



FINDING FUNDS TO KEEP TRAFFIC HUMMING

State, Federal Programs Help Townships Improve Transportation Assets

Townships face the difficult task of maintaining roads, bridges, and other transportation infrastructure with limited budgets and resources. Learn what grant opportunities are available and how municipalities use transportation funding to get more projects done with less.

BY HANNA MARTIN / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Like any municipality, West Wheatfield Township, a small, rural community of about 2,100 people in Indiana County, has limited resources. In fact, the township has gotten by for 55 years without raising taxes. However, when a bridge was in dire need of repair, the township needed to find the funds to make the fixes.

“The bridge was originally made back in the early 1960s,” says Chairman Shawn Baird. “Currently, the way the bridge stands before we shut it down, there are probably only two beams that are still supporting the bridge. The other five or six were already falling down into the creek.”

The project will be quite a large undertaking: The township will need to remove the entire road surface from the

bridge and all the deteriorating support beams. The only part of the original bridge that will remain is the headwall that crosses the creek.

The township decided to throw its hat in the ring and apply for its first grant from the state Department of Community and Economic Development’s (DCED) Multimodal Transportation Fund (MTF) and successfully secured \$500,000 for the project.

West Wheatfield is relatively new to the process of applying for transportation grants. After the township's fire department needed a supervisor to sign off on one of its grants, township staff realized how much untapped funding existed for municipalities.

"Probably part of why this project is so pricey is because everything is getting more expensive from inflation, so it was time to dabble in grants," says township secretary Tammie Shetler. "Joe [Shetler, a supervisor,] was down there hanging upside down on the bridge trying to get pictures to show how bad the bridge was. He went with us to see Sen. Joe Pittman, and I think they really loved the presentation.

"You can talk about things all you want," she continues, "but until you see pictures put up on a screen to show that there's a hole in the bridge that you could throw your dog through and there's a school bus that goes across it every day picking up children ... Sen. Pittman sat up in his seat, and I think he was really on our side from that moment."

Finding funding opportunities

While West Wheatfield Township successfully applied for DCED's grant, many other transportation funding opportunities exist. From federal opportunities through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) to PennDOT's Green Light-Go program and Multimodal Transportation Fund (*separate from the DCED program*) to reimbursement programs, plenty of prospects exist for townships.

For example, DCED's MTF is used for the development, repair, or improvement of transportation assets for municipalities, councils of governments, businesses, and other organizations, and can be used for projects costing a minimum of \$100,000, with



West Wheatfield Township in Indiana County received a \$500,000 grant from DCED's Multimodal Transportation Fund to repair a heavily used local bridge.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MCMAHON, A BOWMAN COMPANY

Lower Salford Township in Montgomery County completed the culvert project shown above with a DCED Multimodal Transportation Fund Program Grant.

grants not exceeding \$3 million. The program also requires a 30% funding match from municipalities. However, PennDOT's MTF is a reimbursement program, also with a 30% funding match, in which townships must work closely with PennDOT during the application process and project execution.

Townships can discover transportation grants and reimbursement programs by working with an engineer or PennDOT Municipal Services representatives or dedicating time each week to identifying opportunities in-house. For example, PennDOT hosts a traffic signal portal where it posts when application rounds will be open, and municipalities can enter an email address to be

notified of opportunities. Additionally, PennDOT shares grant opportunities with regional planning organizations, in the *Pennsylvania Bulletin*, and on social media.

"We try to do everything we can to get the word out, but we do occasionally hear that people didn't know about an opportunity, and that's not something we ever want to happen," says Steve Gault, chief of PennDOT's Traffic Safety & Management Operations Arterials and Planning Section.

Lower Salford Township in Montgomery County is no newcomer to finding and applying for funding opportunities. The township has received funds for transportation projects through PennDOT's Green Light-Go

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grant program to clear up a congested intersection, a Traffic Signal Technologies grant to update the traffic system in the township, the Municipal Bridge Retro-Reimbursement Program (MBRP), and the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside (TASA) program. The township has also been awarded money

through DCED's Greenways, Trails, and Recreation Program and Multimodal Transportation Fund Program and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission's Transportation and Community Development Initiative (TCDI) to improve pedestrian walkability, as well as Montgomery County funding opportunities.

