

Exploring Rural Municipal Governments' Grant Capacity

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ABSTRACT

The degree to which local governments are able to take actions that help their residents respond to and move forward from challenges is critical to rural resilience. One key capacity in doing so is the ability to apply for, receive, and administer grant funding. The objective of this study was to understand the factors that enable and constrain rural municipalities' grant capacity. We interviewed officials from 21 Maine municipalities and identified the types of grants frequently accessed by municipalities, factors communities take into account when deciding what grant to pursue, constraints faced in managing grants, and opportunities for technical support. Our results suggest that funders could enhance the technical support they provide, tailored guidance is needed for a range of applicants, grant programs should be structured to reduce barriers, and support is needed by communities across all phases of the grant process, through to implementation.

meeting community needs (Aldag 2025). In thinking about the implications for Maine communities, we define grant administrative capacity as the full spectrum of grant activities—capacity for identifying relevant grants, submitting a successful grant application, administering a grant, implementing the funded program, and finally, reporting on grant activity (Shybalkina 2024).

Local grant administrative capacity is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include community characteristics, administrative capacity, local needs, and political context. Communities with larger populations and greater administrative capacity

are more likely to receive grants than those communities that may demonstrate greater need (Aldag 2025). These findings align with Maine-based studies that show municipal capacity for implementing sustainability policies is linked to larger populations and a governance structure that includes a town or city manager. Maine municipalities' governance structures vary in representational form (i.e., town meeting/board of selectmen to city council/mayor) and staffing (i.e., town clerk to department staff). That being said, smaller municipalities have also successfully implemented policy initiatives, offering valuable insights into how communities with varying capacities can best be supported (Levesque et al. 2017). Beyond governance structure, a community's administrative capacity, the number and type of employees, their budget, and a community's capacity to collaborate with external partners, contribute to grant administrative success (Hall 2008; Shybalkina 2024). Having limited staffing levels may hinder the scope of grants a community applies for, leading them to apply only for grants that have lower reporting and administration burdens. Finally, political context is important to consider, as elected officials' interest and participation in the grant process influence a

INTRODUCTION

Maine's tradition of home rule places municipal governments at the forefront of responding to environmental, economic, and social challenges that affect Maine's residents and businesses. Disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic required municipalities to rapidly adapt in order to maintain services, while long-range impacts from issues such as climate change or loss of a major industry require adoption of ongoing programs and policies (Cucuzza et al. 2019; Levesque et al. 2017, 2021). In the face of these challenges, municipalities have demonstrated social resilience, defined as the ability to anticipate, respond, and adapt to disturbances.

A key dimension of social resilience is the ability to access external funding in the form of grants (Ji and Lee 2021). Maine policymakers have highlighted the critical need for funding to implement key projects such as those associated with climate adaptation, while also citing the challenges of navigating grant programs as a barrier to progress (Johnson et al., 2019). Recent scholarship has examined the administrative capacity of local governments to apply for and effectively administer grants for

community's ability to successfully access and administer grants (Terman and Feiock 2015). In the face of limited resources, some communities are exploring innovative approaches to expanding municipal administrative capacity such as through the role of volunteers, or the use of AI technologies (Kang et al. 2022; Yigitcanlar et al. 2024).

External factors that affect grant capacity include the scale (federal/state), structure of grant programs (competitive vs targeted programs), and availability of outside businesses and organizations that assist with grant implementation. Because competitive grant programs rely to a greater extent on local capacity (Manna and Ryan, 2011), they may inherently provide less funding to high-need communities with limited grant administrative capacity (Collins and Gerber 2008). Grant program design can alleviate some barriers, such as financial barriers, by waiving local match requirements (Sprague et al. 2019). Finally, grant administrative capacity of small communities is bolstered by the availability of outside private and nonprofit organizations that support grant implementation. Partnerships with regional organizations, for example, can strengthen local grant administrative capacity (Hall 2008). In Maine, regional councils (regional planning commissions, councils of governments) receive funding to support municipalities for certain planning and coordination activities. Maine legislation enabled municipalities to join together to form regional planning commissions or councils of governments for the purpose of providing regional services (MRS, Title 30-A, Chapters 155 and 119). Across the state, these regional councils vary in size and available resources for supporting municipalities. However, even when there are a number of outside entities available, the costs of administering contracts with them can limit small communities' grant administrative capacity (Collins et al. 2016). Given the range in population and forms of governance, along with variations in regional planning support, Maine municipalities have very different capacities in applying for and administering grants.

