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Dealing with the Feds

Federal Funding, Bureaucratic Idiosyncrasies, and Urban Life in the 1960s

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A Cover Awry

Many who are involved in government and nonprofits have taken courses in how to write successful grant applications. No doubt, some are helpful, but there's nothing like experience.

This grant application had its genesis when Lady Bird Johnson whispered in Lyndon's ear "America needs to be beautified." Shortly thereafter, President Johnson proposed the Highway Beautification Act, which faced fierce opposition from the billboard industry, and initially became bogged down in Congress. Johnson, likely the most accomplished arm-twister to hold office, told his Cabinet: "You know, I love that woman and by God, we're going to get it for her." And he did.

Soon, billboards around interstate highways started coming down, and wildflower patches emerged. Parallel programs were also enacted at Johnson's insistence, to "beautify" urban areas.

My boss, the City Administrator of Trenton, NJ, kept track of such emerging opportunities, and thus we were among the first city applicants for funding to plant trees, renovate parks, and build urban mini-parks. It fell to me, recently out of graduate school, to do the writing of the

application. As is often the case, time was tight. The program was administered by the then-young US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), whose original planned name of Department of Urban Development had thankfully been dropped. We had cultivated a contact in the Philadelphia HUD Area Office, and he was anxious to be one of the early awarders of a grant.

Of course, bureaucracies being what they are, the drafting of the regulations by HUD Central had been slow, so we had little time left to assemble the pile of paperwork that the regs required with the grant application. And that's what it turned out be. We needed a letter from the Mayor officially making the application, a letter from the City Clerk (with the embossed City seal affixed) attesting that the City Council had concurred, a letter from the City Attorney that we had the legal right to apply, a statement from the County Planning Commission that the project was consistent with regional goals, a concurrence by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, and a bunch of other certificates, not to mention the actual description of the work to be performed, documentation of the required local match, and the detailed budget for the requested grant.

The evening before we were due to hand-deliver the application to our contact in Philly by the noon deadline, I spotted one last hurdle: "… the application shall be submitted on legal size paper, two-hole punched at the top, in a brown index-weight 11" x 17" binder. Applications not meeting these requirements cannot be accepted."

Simple! I called the stockroom, and asked for the covers. "We don't have any!" "OK, call the local stationery place, they have a state contract and must have them." "Nope, nobody uses them." Finally, after frantically dispatching several staffers to sources all around the county, we located a supply, inserted the boilerplate material in them, and jumped in the car to get to Philly by noon. To be sure, I called ahead to our contact and he assured us he'd be there with open arms.

For some reason, my boss decided to go with me. Fighting our way down Roosevelt Boulevard, and locating a parking place in center city, we bounded up the sidewalk in front of the Federal building near City Hall, with applications in hand, at 11:45 AM. Just to see our contact bounding out the door with even greater speed, saying "Gotta go to lunch, hang around and I'll be back at one."

So we wandered down the street to City Hall, took in the sights, and at 12:45 were back in the lobby, awaiting our man, who did not show until 1:15, apparently having enjoyed his lunch. He expressed his delight that we were there, and invited us upstairs to his cubicle. We whipped out the five copies of the application, each two-hole punched at the top, in a brown index-weight 11" x 17" binder.

He took one look, ripped the covers off, threw them in his trash can, dropped the contents in a filing cabinet and said "This is great, but those damned covers don't fit in any of our filing

cabinets. I don't know why people use them. We'll get back to you after everybody reviews the application."

We bit our tongues, thanked him for his help, and did not start screaming until we were half a block away. My boss didn't seem to harbor his resentment long, though, as I soon learned why he had wanted to come along on the delivery. It involved a stop at a beef and beer joint on Roosevelt Boulevard that he knew. The beef was great, but officially I can't comment on the beer, because I was driving the City car.

If the tearing off of the 11" x 17" covers was a strike against us, we didn't sense it. Five weeks later, we received the grant award notice, and proceeded to rebuild the city's long-neglected Frederic Law Olmsted-designed Cadwalader Park, and otherwise beautify the city. Over several years of successive funding, we removed hundreds of dead street trees, planted over 1300 new ones, spiffed up 25 existing parks, created 23 neighborhood miniparks, and fixed neighborhood amenities. We even snuck in re-bronzing the doors of City Hall and building an attractive landscaped parking lot out back.

Those residents who cared about such things were pleased. Feedback from several deteriorated neighborhoods was positive. But as the program continued, other factors intervened, and things did not all end as anticipated.