Township staff and supervisors work with transportation engineers McMahon, a Bowman Company, to create a list of transportation projects and identify potential grants that may be appropriate for them.

"We've been working with the township on a project prioritization list, and projects range from traffic signals to roadway infrastructure to bridges to pedestrian trails and sidewalks," says Stephanie Butler, P.E., Lower Salford Township traffic engineer and McMahon senior project manager. "When someone gets an email that a program is open, they don't say at this point, 'What project are we going to submit for?' We've already identified the project and whether it meets the application criteria, and we have projects ready before the application period even opens."

Craft a stellar application

Once townships have identified projects and the grants they would like to apply for, it's time to start preparing the application. First, check whether the funding program has a required pre-scoping application. Many PennDOT opportunities, such as the Automated Red Light Enforcement Transportation Enhancement (ARLE) Grant and the Green Light-Go Program, require municipalities to complete pre-scoping applications to determine whether projects are a good fit for funding, while others like the MTF have no pre-scoping requirement.

However, even before starting a pre-scoping application, the township should evaluate a project itself and thoroughly review the application to determine the chances of receiving funding.

"It may sound very basic and simple, but the one thing that town-

"Routine maintenance proposals generally **don't do as well as the projects that are going to make things better** than they are now."

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ships really need to do is to really take their time reading the application and the questions we ask,” David Bratina, director of PennDOT’s Multimodal Transportation Fund program, says. “Unfortunately, I think many times, the applicant kind of glosses over some of the questions, and they could have expanded on their answers a bit more.”

“Really try to make sure the project is aligned with the goals of the program and is going to have a positive benefit,” Gault adds. “Routine maintenance proposals generally don’t do as well as the projects that are going to make things better than they are now.”

Yet, townships should be wary to not include unnecessary details. Gault recommends trying to justify projects in a short, concise way.

“Some people are sending in huge books of information that’s just a lot of fluff, and it gets in the way of reviewing things in a timely manner and isn’t adding value to helping us understand what they’re doing and why they’re doing it,” he says. “The things I look at the most are the cost estimate to see the details of what’s actually being done and the justification of why it’s important.”

From the early stages of the application process, townships should work with a transportation engineer and their regional PennDOT representatives to capture the scope of the problem, draft a solution, and devise price estimates for the project.

“We definitely want everyone at the local government level to consider PennDOT a resource as they pursue these funds,” Alexis Campbell, PennDOT press secretary, says. “We’re here to help and provide information to help their applications be successful. We definitely see ourselves as a partner for local government, and we want to see their success, as well.”

Upper Moreland Township in Montgomery County has received both DCED and PennDOT MTF grants totaling nearly \$3 million toward a \$14 million interchange improvement project. Manager Matthew Candland says making relationships with experts



Lower Salford Township used a MontCo 2040 Implementation Grant to fund the Clemens Road Path and Sidewalk project (top two above) and the Municipal Bridge Retro-Reimbursement Program through the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and PennDOT to replace a township bridge superstructure (bottom photo).

in the transportation field and decision-makers in Harrisburg helped them secure the funding.

“Having a capable and competent transportation engineer is key,” he says.

“I’m not sure how you would write a great application without a transportation engineer. And if you have to promote your project, you have to talk to those folks that make the decisions

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MCMAHON, A BOWMAN COMPANY

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at the state level and partner with your state delegation.”

When it’s time to write the grant, townships should consider hiring a grant writer to make their application shine.

“A good grant writer will definitely help,” West Wheatfield’s Shetler recommends. “We have a grant writer. Your average Joe couldn’t necessarily pull this off. It just takes good teamwork and reaching out and working with other people to help you.”

A deeper dive into grant opportunities

Now that we’ve reviewed how to find funds and tips for writing an application that stands out, let’s dive deeper into several transportation grant programs and learn how townships successfully secured funds for their projects.

PennDOT Multimodal Transportation Fund

Not to be confused with DCED’s Multimodal Transportation Fund (MTF), PennDOT’s MTF program is for the development and enhancement of transportation assets that enrich the community.