In considering grant administrative capacity as a dimension of community resilience, Maine's communities face distinct differences in building social resilience in comparison with urban areas (Cutter et al. 2016; Saja et al. 2018). Rural communities are often at a disadvantage to urban counterparts in accessing and administering grant programs due to lower population, limited staff with grant management experience, and limited digital capacity, among other factors. Rural administrative

capacity is an understudied area of research, and one that has most often been conducted at a county, rather than local level. Further, research in this area has focused more on the success in securing grant funding and to a lesser extent on capacity to administer grants once awarded (Kackar and Harris. 2021; Lobao and Kelly 2019).

The objective of this study was to understand the factors that enable and constrain rural municipalities' grant success across the full spectrum of grant administration activities in Maine. In addition, we collaborated with funders and service provider organizations to explore how they might align their programs to better address grant administrative challenges.

METHODS

For this project, we interviewed 21 municipal officials about their experiences applying for and administering grants. Interviews were conducted between October 2024 and January 2025. We purposively sampled town and city managers, selectboard members, volunteer committee members, and department staff. Of the 21 officials we interviewed, 8 were from coastal communities and 13 were from inland. We spoke with officials from four large municipalities ($\geq 9,000$ people), nine medium (1,000–8,999 people), and eight small ($< 1,000$ people). Finally, 4 of the municipalities had a manager/mayor and city council, 10 had a selectboard and town manager, 4 had a selectboard and administrator, and 3 had a selectboard only. To identify communities that may be less likely to apply or receive grants, we selected 7 municipalities that had not received a Community Resilience Partnership grant and 11 municipalities that had not received a Keep Maine Healthy grant. In developing our sample size of 21 municipalities, 5 communities declined our request for an interview and 11 did not respond to our request.

We spoke to 20 municipal officials by Zoom, and one responded to questions via email. We asked questions about what types of grants they applied for recently, what their experiences were with different types of funders, who in their community applies for grants and what factors determine which grants they apply for, who provides support in grant applications, what type of support they've received, and what type of additional support they would like. For this paper, we have taken the information from the interviews and highlighted the main themes identified across the interviews.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Finding 1: Municipalities Receive Grants from Multiple Sources but Perceive Them Differently

We asked officials to provide some recent examples of grants they had applied for. All of the municipal representatives we interviewed indicated they had received a recent grant, and they mentioned four categories of funding sources: federal, state, private, and Congressional earmarks. Of note, officials often mentioned grants by unofficial names that were difficult for us to identify (such as a “parks and rec grant” or a “town fire department grant”). Our findings might reflect availability of funds in the wake of extreme storm events that occurred in late 2023 and early 2024 that caused significant impact to working waterfront infrastructure in many coastal communities, as many interviewees described grants focusing on infrastructure or a focus on resilience. While not a comprehensive list of grant applications, the answers to this question show us three things. First, municipalities are applying equally for federal grants (such as from FEMA, NOAA, and USDA) and for state grants (such as from Maine Department of Transportation [MDOT] and the Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future [GOPIF]). Second, many officials listed grants and earmarks obtained through their congressional delegation. Third, small, medium, and large communities all discussed all these types of grants; there was not a noticeable difference between what types of grants a small town applied for and those a larger city applied for.

Even though officials discussed applying for federal and state grants equally, they talked about them differently. Federal grants were always described as being more complicated, competitive, requiring a lot of effort, and being more administratively challenging. One person exemplified this as, “I think probably the most complicated are the federal ones, and the reporting is the worst. I mean, some of them even require special audits...do extra paperwork. God forbid you need to talk to someone on the phone...you’re stuck on phone trees forever.” State grants, on the other hand, while also described as requiring effort and having issues with grant administration, were considered more streamlined with greater assistance available. One official stated, “The state has made their grant application processes easier, far more streamlined than they have been in the past. So the stream crossing grants, far easier than what they used to be. But still you’d have to do that work.” Finally, private

foundations were discussed with mixed experiences, being hard to find and inconsistent, but also sometimes more user friendly with an emphasis on relationships with grantees. We heard, for example, “The private stuff—super easy to fill out applications. Their applications are typically a couple of pages, not huge narratives, just cut and dry. They just want to know the bare bones.... Grant management of those are typically cut and dry as well. You go and purchase the item, or whatever it might be, and you just report it.”

Implication: Funders Could Enhance the Support They Provide Based on Identified Weaknesses.

