

Small Step, Big Impact

A Community Improvement Program

Bridging the Gap Between Community Vision and Project Realization

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Project Overview

A structured, milestone-driven program designed to empower small communities to transform ideas into sustainable, impactful projects through education, planning, and professional support.

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Executive Summary

Imagine small towns and neighborhoods where good ideas don't die because of red tape or lack of technical support. Across many communities, leaders have the vision, passion, and desire to improve quality of life—but lack access to the technical expertise, funding navigation, and development processes required to bring those ideas to life.

Small Step, Big Impact is a structured, milestone-driven program designed to bridge this gap. It serves as a support network that connects community ambition with professional design, construction, and sustainability guidance. Rather than acting as outside consultants, the program partners with communities to build local capacity and long-term success.

Through a phased approach—beginning with foundational education and progressing through readiness, concept development, implementation, and sustainability—this program provides a scalable and repeatable framework for transforming ideas into impactful, sustainable community assets.

Problem Statement

Small communities encounter several recurring barriers:

- **Limited Capacity:** Local officials often serve in part-time roles with minimal administrative support.
 - **Knowledge Gaps:** Lack of familiarity with construction project processes, funding requirements, and technical standards.
 - **Funding Disconnect:** Difficulty aligning community ideas with grant and funding criteria.
 - **Project Failure Risk:** Projects often stall at the concept stage, never reaching “shovel-ready” status, or fail long-term due to lack of sustainability planning.
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Research & Observations

Based on observed conditions and engagement with small communities, several consistent patterns emerge:

- Communities possess strong ideas and motivation but lack technical pathways to implementation
- Grant programs and funding opportunities are often underutilized due to complexity

- Limited access to engineering, planning, and design expertise creates bottlenecks
- Projects frequently stall between idea and execution due to lack of structured guidance

These observations reinforce the need for a structured, supportive framework that simplifies the process and builds local capacity.

Program Vision

To empower small communities to successfully develop and sustain improvement projects by providing a structured, phased process supported by education, professional guidance, and access to proven project models.

This program is rooted in a simple principle: small communities should have access to the same caliber of planning and design as major cities—scaled appropriately to their size and grounded in long-term sustainability.

Program Framework Overview

The program operates on two complementary structures:

Program Pillars

1. **Community Idea Development** – Helping communities identify and define meaningful, locally-driven projects.
2. **Design & Implementation Support** – Providing access to professional expertise to guide projects through technical and compliance requirements.
3. **Sustainability & Maintenance Framework** – Ensuring long-term operation, ownership, and community benefit.

These pillars are delivered through a structured milestone process outlined below.

Program Framework Overview

The program is built on a **six-milestone framework**, each designed to incrementally build capacity, reduce risk, and ensure long-term success.

Program Support Structure

The program is supported by an interdisciplinary team of professionals including planners, engineers, designers, grant writers, financial advisors, and community liaisons. This team works alongside local leadership—not as external consultants, but as partners building capacity within the community.

In addition, strategic partnerships with established philanthropic and community-focused organizations will be critical to the success and sustainability of the program. Organizations such as the **K21 Health Foundation** and the **Kosciusko County Community Foundation** are well-positioned to serve as key partners or potential administrative bodies for the program. These organizations bring:

- Established relationships with local communities and leaders
- Experience managing grants and funding distribution
- Credibility and trust within the region
- Infrastructure to support program coordination and long-term oversight

Their involvement could help facilitate funding alignment, provide administrative support, and ensure the program remains sustainable and scalable across multiple communities.

Milestone 1: Foundational Education & Process Orientation

Purpose

Establish a shared understanding of the construction project lifecycle and build trust with community leaders.

Key Activities

- Project lifecycle workshop
- Distribution of a simplified project roadmap
- Open discussion and Q&A sessions

Deliverables

- Workshop completion
- Project roadmap handout
- Engagement summary

Measures of Success

- Active participation from local leadership
 - Demonstrated understanding of project phases
 - Established communication channels
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Milestone 2: Community Readiness Assessment & Micro-Team Formation

Purpose

Evaluate the community's capacity and establish a local team responsible for project coordination.