“We’re really looking for how different modes of travel are enhancing their communities,” says Bratina, who oversees the program for PennDOT. “Just sending in an application to pave streets isn’t going to do it. If they can couple that with other modes of transportation, that would greatly increase their chances.”

Last year, Upper Moreland Township received a \$1.6 million grant through PennDOT’s MTF. Coupled with the township’s \$1.35 million grant from DCED’s MTF, Upper

MORE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Federal programs help townships upgrade transportation infrastructure

Moreland is on its way to funding the \$14 million project to improve the Willow Grove interchange on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

“One of the interchanges only has one lane going onto the Turnpike, and it backs up horribly,” Candland says. “An improvement really should have happened many years ago, but it never did, so the township took the leap to start rectifying this problem.”

Prior to applying, Upper Moreland worked with traffic engineer McMahon and the KSA Group, a consultant, to determine the scope of the project.

“The project that would solve this problem is the construction of a new overpass bridge that goes over the Turnpike off-ramp and then loops around and goes underneath the road you were just on,” Candland says. “The total cost is about \$14 million, and we’ve gotten \$3 million so far, so we’re just going to keep chugging away to try and get the other financing.”

PennDOT recommends townships applying for funding for large or complicated projects like the Willow Grove interchange should prepare a preliminary design and cost estimate before the application window opens. Additionally, townships may want to secure funding sources that could potentially be used as matching funds prior to the next MTF funding round.

On the PennDOT site, applicants can review the *Multimodal Transportation Fund Success Manual* to see eligible projects, match requirements, pre-application requirements, an application checklist, post-award compliance requirements, and frequently asked questions. To learn more, go to penndot.pa.gov, choose the Projects & Programs tab, and select Multimodal Program from the drop-down menu.

Application rounds for PennDOT’s MTF typically open in September; however, townships can apply to DCED’s MTF through July 31. (*Go to dced.pa.gov/programs/multimodal-transportation-fund/*)

Green Light-Go

PennDOT also offers the Green

Like the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside Program, municipalities can take advantage of federal funding opportunities through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), also called the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), in addition to state transportation funding.

Signed in November 2021, BIL invests approximately \$550 billion in infrastructure nationwide. Eligible projects for various grants include bridge infrastructure, infrastructure for electric vehicles, transportation safety programs, reconnecting communities, and new and emerging technologies.

PennDOT’s IIJA page (www.penndot.pa.gov/Doing-Business/Pages/IIJA.aspx) publishes upcoming grant alerts. Currently, the U.S. Department of Transportation is accepting applications for its Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Discretionary Grant Opportunity (www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=346798) to deploy charging and alternative fueling infrastructure. The grant is divided into two categories. While the Community Charging and Fueling Program simply requires a project to be publicly accessible and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, applicants to the Alternative Fuel Corridor Program must have a contract with a private entity to acquire, install, or operate alternative infrastructure and be located along an alternative fuel corridor.

“Soon, a convenient, reliable, and accessible EV [electric vehicle] charging network will be something that residents and businesses expect and look for when they are making decisions about where to live and invest,” says a spokesperson from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). “Participating in the CFI program is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leverage federal dollars to jumpstart building that community-focused network now.”

Rural communities can even benefit from applying to the program. The U.S. Department of Transportation has published a Rural EV Toolkit to help rural communities plan for and fund EV charging infrastructure.

“In rural parts of the country — home to 20% of Americans and almost 70% of America’s road miles — EVs can be an especially attractive alternative to conventional vehicles,” the FHWA says. “Rural residents drive more than their urban counterparts, spend more on vehicle fuel and maintenance, and often have fewer alternatives to driving to meet their transportation needs. Over the long run, EVs will help residents of rural areas reduce those costs and minimize the environmental impact of transportation in their communities.”

Townships applying to any federal transportation funding opportunity, including the CFI program, should review the FY 2023 DOT Grant Application Success checklist from the U.S. DOT (www.transportation.gov/grants/dot-navigator/fy-2023-discretionary-grant-preparation-checklist). To apply for federal funding, visit grants.gov.

Light-Go program, which townships can use to improve the efficiency and operation of their traffic signals. Examples of eligible projects include the addition or replacement of LED bulbs, traffic signal retiming, performance monitoring, and modernization

upgrades. New traffic signals, routine maintenance, emergency preemption equipment, battery backups, and flashing warning devices are not eligible for funding.

