



APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2018.** Please include this application form with electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).


PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Albemarle County
Program Title: Neighborhood Improvement Funding Initiative
Program Category: Community & Economic Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Jeff Richardson
Title: County Executive
Signature: 

VACO award for the Neighborhood Improvement Funding Initiative

Category: Community & Economic Development

Brief Overview (3-4 paragraphs)

Each year, Albemarle County's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process yields scores of project requests that span a wide range of classification categories. Small-scale, quality-of-life, improvement projects, that mean so much to residents and contribute to walkable, bikeable communities and placemaking, simply do not get prioritized when competing against mandates and public safety needs.

The Neighborhood Improvement Funding Initiative (NIFI) addressed this challenge by investing year-end budget surplus in our community. Residents were invited to the table to brainstorm with their neighbors, work through project challenges alongside staff, and ultimately select projects for funding.. It was important to develop a process that leveraged existing resources and ensured projects were in-line with established community priorities, provided ample opportunity for community participation and brainstorming, and directed funds across the many urban development areas. The outcome was an inclusive process that created a sense of community and resulted in projects that could be implemented immediately.

In all, nearly 500 community members participated in the NIFI process, over 400 project ideas were submitted, and nine projects were approved for funding across the County's seven urban development areas. Over \$1.3 million is being invested in quality-of-life projects across the 726 square miles of Albemarle County that will fulfill needs identified and prioritized directly by our community. The funded projects cover projects that enhance walkability, safety, and trail improvements.

Executive Summary

Each year, Albemarle County's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process yields scores of project requests that span a wide range of classification categories. Small-scale, quality-of-life, improvement projects, that mean so much to residents and contribute to walkable, bikeable communities and placemaking, simply do not get prioritized when competing against mandates and public safety needs.

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This program also created ancillary benefits for the community and staff. It vastly increased participation in a County initiative – hundreds of new faces and online users took part in the process and identified emerging trends in community needs – only one of the projects recommended by the community for funding was part of the County's CIP or transportation priorities.

Application Narrative

Program Description

Each year, Albemarle County's Capital Improvement Plan process yields scores of applications from departments and partner agencies for project requests that span classification categories including mandates, obligations, maintenance/replacement projects, school renovations/expansions, parks, trails, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and community facilities. Despite strong economic growth, each year the amount of funding requested exceeds the funding available. Small-scale, quality-of-life, improvement projects, that mean so much to residents and contribute to walkable, bikeable communities and placemaking, simply do not get prioritized when competing against mandates and public safety needs. In addition to not making steady progress towards these important projects, citizens felt there was a disconnect between stated County priorities and on-the-ground improvements.

The Neighborhood Improvement Funding Initiative addressed this challenge by investing year-end budget surplus in our community and fostering a sense of unity by inviting our residents to the table to brainstorm and ultimately select projects for funding – while taking them through an inclusive process where they worked through project challenges alongside staff.

Award Criteria

The Neighborhood Improvement Funding Initiative (NIFI) was an innovative program in two ways:

- Invited the entire community to participate in the capital planning process through a series of public meetings and parallel online opportunities to encourage high-level participation.
- Invested budget surplus funds in community-identified priority projects to enhance quality-of-life.

The community engagement process established for NIFI could easily be used by other localities. Funding for this pilot program drew from budget surplus, but could draw from other sources and/or programmed funding in future years.

Program Implementation

Research

The Board of Supervisors identified a desire to invest budget surplus funds into actionable, quality-of-life improvement projects in the County's urban development areas (similar to neighborhoods in a city), with citizens driving the decision-making. Staff then researched different models deployed in other communities to accomplish that task. Three models emerged – a neighborhood matching grant program, formal citizen involvement in the capital planning process, and participatory budgeting.

Neighborhood matching grant programs typically allow neighbors to come together to develop a project idea that they match (dollar-for-dollar or volunteer hours-for-dollar) a grant award from the locality.

Projects tend to be small-scale, with total costs between \$5,000-\$10,000. Formal citizen involvement in the capital planning process uses a dedicated citizen CIP committee, or formal engagement with other existing citizen committees, to participate in the early stages of the CIP development, through a combination of discussion and survey responses. Ultimately, staff proposed a participatory budgeting process, which invites citizens to pitch ideas for capital improvement projects, and then citizens vote on which ideas should receive funding.