Key Activities

- Application of a readiness assessment tool
- Identification of a micro-team (2–4 individuals)
- Review of strengths, gaps, and training needs

Deliverables

- Readiness assessment report
- Established micro-team
- Capacity-building recommendations

Measures of Success

- Completion of assessment
- Engagement of micro-team
- Alignment on readiness level and next steps

Milestone 3: Site Feasibility & Concept Selection

Purpose

Identify viable project sites and select realistic project concepts using existing models rather than creating new ones from scratch.

Key Components

Site Feasibility

- Evaluation of ownership, jurisdiction, and zoning
- Review of utilities and infrastructure availability
- Consideration of environmental constraints and future development plans

Project Reference Database

A curated, centralized database of past and current projects is introduced at this stage. Access is limited to communities that have completed Milestones 1 and 2.

The database includes:

- Proven project concepts
- Cost ranges
- Design approaches
- Lessons learned

This shared knowledge base allows communities to adapt and scale proven solutions rather than reinventing the wheel.

Concept Selection

- Review of database examples
- Alignment with community priorities
- Selection of 1–2 feasible project concepts

Deliverables

- Site feasibility report
- Access to project reference database
- Selected project concepts

Measures of Success

- Identification of viable sites
 - Effective use of reference database
 - Selection of realistic, scalable concepts
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Milestone 4: Concept Design & Funding Pathway

Purpose

Transform selected concepts into fundable project plans.

Key Activities

- Development of conceptual designs
- Preliminary cost estimates and timelines
- Identification of funding sources and strategies

Deliverables

- Conceptual drawings
- Budget and timeline
- Funding alignment report

Measures of Success

- Feasible design and budget
 - Alignment with funding requirements
 - Community approval of project direction
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Milestone 5: Project Implementation & Construction Support

Purpose

Execute the project while maintaining oversight and community involvement.

Key Activities

- Final design and permitting
- Contractor selection and procurement
- Construction oversight and monitoring

Deliverables

- Completed project
- Construction documentation
- Community engagement records

Measures of Success

- Project delivered on time and within budget
 - Quality standards met
 - Active participation from local team
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Milestone 6: Sustainability & Long-Term Operation

Purpose

Ensure long-term functionality and community benefit of the project.

Key Activities

- Development of maintenance and operations plans
- Training for local teams
- Documentation of lessons learned

Deliverables

- Operations and maintenance manual
- Training completion records
- Sustainability roadmap

Measures of Success

- Community operates project independently
- Long-term viability demonstrated
- Framework ready for replication

Pilot Community Case Example (Hypothetical)

Community Profile

- **Name:** Town of Mill Creek (population ~3,200)
- **Context:** Rural community with a small downtown, limited administrative staff, and aging public amenities
- **Leadership Capacity:** Part-time town council and clerk; no in-house engineering or grant-writing resources

Identified Need

Residents and local businesses have expressed a desire for a **multi-use community space** to support:

- Small events and gatherings
- Youth programming and after-school activities
- Seasonal markets and local vendor opportunities

Previous attempts to advance this idea stalled due to unclear scope, lack of site analysis, and difficulty navigating funding requirements.

Application of the Program

Milestone 1 – Education & Process Orientation

Town leaders participate in a 2-hour workshop introducing the construction project lifecycle. Key outcomes:

- Shared understanding of project phases and terminology
- Realistic expectations for timeline and effort
- Identification of initial points of contact

Milestone 2 – Readiness Assessment & Micro-Team Formation

- A **3-person micro-team** is established (council member, local business owner, and parks volunteer)
- Assessment reveals strengths in community engagement but gaps in administrative capacity and grant experience
- Targeted guidance is provided to streamline decision-making and communication