Many communities face challenges in navigating varying administrative requirements across federal, state, and private grant programs. Even grant programs intended to fund rural communities or designed to support high-need communities often fall short of intended goals by disproportionately limiting access by low-capacity communities (Hall 2010; Manna and Ryan 2011). Although competitive grants and reporting are important for accountability, meeting the needs of all communities may require funders to improve programmatic support by, for example, streamlining reporting requirements (federal), reducing administrative burdens (state), and improving advertisement of grant programs (private). Beyond implementing adjustments at the funder level, service providers from regional, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors can assist municipalities with the most challenging components of each type of grant to help build grant capacity (Collins et al. 2016). Drawing on this full suite of Maine’s multisector grant technical assistance efforts (e.g., from funders at various levels, regional planning organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and private consultants) can help municipalities build grant capacity.

Finding 2: Municipal Governmental Structure Influences Who Applies for the Grant

We were also interested in who applies for grants. For this question, we saw a strong demarcation between who is applying for grants in smaller towns compared to larger cities. Smaller towns, especially those with a town meeting form of government, were most likely to have elected or appointed volunteers doing the applications (e.g., committee and selectboard members) or volunteers with grant-writing experience. Small and medium-sized towns that have a town manager are most likely to have that position be the one who applies for grants. One

small-town official explained, “I’ve got several hats that I wear, and you know, grant writer is just one of them, and I’ll tell you something, I’m not the best grant writer.” In addition, small and medium-sized towns without in-house grant expertise mentioned the role of external consultants in contributing to grant identification and writing. “On some occasions, they’ve used outside consultant grant writers, for larger ones, but for the most part it’s just us.” Finally, medium and large municipalities were most likely to have department staff write the grant applications. As one respondent from a larger town described, “A department head is generally the one that the grant starts with, so they may see a grant, they may have a need and go seek out a grant; however that happens, this grant comes to light. They apply for the grant, or they get the information to apply for the grant. They then go through me as the town manager, we talk about it....I give approval to have the grant submitted, so they submit the grant.”

Implication: Provide Tailored Grant Assistance to a Range of Individuals

Different types of communities need grant support for different individuals. Maine’s largest towns and cities may have grant writers or department heads with prior grant-writing experience, but in many other communities, department staff and town managers may need training and support. For smaller rural communities with limited staff, interviewees noted the challenge of balancing other town priorities while also developing grant administrative capacity. In these smaller or more rural areas, we may need nontraditional approaches for building grant administrative capacity. For example, the community resilience of rural communities relies to a greater degree on community capital (Cutter et al. 2014), and there are greater levels in the rate of volunteerism in public sector activities in rural communities than urban communities. Our research contributes to an understanding of the role of civic volunteers, those community volunteers who contribute to the administrative capacity of municipal governments in general and to grant capacity specifically. In rural states such as Maine, communities may benefit by receiving support that engages volunteers to enhance grant administrative capacity, particularly in the grant identification and preparation phase. However, there needs to be an awareness of the implications of the role and use of volunteers, given prior research indicates that better resourced communities may have a higher level of volunteerism (Kang et al. 2022; Paarlberg et al. 2022).

Finding 3: Municipalities Consider Many Factors When Deciding Which Grants to Apply For

The factors that influence what grants a community applies for are quite varied but can be grouped into three main categories: the grant meets identified needs and priorities; it is financially viable; and there is staff capacity to apply for it. While sometimes community goals were discussed generally (e.g., one official mentioned they will “target the grants that fit our needs”), other times officials discussed specific needs such as infrastructure priorities or pre-identified climate change-related goals. One respondent explained, “We have a pretty strong list of priorities through the climate action plan and a strong committee and council. And so we meet monthly and talk about implementation. And so, as we find out about grants...we are always looking at our priority list.” Related to the theme that the grant must meet identified needs, there must be support from elected officials or town meeting to apply for a grant. This early political will makes it easier to allocate financial and human resources, find volunteers, and get final approvals to accept grant funds.

The financial viability of possible grants is also important in deciding whether to apply for them. Officials talked about conducting informal cost-benefit analyses, with required matching funds being a potential barrier. This was important to municipalities of all sizes. For example, one town official described, “Also, what that kind of a match might be, because a lot of the grants have a required match. And if that’s a financial contribution, does the town have that within their budgets? If it’s an in-kind administrative or labor contribution, do we have the capacity to do that?” Finally, municipalities need to have the staff capacity to apply for a grant, which includes both the expertise and skill to apply, as well as the time available either in-house or through a hired expert. One town official, with a bit of humor, explained that a factor they use in determining what grants to apply for are, “ones that come with an assistant to write it for us.”