“Green Light-Go is focused on improving mobility, so traffic signals and

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projects that are going to provide less congestion will get prioritized,” says Gault, who oversees the program.

Cranberry Township in Butler County has leveraged the Green Light-Go program to coordinate the 51 traffic

signals it maintains for four municipalities as part of an intermunicipal agreement.

“Our traffic signals adapt in real time, and we have a traffic operations center,” Cranberry Director of Public Works Kelly Maurer says. “All that’s been leveraged by state grants, and over the last 10 years, we have leveraged \$9 million in PennDOT grants. We use the Green Light-Go grants to upgrade our signals to new technology so that everything is camera detection, and then we use ARLE grants for new signals.”

Warrington Township in York County also recently received \$279,400 through the Green Light-Go program to modernize an old traffic signal. The township has worked closely with PennDOT during the grant application process.

“We just had a field view with PennDOT District 8, and I think the final product isn’t going to be exactly what we want, but we’re going to replace outdated traffic equipment that’s getting expensive to maintain with complete traffic control and monitoring equipment,” says Jim Smedley, a member of the township planning commission. “It’s important to work with an engineer who’s familiar with PennDOT grant programs and procedures. Also, try to involve PennDOT traffic engineering staff in the decision making from the very beginning to determine exactly what is needed and what can and can’t be done.”

“We’re getting about 80% funding from them to do something that we probably would not have been able to do,” he continues, “so I would encourage any municipality that wants to modernize its signal equipment to definitely apply to that grant.”

Green Light-Go requires a 20% match and is a reimbursement-based program, meaning townships must directly pay contractors and submit for reimbursement through PennDOT’s eGrants system. Townships must also complete a pre-application scoping process. For more information, go to www.dot.state.pa.us/public/Bureaus/BOMO/Portal/TSPortal/

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CRANBERRY TOWNSHIP



Green Light-Go is one of the many grants Cranberry Township in Butler County has received for traffic signal improvements. The township uses its own traffic operations center (bottom photo) to monitor the 51 traffic signals it maintains.



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Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside Program

When reviewing transportation projects that could be funded through grants and reimbursement programs, townships shouldn't forget about pedestrians. Created by the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside (TASA) Program provides funding for transportation alternatives, such as on- and off-road bicycle lanes, infrastructure that enhances community mobility and improves non-driver residents' access to public transportation, trails that serve a transportation purpose, and safe routes to schools.

"The program improves normal resident rotation and the safety of the public and provides safe routes to schools and areas of interest in the region," PennDOT's Transportation Planning Specialist Justin Cambric says. "We'll fully fund the construction even if the municipality and the sponsors are responsible for the pre-construction costs. There's not a strict match requirement like there typically is with federal funds."

Winning projects score high in evaluation categories such as network connectivity consistent with regional land use and planning, collaboration with stakeholders, economic impact,



Warrington Township in York County leveraged \$279,400 through the Green Light-Go program to modernize an outdated traffic signal.

and project value. Projects are also judged against two more heavily weighted areas of emphasis, including project readiness and deliverability and pedestrian and bicyclist safety.

The TASA program provides a minimum of \$50,000 and maximum of \$1 million for construction projects. The application cycle typically opens in the late spring or early summer and closes in the fall. To learn more, go to penndot.pa.gov, choose the Projects & Programs tab, select Planning, and scroll down to Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside in the blue box. Email RA-pdTASA@pa.gov with questions.

Persistence is key

When applying for any transportation grant, townships should keep on top of where their application is in the process. When West Wheatfield Township applied for the \$500,000 DCED MTF fund to repair a crumbling bridge, they were in frequent communication with PennDOT representatives and other stakeholders about the status of the application.

"It's not for the people who administer these grants to come knocking on your door," Stetler says. "The information is out there, and you really just have to get off your keister and start looking for stuff and asking questions. Be very persistent. Sometimes we're going to knock, but sometimes, we're going to downright pound on those doors, but you've got to do it. Don't give up. It does take a lot, but the time it took for us paid off." ♦

"It just takes good teamwork and reaching out and working with other people to help you."

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