Plans Gone Asunder

For cities prepared to apply for and manage Federal grants in the late sixties, the money just seemed to roll in. The Great Society was at work! With or without the required 11" x 17" covers, our applications for beautification grants were carefully tuned, we completed projects on time, and most important to the Federal bureaucrats, we met reporting deadlines, and spent every nickel so they would not have to perform any contorted accounting!

Trenton's success on the HUD Beautification front led to a phone call to City Hall one day from our HUD rep in the Philly area office, who by now was our real buddy. "The PR people at the regional office would like to set up a tour of your beautification projects, maybe get some good press with photos!" Ever eager to make a higher level in the HUD bureaucracy also our buddy, we scheduled his visit. And this was not just any hack – this was the Assistant Regional Administrator for Metropolitan Development of the Regional Office of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development!

Our brains spun, plotting a good impression that would lead to an increased flow from the Federal War on Poverty and related expressions of financial largesse. So, we set the stage carefully, planning out a full day of visits to our Federally-funded miniparks, streets lined with new trees, the new modernistic comfort station and playground in Cadwalader Park, and more. Not to rest on our laurels, we tipped off the City Hall reporters to be on hand for a presentation

in the Mayor's office (those days, Trenton had two very active local newspapers, each with one or more reporters assigned full-time to cover city affairs). We then arranged for an exclusive restaurant in the City's Chambersburg section that cooked outstanding food from scratch, whatever the guest wanted, to open for a special lunch for our distinguished visitor.

The word got out among the city workers, and as the day arrived, the parks maintenance guys arrived with several dozen potted marigolds from the city greenhouse, which were carefully placed in the City Hall lobby to greet the dignitary as a clear representation of our commitment to the beauty of nature. And, most important of all, as the ten o'clock arrival hour approached, our parking lot attendant was in readiness to direct the visitor's car to the coveted space nearest the rear building entrance as suggested in the detailed itinerary we had sent him.

Ten o'clock came and went, and no dignitary. Frantic calls elicited guesses that he was on his way. Sometime after eleven, he sidled in the City Hall front door, brushed by the awaiting marigolds aligned in salute, and approached the blind concessionaire, asking where to go. Fortunately, we intercepted him, and ushered him up to the Mayor's Office, where he received the Key to the City, accompanied by the flashing of bulbs. A bit late, and not quite as planned, but we were off to a good start.

Next, he was given the royal treatment in the Mayor's car to see several parks and get some more pictures taken. We explained how we were targeting some neighborhoods in an attempt to use newly constructed miniparks on previously vacant lots to instill neighborhood pride.

He soon muttered something about running late, so we cut short several stops and headed to the restaurant, figuring that an outstanding meal cooked to order would make for happy memories of Trenton, not to mention a friendly disposition when reviewing future grant applications. Once there, loosened up by some generous libations, he confided that this was the best job he'd ever had. Previously he had been a lawyer in the distressed coal country of northeastern Pennsylvania, having a tough time making ends meet, until the miracle of being of the right party at the right time ensconced him in this job of a lifetime in the HUD regional office.

As the chef worked his magic in the kitchen, our honored visitor kept checking his watch, and finally asked if he could just get a quick sandwich so he could hit the road. A veal parmigiana masterpiece was quickly produced and consumed, and he was gone. We never saw him again.

Chagrined as we were by what felt like strike two, his hasty departure did not seem to impair the next round of grants, and thus in the summer of 1967, we refocused our beautification efforts to address a larger looming problem. In retrospect, however, his departure may have been another warning that all does not always go as planned.

The third, and more serious, strike hit us unexpectedly, during a presentation to a large group of residents in a poor neighborhood we had targeted for a full round of beautification largesse. So far, our efforts had been appreciated, but when I showed the crowd a large map of the area,

gussied up by our landscape architect with colorful sketches and locations of the new trees, there was a commotion in the back of the room. “We don’t want any trees! If you plant them, we’ll cut them down!”

Even the folks in the front of the room, largely African-American, were shocked, and I quickly assumed the person was referring to the possibility of having to rake up leaves from the newly planted trees. So, problem solved: “We sure don’t want to put any trees where they aren’t wanted. Just give us your address and we’ll be sure not to plant any in front of your house.”

But this was in 1967, “the Long Hot Summer of 1967” as it was later called. Newark and Plainfield had suffered major rioting, Detroit had burned, the nation was uneasy for reasons of an unpopular war, culture clashes, poverty, and racial tensions. Trenton, with conscientious leadership and a generally calmer populace, had avoided any disturbances while other cities burned, but something ominous was afoot.

We proceeded with spending the beautification funds and stepped up other programs as well. But soon we were to learn that the voice from the back of the room was not really talking about trees.