Implication: Grant Programs Should Be Structured to Reduce Barriers

There are opportunities to structure grant programs to reduce barriers. Grant programs may not always match pre-identified community needs, and some communities will not apply for grants that do not support their identified priorities. Thus, if we want to ensure broader distribution of grants, some grant programs should be designed and funded to meet these locally

identified needs. Another example is that grant programs can be developed to abate financial barriers for rural communities such as by reducing or waiving match requirements (Sprague et al. 2019).

Finding 4: Municipalities Receive Support from a Wide Range of Organizations, but Type of Support Is Limited

We were also interested in the support that communities had received, who they received support from, and what they would find to be helpful in the future. Many types of organizations provide support to municipalities applying for grants, without any clear differences between smaller and larger towns (Table 1). References to assistance from federal agencies was most limited, although communities mentioned assistance from congressional offices in identifying funding opportunities. In addition, while talking about support received, respondents also mentioned individual community members with expertise in grant writing.

The primary assistance municipalities received was locating relevant grants, grant writing, and the application process. It can be difficult for officials to find time to go through grant announcements searching for those that would meet their needs. As one town official explained, the “(local) Council of Governments, the Regional Commission, if they have grant opportunities available, they’ll reach out if they know there’s something that we’re looking at.” Similarly, having help with the actual application was cited as extremely useful: “Just the hands-on approach and the assistance on walking through these, because a lot of these grants are the first time we’ve ever applied for them, and you know, hold my hand and walk me through it, and we’ll get there.” Sometimes this support in completing the application was minor but important: “the person who is the director of the community resiliency partnership for the state of Maine, unbelievably accessible and available. Any question, quick answer, I was really impressed.” Notably, a couple of interviewees stated that they had not received any support, such as one official who explained, “there isn’t a lot of help that I can reach out to. So that has, in turn, discouraged me from applying for grants because I don’t have the help.”

After receiving grants, municipalities experienced two sets of constraints in carrying out their planned

TABLE 1: **Outside Organizations That Supported Municipalities Applying for Grants**

Type of entity	Examples
Federal government	Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Department of Agriculture, Congressional Representative
State government	Maine Department of Environmental Protection, Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, Bureau of Parks and Lands
Regional organizations	Council of Governments; County Planning Commission
Nongovernmental organizations	Maine Municipal Association; land trusts; Gulf of Maine Research Institute; Island Institute; Maine Association of Nonprofits; Chambers of Commerce
Private sector	Engineering firm; consultant/grant writer; solar/heat pump company

projects. The first set of constraints was related to accessing the expertise (with staff or hired experts) and funds to do the promised work. Staff themselves may not have needed skills, and it can also be challenging to find contractors to do the needed work. In addition, not only can it be challenging to pull together matching funds or to obtain multiple grants for a big project, but also prices rise between the initial estimate and the actual implementation of the grant. The other set of constraints was related to the grants themselves: meeting grant reporting demands and completing the work within the grant timeline. Reporting and financial management can be quite cumbersome, especially for medium and large towns and cities (which perhaps received larger, more complicated grants). One municipal representative even reported that “they are very cautious about accepting grant opportunities because of the reporting requirements that they’ve faced in the past.” Similarly, grants have timelines that communities are often pressed to meet.

When asked about what support they needed, officials from small and medium-sized towns especially need assistance with identifying grants that they are eligible for and the human capital to apply for and manage grants. One town official explained, “We’re all wearing multiple hats, and there’s just not enough hours in the day to give grant work the attention it really needs.” While another stated, “Just searching for and finding out what we would qualify for is hard. I just need somebody to send me the emails, as bad as that sounds. They’re not always very easy to find.” A few interviewees from small and medium-sized

towns mentioned needing help with information required for grant proposals, such as socioeconomic data for their community. For example, one municipal official explained, “Your larger municipalities may have engineers on staff who can do it, but the majority of municipalities just simply do not have that level of expertise or anyone with the skill sets necessary to complete what the state and federal government need. So you have to pay for it. It’s not cheap.” Meanwhile, medium and large towns and cities need better financial and administrative infrastructure: “We have a good project team, people who understand what we’re doing. So I don’t think anyone ever feels like they’re alone. But the financial side of reporting is still hard without the right tools or someone dedicated to it.”

