

**Guidance for Preparing Planning Project Proposals for the
2015 Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program**

**Provided by the
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
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This document was initially prepared by Hugh Joseph (Friedman School of Nutrition, Tufts University) for the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) and subsequently revised by Andy Fisher for the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project. It is intended to help Community Food Projects (CFP) grant applicants understand the Planning Projects requirements and expectations, and develop appropriate submissions. We have done our best to assure the accuracy of the information provided, including verifying information with staff of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). However, this does not represent official USDA policy, nor is it a substitute for guidelines from NIFA concerning the CFP Program. Our role is to promote the best possible submissions by applicants based on our experiences with the CFP Program and interpretations of the Request for Applications (RFA). **Please use this guide only in conjunction with the [Community Food Projects RFA](#), and consult that RFA for complete instructions for submission of a Planning Projects proposal.**

Companion Guidance: For additional guidance with preparing a full CFP proposal, see the *Community Food Projects Planning Guide*, also posted on the New Entry [website](#).

1. Basic information: For 2015, the **Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program (CFPCGP)** again includes an opportunity to submit proposals for stand-alone **Planning Projects (PP)**. (The award rate for all projects in 2014 was 17% overall. In the past, a higher percentage of planning grants are funded than Community Food Projects)

NOTE: NIFA specifies that “No single PP award shall exceed \$35,000 for the total project period,” which may not exceed three years. This is an increase over the \$25,000 allowed in previous years.

2. NIFA language specifications for Planning Projects:

The RFA includes the following language concerning Planning Project grants:

“The purpose of a Planning Project (PP) is to complete a plan toward the improvement of community food security in keeping with the primary goals of the CFPCGP. PPs are to focus on a defined community and describe in detail the activities and outcomes of the planning project.”

“Planning project means an activity initiated by an eligible organization to assess food security in a defined community and develop plans aimed to improve community food security.”

3. Types of Planning Projects

The RFA gives examples of PPs as including but not limited to, “community food assessments’ coordination of collaboration development plan, GIS analysis, food sovereignty study, and farm-to-institution exploration. All projects must involve low-income participants.”

Planning projects offer a unique opportunity for some communities and organizations to receive a limited amount of funding exclusively for planning types of activities. **What NIFA wants to see in a Planning Project grant are efforts that engage low income residents in the process, carry out community-based assessments, and work on determining the overall idea, the players, and so on.** In other words, they are looking at more inclusive organizing processes at a more initial stage of community food project development. That said, there are two ways to approach Planning Projects:

A. Conduct planning to develop or improve the objectives, design and implementation of an emerging Community Food Project. We can call this *“project-linked planning.”*

Obviously, all community food projects have to be planned. Project-linked planning occurs when this process is already underway, but the organizers and their partners have not figured out the project in sufficient detail to be ready to develop a “regular” CFP grant proposal. They may not have fully heard from the community to be served or identified which constituencies will participate. They may not have lined up all the players, agreed to the goals or desired outcomes, determined how to carry it out, secured matching funds, and so on. In this case, some additional time and resources could help ensure that the project is well-planned, and able to compete successfully for a “regular” CFP grant.

B. Conduct more broad-based community planning activities that are not linked to a pre-defined community food project. We can call this *“community food planning.”* One example of this is a community food assessment (CFA), which involves members of a community working together to examine conditions, needs, assets, and opportunities for improving community food security. Another example of community food planning is in policy-making, when a group of stakeholders is considering a food policy council (FPC) or a similar type of coalition to develop and advance a policy or advocacy agenda to improve food security.

These efforts can be either “open-ended” or “focused” endeavors. With an “open-ended” CFA, for example, the process of inquiry starts broadly and then gets narrowed down. By contrast, a more “focused” CFA or FPC starts with a more defined agenda that expedites planning and progress toward action. For example, the community members have decided that local food production is a priority, but they still need to do more work to determine the who, what, where, and how of it all. (For more on Community Food Assessment, please see [*“What’s Cooking In Your Food System: A Guide to Community Food Assessment”*](#))

4. Planning Project options:

Planning Project grants for project-linked planning: This type of planning is done when you are still in the initial stages of planning a specific project. You may have good project ideas, but most of the work to prepare a solid plan is yet to be carried out. You need to find more partners, to get more community input, to work out priorities and logistics, and so on. In this situation, a Planning Project grant can support such work for up to three years. Assuming the intention is to submit a regular proposal at a later point, an important factor to consider is that this Planning Project grant should not be that carefully defined in terms of the resulting initiative. There may

indeed be connections between an original Planning Project grant and a subsequent “regular” CFP proposal, but they must be sufficiently different that the legislative intent of a “one time infusion” is maintained.

Planning as part of “regular” CFP proposals: An alternative for project organizers who already have a somewhat well-defined project idea is to incorporate a planning phase into a “regular” CFP proposal. This is allowed and, in fact, encouraged by the current program guidelines. For example, you may submit a three-year application, with the first six to twelve months used to complete some of the critical planning aspects. This assumes that the core ideas and players are already in place, as are the designated target populations and at least some of the matching funds. However, some design and implementation pieces still need to be completed and this would be carried out in the initial planning phase of the overall proposal. Using this approach, you can finish the planning phase up front and also have funding available to implement the CFP project in the remaining time.