Seeing Ourselves

In July, 1967, just two years before the United States landed two men on the moon, the Mayor of Trenton stood on a dusty corner of the city’s decaying Ewing-Southard neighborhood – old, worn, and tired – occupied by people of limited financial means but some pride. All department directors were on hand. This was what came to be called “The Long Hot Summer of 1967,” in which Atlanta, Boston, and Cincinnati had already burned. When the Mayor spoke, it was out of fear and hope. He loved his city and did not want it destroyed. His directive was simple: “I want this neighborhood fixed up, and I want it done now!”

Trenton had been among the first to create a Community Action Program to funnel in Great Society funds, but that took time to start. The promised Model Cities program funding was still in the pipeline. Something had to be done NOW, and it had to employ the limited resources on hand. As we optimistically but perhaps naively wrote at the time, “Trenton would use its despair as a foundation for constructive action.”

We had already piloted the use of Federal beautification funds in one neighborhood, and now the concept was expanded. Take one neighborhood at a time, redirect all available resources to it, allow the residents to see change. In minutes, Public Works trucks arrived. Lots were cleaned, streets repaved, brighter street lights installed, a small park opened. Sidewalks, trees, house repainting, violations corrected. We reached out to local residents. This, the Mayor hoped, while not solving all the problems, would demonstrate that we cared, and preserve the peace until more resources were on hand.

At first it seemed it might work. Newark and Plainfield burned, but Trenton made it through that summer, ready for the incoming Great Society funds to deal with more fundamental needs such as education, health and job training. The reality of poverty in America, as described in Michael Harrington's *The Other America* in 1962, was becoming manifest.

Then, on April 14, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. On the evening of April 19, a group of African American youths gathered down the street from City Hall, venting their anger and looting a clothing store. A patrolman's arm was jostled as he pulled his pistol. Harlan B. Joseph, a college religion major who lived in a narrow row home in the Ewing-Southard neighborhood, the place we had hoped to save, was dead.

The situation escalated rapidly through the night and next day, involving much of downtown. 200 stores were looted, fires started, over thirty police and fire officers injured, millions of dollars of damage. The worst of it was near the historic Battle Monument, next to which we had created a nicely landscaped minipark.

Rioters stormed the police headquarters and were driven out at gunpoint. The Police were overwhelmed – not equipped, not trained for this. The only immediate response available was physical force, clubs, guns and dogs.

Without enough helmets on hand to protect against the onslaught of bricks, the cops noticed that a welding store had been broken into, and some helped themselves to welding helmets. When rioters started throwing bricks down from a rooftop, the cops located a World War I Browning Automatic Rifle and sprayed the rooftop with a rain of bullets. Another cop, arriving from home in his K-9 car but without having had time to pick up his dog, was surrounded by angry youth. In desperation, he reportedly grabbed the dog's leash, jumped out and screamed "My dog got loose, where is he?" Fearful of canine attack, the crowd moved away.

By the next day, several hundred arrests had been made, including 37 juveniles; cops were told not to make more arrests as there was no place to put them. There were tales of blackjack justice. Firemen started fabricating plate steel to protect them from being pelted on their engines. The city was barricaded, state offices ordered closed.

It was not until the State Police, better trained and armed, arrived in force that order was restored. The exasperation of the local police was audible the next morning, when the Mayor and community leaders took to the streets by the Battle Monument to urge calm, and those listening in City Hall heard the crackle over the police radio: "This is Deputy XXXX. Listen up, the do-gooders are here, all officers stand clear for the peacemakers."

The result of all this was that the flight to the suburbs accelerated. Stores continued moving out. Deterioration accelerated. Trenton's population has dropped 26% since the riot. Today, 28% of the residents are below the poverty line. New Jersey's capital city is overwhelmed by boarded up properties, and fights drugs and gangs on its streets. By day, thousands of State workers arrive, by evening they are gone. Murders are frequent. The city government staggers.

Most of the people who were involved in all this were well-intentioned, but controlled by the circumstances of broader forces. No doubt some were and are at fault, but in a sense everyone was.

In 1974, the Federal Urban Beautification program was ended. Federal funds for urban America and support for “social programs” are now limited and often contentious.

The War on Poverty that Johnson hopefully declared has long been declared lost. If street trees, playgrounds, parks and renovated public facilities were clearly not the answer, perhaps someday they may be small part of it. Certainly, they have value in their own right. But the plight of disadvantaged Americans and intergroup tensions, and even its effect on those not directly responsible, demands thoughtful resolution and difficult choices--as complex, uncomfortable, and challenging as that may be.

Jim Alexander served as Assistant City Administrator from 1964 to 1970, when he joined the State Department of Community Affairs to head a program providing fiscal, management and planning assistance to local governments throughout New Jersey.