

The 2024 CFP Planning Projects Grant Writing Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This guide 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 Grant Writing Guide* and the resource *Planning Successful Community Food Projects*, also posted on the New Entry [website](#).

Basic Information

For 2024, the **Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program (CFPCGP)** again includes an opportunity to submit proposals for *Planning Projects (PP)* in addition to full CFP implementation grant proposals.

NIFA language specifications for Planning Projects

The RFA includes the following language concerning Planning Project grants:

***Purpose of PP:** The purpose is to provide early-stage investment in new, startup projects or to invest in completing project plans toward the improvement of community food security in keeping with the primary goals of the CFPCGP (see Part I § B of this RFA)
..... The PP is to prepare a plan for a successful Community Food Project in keeping with the purpose of CFP program goals. Therefore, the PP is expected to model all aspects of the Community Food Projects.*

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 people with low incomes.”

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 other project details. In other words, they are looking at more inclusive organizing processes at an initial stage of community food project development. That said, there are two ways to approach Planning Projects:

- **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 full CFP implementation 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 CFP implementation grant.

- **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](#)”.

Planning Project Options

Example: A community wants to develop a project that involves community gardens, a community kitchen, some local marketing, and nutrition education classes. The specifics are vague. The organizers want to submit a Planning Project application to get the nuts and bolts worked out, and then submit a full proposal for the next round of funding. The Planning Project could be funded and a full CFP standard project proposal could be submitted in a future year.

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, get more community input, work out priorities and logistics, and so on. In this situation, a Planning Project grant can support such work for up to three years. A full CFP implementation grant proposal could be submitted at a later point. There may indeed be connections between an original Planning Project grant and a subsequent full CFP proposal.

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 receive funding preference. A follow-up CFP implementation grant 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 CFP implementation grant proposal that is eligible for funding consideration.

Considerations in deciding to submit for a Planning Project vs CFP grant

Funding level: Planning Project grant awards have a \$35,000 limit, no matter how long they last. By comparison, a CFP implementation grant proposal can be funded up to \$400,000. Planning Project grants can be proposed for one to three years.

Match: Planning Project grants must be matched 100%, as with all 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 proposal.

CFP review criteria: In many respects, Planning Project grants and full 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.

Level of effort: PP applications are somewhat shorter than are full standard CFP submissions, but when all is said and done, not by that much in our opinion. The allowable narrative is the same length and includes most items that the standard proposal requests. There is still the match to secure, letters of support to solicit, attendance required at PD meetings, solicitation of technical assistance, and filing of regular reports. PP applications also appear to be as competitively reviewed as are the larger standard submissions. All this for a lot less money as well.

A central idea of PPs is to follow up with a standard CFP proposal. But if you choose a one-year PP schedule, and most or all of it to carry out the workplan, it could then be 2025 before you subsequently apply for a full standard grant, and then later into 2026 before it gets started. That's a large gap of time from today's date.

However, there is nothing to prevent you from getting your planning done in just a few months and then applying in the next round rather than a year later. That way, you cut an entire year off the two-step process, and you will have a real head start to get the standard proposal done, by having already planned out the project you want to carry out, along with known partners and a clear idea of where the match will come from.

(Also, as part of this strategy, note that the USDA may “pre-fund” a project by up to 90 days before the official award date, allowing you to get started by late spring rather than late

summer. USDA will not release the funds until after the award date; as such, this is at your own risk. If something falls through with the award, the USDA is not required to reimburse funds expensed before the official start date.)

Alternatives to Planning Project applications

If you expect that a CFP full standard grant proposal will be an outcome, the RFA and formal implementation schedules are important. Funding for 2024 grants is open now. The next RFA may be out again in the Fall of 2025. Unless you have a very succinct planning initiative that will take just a few months (per above), it probably makes more sense to expect to wait until the 2025 funding cycle to submit a standard CFP grant proposal and bypass the planning grant option. You won't be funded by NIFA for the planning work, but most applicants do not request PPs before applying for the much larger awards.

Planning as part of full CFP implementation grant proposals

An alternative for project organizers who already have a somewhat well-defined project idea is to incorporate a planning phase into a CFP implementation grant 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. 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 CFP implementation 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). As such, this approach is not appropriate for a more open-ended and less-defined planning effort.

Multiple submissions

Can an applicant submit more than one proposal - say a Planning Project and a CFP implementation grant application? USDA discourages 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 CFP implementation 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.

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 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 an implementation grant 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 CFP implementation 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 projects, so we hope there will be a lot of applications in this category as well as for CFP.