

## **MEMO**

**Date: 2/17/2021**  
**To: CRA Board**  
**From: Carlos Peralta, Project Manager**  
**RE: 2021 Forward Fund Update**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2021 Forward Fund Grant (FFG) may be the most important grant year of the six-year grant program. As Cambridge non-profits, community groups, and small businesses, work to recover from the global pandemic, the FFG program offers local organizations resources that will assist in adapting and rebuilding for the future. The 2021 grant program reinvests a portion of the CRA's development revenue generated in the Kendall Square Urban Redevelopment Project into community infrastructure that will assist with providing the Cambridge community with support to continue in the recovery efforts.

The CRA staff propose to continue funding two types of grants: Capital Infrastructure and Technical Assistance. In order to help address the increased reliance on technology and confront the digital divide that has been highlighted over the past year, staff recommends updating grant eligibility to include upgrades to an organization's Information Technology infrastructure or equipment needs, in addition to funding more traditional capital projects. The Capital Infrastructure grants will fund the implementation of construction projects, equipment purchases, or Information Technology upgrades that help nonprofits deliver critical programs. The Technical Assistance grants provide funding for feasibility analysis, final architectural design, or engineering studies for organizations as they plan for future investments of their facilities. The Technical Assistance grant can also assist with capacity building and planning needed to enhance community programs.

As has been the usual practice of the FFG program, the target applicants remain local organizations and non-profits, providing services to the Cambridge community.

## **FUNDING AMOUNTS**

At the December 2020 Board meeting, the Board voted to allocate \$300,000 for the 2021 FFG program with an additional \$200,000 for COVID-19 small business relief. The Small Business relief program is under development as CRA staff work with City staff to design a program that best supplements Federal and State assistance programs in an impactful manner.

For the FFG, staff proposes distributing two-thirds of the allocation for Capital Infrastructure grants (\$200,000) while reserving a third for Technical Assistance (\$100,000). The maximum award for Capital Infrastructure projects would be \$50,000 per grantee with a one-to-one match requirement for any grants exceeding \$25,000. For the Technical Assistance grant, the maximum award suggested is \$10,000 per grantee.

Staff is confident that the proposed award amounts will provide the opportunity for several proposed projects to be funded. This allocation will ensure Forward Fund's ability to support more grantees in large capital infrastructure projects. The Technical Assistance grant will not only provide Information Technology capacity building but will provide funding to conduct feasibility studies for capital infrastructure projects. These studies should create a pipeline for future Capital Infrastructure grants.

As in previous years, the CRA reserves the right to allocate funding based on the quality and quantity of applications received, and may also, request project modifications or other conditions before disbursement of funds.

## GRANT TYPES

### **Community Capital Infrastructure Grants (\$200k in available funds)**

*Award funding up to \$50,000*

Awards would be offered to applicants seeking to fund a physical improvement project that serves a civic facility that provides public assistance and resources to the local community. The proto-typical use of Capital Infrastructure grants focus on building or infrastructure projects for non-profit facilities or Cambridge- based organization with a neighborhood function that touches a significant amount of the population. Projects involving private property will need to specifically demonstrate the “publicness” and civic value of the investment. Large Capital Infrastructure grants seeking funds greater than \$25,000 will need to demonstrate a match of at least 1:1 support from other sources. If the proposal is for the grant to be part of a much larger project, it will need to demonstrate that the CRA investment is filling a critical gap in the viability of that project and demonstrate how that money will be utilized to meet the FFG goals.

### **Technical Assistance Grants (\$100k in available funds)**

*Award funding up to \$10k*

Awards would be offered to applicants seeking to fund a feasibility, final architectural design, or engineering study for organizations pursuing preconstruction information and relevant data related to a facility improvement project. The FFG has expanded eligibility to include Information Technology installations or upgrades that serve to directly connect programs to members of the Cambridge community.

Types of technical assistance may include, but are not limited to:

- Architectural and engineering studies,
- Business plans and market research related to an expanded or new facility,
- Comprehensive facility maintenance planning,
- Organizational capacity building, or
- Information technology installations or equipment purchases that directly assist community programs.

## PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS

Furthermore, to allow for a successful 2021 grant program staff recommends the following revisions to the operations of the program:

- **Extended outreach efforts:** Virtual outreach engagement will include monthly Zoom office hours in addition to presenting at local organizational meetings, and sending out weekly email blasts. The new office hours component will provide applicants a chance to speak with CRA staff regarding a proposed project, application process, or other aspects of the program during this remote working phase.
- **Modifying the Selection Committee’s involvement:** The Committee will virtually meet twice during 2021 to review the proposals, as opposed to three times in 2019. The dates for the review sessions will be in late spring and early fall.
- **An abridged application will be provided for the Information Technology grant type:** Applicants in the past had to complete one application for different grant types making the application and review process burdensome. This has been corrected in 2021 to include a simpler application for the Information Technology grant.

## WHAT'S NEXT

While 2021 will continue to be challenging as the City rebounds from the pandemic, the 2021 Forward Fund will not be the only assistance the CRA will provide. Staff and members of the Community Development Department continue to hold discussion on how best the CRA's additional COVID relief funding can continue to assist the small business community as many restaurants and retail in the spring as many begin to reopen from hibernating for the winter. Staff will return to the Board to present recommendations for a new Small Business relief program.