Many “regular” CFP applications have even incorporated a community food assessment, policy planning, or similar initiatives. In such proposals, these planning initiatives need to be much more focused – i.e., linked to the rest of the project – so as to be part of an integrated project. This planning will also need to be completed in a tighter time frame that makes sense within an overall project (e.g., a few months or maybe a year). So this approach is not appropriate for a more open-ended and less-defined planning effort.

Stand-alone assessment and planning initiatives: Planning Project proposals can be very appropriate for stand-alone community food assessments and food policy initiatives. NIFA CFP staff has indicated that planning grant proposals that have an end-goal in mind will have funding preference. A follow-up “regular” CFP proposal is not a necessary outcome of these Planning Projects. The activity can be a stand-alone effort. However, if the outcomes of the community food planning process include new initiatives, they can be incorporated into a “regular” CFP proposal that is eligible for funding consideration.

5. Important considerations in deciding whether to submit for a Planning Project versus a regular CFP grant:

→ **Funding level:** Planning Project grant awards have a \$35,000 limit, no matter how long they last. By comparison, a “regular” CFP proposal can be funded up to \$400,000.

→ **Match:** Planning Project grants must be matched 100%, as with regular CFP proposals. However, you can usually assume that the value of the time and effort contributed by stakeholders involved in the planning process will make it possible to match these levels. Of course, you will need to document this in your PP full proposal.

→ **One-time infusion:** Planning Project grants are for a one-time initiative – a stand-alone undertaking. If a subsequent “regular” CFP proposal is expected to result from it, the Planning Project grant must be sufficiently distinct from the content and focus of any follow-up proposal. So it should be used for more initial planning or organizing, or for a stand-alone planning effort that won’t result in a full CFP proposal later on.

→ **CFP review criteria:** In many respects, Planning Project grants and “regular” CFP grants are expected to address similar CFP priorities. Some type of community food assessment is similarly expected as part of this effort – examining conditions, needs, opportunities, assets – whether it is open-ended or more focused in its design.

→ **Time frames:** Planning Project grants can be proposed for a few months or for up to three years. If you expect that a full CFP proposal will be an outcome, the RFA and formal implementation schedules are important. Funding for 2015 grants may not be announced until summertime, with a likely start date being September 1, 2015. Then, the next RFA may be out again in the Fall of 2015 or Winter of 2016. This will allow you only a few months to carry out a Planning Project grant if a follow-up “regular” CFP proposal is in the works for the 2016 RFA.

So unless you have a very succinct planning initiative that will take just a few months, it probably makes more sense to expect to wait until the 2017 funding cycle to submit a “regular” CFP proposal that incorporates the results of the Planning Project grant. However, you do certainly have the option to propose a PP that lasts only a few months. Work on planning can also continue between the time a PP application is submitted in March 2015 and the time it starts, once approved. By taking this approach, you can garner up to a year’s worth of planning time from this overall effort. However, any required match will have to be applied to the formal grant period for which CFP PP funding is awarded. Note that USDA may “pre-fund” a project by at most 90 days before the official award date, roughly June 1, 2015, allowing you to charge expenses to the project, but not releasing funds until after the award date.

→ **Effort:** The application process for a Planning Project grant is almost the same as that for a “regular” CFP proposal, and for a lot less money. Due to the nature of Planning Projects, we also expect that reviewers will be more lenient on applications. That doesn’t suggest that a sloppy application is acceptable. It implies that they will understand that some applicants haven’t had much time to organize a tight project, or that they lack resources to do effective community-based planning, which is why they can benefit from this seed money. If you want a Planning Project grant, get your proposal in!

7. Multiple submissions? Can an applicant submit more than one proposal- say a Planning Project and a regular CFP application? USDA does discourage multiple submissions, but technically yes you can submit multiple proposals, as long as they are for different purposes. In other words, you can apply for a “regular” CFP grant if you are ready, while at the same time submitting another smaller Planning Project grant for a different purpose. Remember, however, that the application process is about as involved for either type of proposal, so be sure you have the time to organize and prepare two applications well before jumping in to doing more than one at a time!

8. Summary perspectives: Planning Project grants are really designed to support community assessment and comprehensive planning around community needs, and to engage low-income stakeholders in the process. They are most appropriate for more early-stage community food security planning – be it for assessments, policy, or more targeted food security initiatives. They are not really designed to help an individual organization or a collaboration of groups to plan a regular Community Food Project independent of these processes where the specifics are already developed but simply need more work. That can be done as part of a regular proposal, as mentioned above.

These funds can provide some seed money to develop great ideas and promote better planning of CFP projects – something that is vital to initiatives that are going to be successful and sustainable. Although Planning Projects are funded at much lower levels than “regular” CFP grants, they can involve about the same amount of work to prepare. Still, they are a welcome vehicle to promote community organizing and low-income constituent engagement in community food endeavors from the onset. There is a lot of interest nationally in these types of community-based planning, so we hope there will be a lot of applications in this category as well as for “regular” CFP proposals.