Program Proposal

While a participatory budgeting approach was deemed the most appropriate method to achieve the Board's desired outcome, it was important to tailor the approach used in large cities for our community. For example, Albemarle County covers 726 square miles; has distinct, designated urban development

areas; commits to the implementation of a robust Comprehensive Plan that encourages community amenities be prioritized for those urban development areas; and convenes seven “Community Advisory Committees” that regularly meet to discuss community issues and desires. It was important to develop a process that leveraged existing resources and ensured projects were in-line with established community priorities, provided ample opportunity for community participation and brainstorming, and directed funds across the many urban development areas.

The process proposed to the Board of Supervisors assumed the seven Community Advisory Committees served as “homes” for the process, while inviting widespread community participation. The process had the following steps:

- ***Orientation for Community Advisory Committees*** – to share the program goals and objectives, as well as the timeline.
- ***Community Brainstorming*** – using in-person discussions and an online submission form, inviting the community to share their ideas for how to improve quality-of-life in their neighborhood.
- ***Prioritization*** – using a weighted voting system, inviting people to rank their “top-three” projects (5 points for first, 3 points for second, and 1 point for third); opportunity for in-person or online voting.
- ***Identifying the top 3*** – after tallying the points for each idea, sharing with the communities the “top 3” projects, and inviting a discussion to react to the results. Up to 3 projects could be recommended for advancement to the next round, scoping. Each project for scoping was also assigned a “community champion” to be the point person.
- ***Scoping*** – engaging with design consultants to develop a scope of work, explore feasibility, and then develop a design concept, budget, and timeline for each project. Scoping was completed

using a team approach, with the project champion, a staff subject-area expert, a staff project manager, and the consultant.

- **Pitch Night** - a “pitch night” was held where consultants pitched the scoping results to the communities, and allowed community members to ask questions and make refinements as needed.
- **Final selection** – Community members once again were invited to “vote” on their top project, based on the scoping results, and to advance the final selection as a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors.
- **Board approval** – the Board of Supervisors received the project recommendations from each of the seven urban development areas and ultimately approved them for funding.
- **Implementation** – The projects are now being designed, bid, and constructed.

Program Budget

Funding was to come from surplus budget funds. The Board of Supervisors approved a recommendation to provide \$200,000 for each of the seven urban development areas, for a total of \$1.4 million for projects. Staff also recommended an additional \$200,000 be approved for support funds, to be used to fund contract services, printing, and other needs.

Budget

- \$1.4 million for project implementation (\$200,000 each for seven areas)
- \$200,000 for support costs
 - Contract services
 - Printing/supplies
 - Project Management Division staff time (this division is funded through an internal service fund, so staff participation requires funding)

Actual

- \$1.3 million appropriated for project implementation, based on project requests
- \$182,000 for support costs
 - Contract for meeting facilitation support
 - Consultant work during scoping
 - Cost of project management division staff to support the project
 - Board-directed hire of a staff position for urban design/planning

Program Process

Board approval

After presenting findings on the three different approaches for involving the community in improvement projects and the proposed approach and process for the program, the Board of Supervisors approved the program. The Board expressed a strong interest in using the seven Community Advisory Committees as the “home base” for the program, while inviting robust participation from all community members. The Board also expressed interest in ensuring community members were informed that the policy for surplus budget funds required any expenses be one-time in nature (so community facilities, like a library or community center, would not be eligible for this program).

Staff Recruitment & Training

With seven community advisory committees, it became clear that having a dedicated staff person to work with each group throughout the multi-month process would be needed, and that having a strong training program to ensure consistent facilitation would be critical to the success of the program. We also recognized the opportunity to engage a team of staff across several departments to guide the planning process, to ensure a cross-section of perspectives on both the process and the project ideas. We recruited five staff members from community relations, community development, and project

management to serve as facilitators for the program, as well as contracted with two staff members from the regional planning district commission to assist.

Together, the team developed program documents, meeting materials and agendas, meeting scripts for facilitators, and the approach for online opportunities to participate in the program. Staff also developed a communications plan to spread the word about this new and exciting opportunity.

