might be seen as burdensome and irrelevant by grantees. Therefore, planners looking at a grants program might be advised to develop a reporting scheme which combines formal indicators with other forms of evidence, such as stories of significant change [44]. Community capacity building can serve as an outcome measure which may be common to projects which otherwise use distinct approaches to reach divergent audiences. While media attention to community grants might be rare, planners will be best placed to respond to any controversy when the criteria for funding and processes by which decisions are made are transparent and auditable by outside observers.

The overall quality of both applications and funded projects seems likely to be higher when community organizations have access to technical assistance from the grantor. In the author’s experience, recipients are most willing to go on record and express their appreciation for such procedures. This may well help to ‘level the field’ and ensure that more than a select group of organizations can compete for funds available. However, there is a danger that technical assistance might become another way of structuring or controlling what community groups do—that is, it might (unintentionally or otherwise) discourage creative but controversial ideas and steer applicants towards the safe middle road. Offering such support will also demand additional time and resources on the part of the funder and so should be designed into the process from the start.

Grant programs should consider the question of sustainability—will a one-time injection of resources make a long-term difference? For the practicing planner, it is probably most

important to decide what should be sustained. If it is the project or program, then options for completing the necessary groundwork of identifying and recruiting on-going sponsors should be built in as eligible expenses. However it is probably more common for transferrable knowledge and skills to be the most desired outcomes. This is likely why community capacity building recurs in the grants literature as both a process objective and outcome.

Done thoughtfully, grant programs can make a difference for individuals and communities. There is no shortage of examples from municipalities around the world. Yet there has so far been little synthesis of experiences or development of best practices in this sphere; this chapter has offered an initial contribution towards that end.

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