Implication: Enhance Support by Organizations Across All Grant Phases

In achieving successful grant outcomes, interviewees articulated the need to receive support at all stages of the grant process: identifying grants, grant writing, grant project implementation, and finally fulfilling reporting requirements. In other words, in addition to helping municipalities identify relevant grants and writing grant proposals, grant programs or service providers should recognize that many municipalities need assistance with information called for in grant applications, expertise in carrying out grant activities, help with navigating reporting requirements, and easy-to-use financial accounting systems. Surprisingly, we found fewer discussions of challenges associated with reporting requirements from smaller communities. Lower-capacity communities may be self-selecting for grants that have lower administrative burden, and as a result, not accessing funding programs that can contribute to overall community resilience (Terman and Feiock 2015). However, strategies such as streamlining reporting requirements and strengthening capacity to manage grant funds can enhance the latter stages of communities’ grant administration activities (DiPetrillo et al. 2017).

Understanding the opportunities and barriers at each phase of the grant administrative process for rural communities is an area that requires more attention (Shybalkina 2024; Terman and Feiock 2015). Our exploration of the spectrum of grant administrative capacity contributes to a better understanding of ways to support rural municipalities at each phase of the grant administrative process. For example, supporting service providers, such as Maine’s Councils of Governments, that

aid municipalities throughout the grant administrative process can enhance municipal capacity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In addition to the finding-specific implications we have discussed, our research points to some overarching conclusions. A key finding in our research was the critical role of service providers, external individuals, or agencies that supported building grant administrative capacity. Many interviewees described this form of support as “partnerships.” Examples of service providers mentioned by our interviewees included regional planning agency staff, nonprofit staff, and private consultants. Service providers assisted with identifying and providing grants and with longer-term planning processes. The role that service providers play in building grant administrative capacity aligns with prior research on municipalities’ capacity for partnering with nonprofit and for profit entities in enhancing grant capacity (Shybalkina 2024).

Volunteers were also critical in supporting grant capacity, especially in the smallest, more rural communities. We identified communities that might be otherwise considered low-capacity due to limited administrative capacity, yet described a successful outcome with grant programs. In three of these communities, interviewees described the value of volunteers who had a particular expertise that was integral to the grant program. As one interviewee noted, “So you try to tap into local expertise if you can.” Further examination of the factors that contribute to the success of these communities and the roles of local volunteers may be helpful for identifying best practices for providing assistance to municipalities with low administrative grant capacity.

Our results also highlight the need to pay attention to more than just the beginning phases of grant capacity. For example, a key component of grant administrative capacity is the community’s ability to implement a grant-funded project from planning to full implementation. Lowering the barriers to implement a grant-funded project is one important dimension of grant administrative capacity (Collins et al. 2016). Several interviewees described the value of funding for planning processes. Supporting communities through all steps of a project while also removing the administrative and funding barriers as they move from planning to implementation may be one significant approach for building community resilience. This supports other literature that shows smaller

communities often need assistance with implementation phases of resilience projects, such as climate change adaptation (Levesque, Wake, et al. 2021).

This research is occurring during a time of a changing landscape in terms of grant processes. For example, there are currently questions about the availability of future funding opportunities. In addition, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) could also support municipal grant administrative processes. The use of AI for grant administrative work was mentioned by two interviewees, one large and one small community. There is an emerging literature on the role of AI in local government and in support of organizational grant management (Mkabane and Kinigi 2024; Yigitcanlar et al. 2024). For Maine communities, the ability to use AI as one tool may interact with the capacity for digital services, thus an awareness of the need to enhance digital capacity is needed (Levesque et al. 2021, 2024).

Although the communities in our sample represented a range of geographies, sizes and forms of governance, we recognize they provide just a snapshot not only in number but also in time. We attempted to include communities that had limited to no success in securing grants, but found that all communities we interviewed had received some level of grant funding. This finding may reflect either that receiving grants is more ubiquitous than previously considered, or that communities that had not received grants declined our request for interviews. Future research should focus on municipalities that have received no grant funding to see how our findings differ for these communities. Finally, we did not distinguish between planning and implementation grants in the interviews. Future research might explore the challenges communities face securing funding in the move from the planning to implementation stage. Understanding the gap between planning and implementation will continue to be an important way to identify support mechanisms for rural communities to meet the needs of their residents and develop greater resilience.

In summary, our results suggest that there are opportunities for both funders and service providers to help municipalities improve their grant administrative capacity, and further their ability to prepare for and respond to challenging situations. By exploring ways to structure grant programs, assist the different types of municipal individuals involved in the grant process, and provide support throughout the entire grant process, we can address current weaknesses in grant capacity. Finally, while all municipalities across Maine would benefit

from improved grant processes, these efforts could have significant positive implications for rural Maine where small and medium-sized municipalities are prevalent.

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