Community Orientation

Members of the community were invited to attend an orientation session, where staff introduced the program, process, and goals; provided an overview of the schedule; and answered questions from attendees. Also provided to each urban development area was a list of projects that the community and the County had previously identified as priority projects for their neighborhoods (developed through previous comprehensive and master plan processes).

Brainstorming

The first monthly meeting of the NIFI process invited community members to bring their ideas – no matter how outlandish! – on how to meaningfully improve their community. Ideas covered a wide range, from playgrounds and gazebos to wildflower meadows to hard infrastructure like sidewalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures. For participants attending an in-person meeting, small group breakouts invited everyone to contribute to the discussion; for online participants, a simple Google Form invited them to name the project, provide a brief description, and identify a location for the idea.

All of the ideas submitted for an urban development area were collated and then evaluated by the staff team for how it met the program guidelines – was the idea able to be implemented with one-time funds, did it conform to the County’s Comprehensive Plan, would it provide a public benefit, and was it feasible? Projects that did not meet program guidelines were placed in the “parking lot”, with an explanation for why it was not eligible through this process.

Prioritization

The second monthly meeting of the NIFI process invited community members to identify their “top 3” projects. In-person, participants were given different colored dot stickers to place on large posters for their first, second, and third-favorite idea. Online, participants simply ranked their top 3 projects. All of the rankings were then collated, tallied, and sent back for the next round, identifying the “top 3” projects.

“Top 3”

At the third monthly meeting of the NIFI process, community members reviewed how the project ideas ranked. Staff instructed each urban development area to select up to three projects to advance to the next round, scoping. In some cases, the points for the top one or two projects were overwhelmingly above the rest of the projects, so only one or two projects were submitted for scoping.

Each project submitted for scoping was required to also have a community champion assigned – the community champion was charged with working with the scoping team to ensure the community intent for the project remained in focus as the scope was further developed.

Scoping

Scoping involved a team of people working over the course of three months to define a scope of work, explore feasibility and challenges, finalize a project location and extent, develop a conceptual design, and identify a budget and timeline for implementation. The scoping team was tailored to each project submitted from each of the seven urban development areas, and included a consultant, staff subject-matter expert, staff project manager, and the community champion. The team met onsite for each project and had several meetings over the course of scoping to develop a strategy and review materials in advance of “pitch night”.

Pitch Night

Once all of the scoping was complete, the community was invited to attend a pitch night, where the consultants pitched their approach for the project idea and delivered a written report that identified the scope of work, feasibility, conceptual design, budget, and timeline for each project idea. Attendees were invited to ask questions about the pitches.

Final Selection

The fourth NIFI community meetings were scheduled two-three weeks following Pitch Night, to allow participants to reflect on the proposals they received. After a discussion, attendees were asked to vote to select their final project and submit a recommendation for funding to the Board of Supervisors.

Board approval

The Board of Supervisors received the project funding recommendations from the seven community advisory committees and unanimously approved them.

Program Outcomes

In all, nearly 500 community members participated in the NIFI process, over 400 project ideas were submitted, and nine projects were approved for funding across the County's seven urban development areas. Over \$1.3 million is being invested in quality-of-life projects across our large county that will fulfill needs identified and prioritized directly by our community. Those selected for funding include projects that enhance walkability, safety, and trails:

- Provide a crosswalk and pedestrian signal in front of an elementary school
- Provide a walking path to connect three public schools on a shared campus
- Create a walking trail around a school campus with connections to surrounding neighborhoods
- Improve entrance and parking area serving historic downtown businesses

- Provide a pedestrian crosswalk and signal to connect an existing bus stop on one side of the road with neighborhoods on the opposite side of the road
- Two trail access improvement projects
- A corridor study to redesign a major roadway for bike, pedestrian, and traffic calming
- Landscaping an overgrown section of sidewalk near a community park

This program also created ancillary benefits for the community and staff:

- Vastly increased participation in a County initiative – hundreds of new faces and online users took part in the process
- Identified emerging trends in community needs – only one of the projects recommended by the community for funding were part of the County’s CIP or transportation priorities.
- Brought the community to the table to understand the challenges of implementing a project on the ground – participants who were community champions or participated in the pitch night were introduced to right-of-way, access, site distance, wetlands permitting, and other issues that most residents are not familiar with.