Milestone 3 – Site Feasibility & Concept Selection

- Two potential sites are reviewed: an underutilized downtown lot and a parcel near the park
- Utilities, access, and zoning favor the downtown location
- The team accesses the **Project Reference Database** and identifies a comparable small-town pavilion/community center model
- The concept is adapted to fit Mill Creek’s scale and budget

Outcome: One preferred site and a refined project concept grounded in proven design

Milestone 4 – Concept Design & Funding Pathway

- A conceptual layout and rough cost estimate are developed
- Funding opportunities identified include a regional development grant and a local foundation
- The project is aligned to meet “shovel-ready” criteria over the next phase

Milestone 5 – Implementation & Construction

- Final design and permitting are completed with professional support
- Local contractors are engaged through a transparent procurement process
- Community volunteers assist with non-technical elements (landscaping, programming ideas)

Milestone 6 – Sustainability & Long-Term Operation

- A simple operations plan is established (shared oversight between parks board and local nonprofit)
 - Revenue model includes event rentals and seasonal programming
 - Maintenance responsibilities are clearly defined
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Results & Impact

- A previously stalled idea becomes a **completed, functional community asset**
 - Increased local engagement and downtown activity
 - Improved confidence among local leaders to pursue future projects
 - A repeatable model established for additional community improvements
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Legal Considerations: Project Reference Database

The development of a Project Reference Database introduces important legal and professional considerations that must be addressed to ensure responsible use and long-term viability of the program.

Intellectual Property Considerations

Plans, drawings, and specifications are typically protected under copyright law and are often owned by the original designer, engineer, or architect—not the community or project owner. As such, any materials included in the database must be shared with proper authorization through a contributor agreement granting permission for use and distribution.

Liability and Use of Information

The materials provided in the database are intended to serve as **reference tools**, not construction-ready documents. Improper application of plans or reliance on incomplete information can lead to safety, compliance, or financial risks. To mitigate this, all materials should be clearly labeled as:

“FOR REFERENCE ONLY – NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION”

Additionally, users should be required to acknowledge that all materials must be reviewed and adapted by licensed professionals prior to implementation.

Role of Professional Oversight

This program does not replace the need for licensed engineers, architects, or contractors. Instead, it supports communities in understanding project possibilities and preparing for professional engagement. This distinction reinforces the program’s role as a **capacity-building partner rather than a provider of professional design services**.

Recommended Safeguards

To reduce risk and ensure ethical use of shared materials, the following safeguards are recommended:

- Contributor agreements confirming ownership or permission to share materials
- User terms of service outlining limitations of use and liability
- Clear disclaimers on all documents
- Emphasis on conceptual and educational use only

Summary

By implementing these safeguards, the Project Reference Database can function as a valuable educational and planning tool while minimizing legal exposure. This approach aligns with the program’s broader goal of empowering communities through informed decision-making rather than providing turnkey solutions.

Works Cited

American Institute of Architects. *Ownership and Use of Architectural Documents*. AIA, www.aia.org.

United States Copyright Office. *Copyright Basics*. U.S. Government, www.copyright.gov.

National Society of Professional Engineers. *Code of Ethics for Engineers*. NSPE, www.nspe.org.

Program Benefits

- Structured and achievable process
 - Reduced project risk
 - Increased community capacity
 - Improved access to funding
 - Scalable and repeatable model
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Conclusion

This program provides a practical and structured approach to overcoming the barriers faced by small communities. By focusing on education, leveraging proven project models, and progressing through clearly defined milestones, communities can move from ideas to sustainable, impactful projects.

At its core, this initiative is about more than completing projects—it is about building local capacity, fostering collaboration, and empowering communities to take ownership of their future.

This is about giving small communities access to the same caliber of planning and design as major cities—scaled to their size and rooted in sustainability.

Intended Use of This Plan

This white paper is intended to serve as a foundational document to:

- Engage non-profit funding agencies and philanthropic partners
 - Align with grant programs and funding opportunities
 - Support collaboration with municipal leaders and stakeholders
 - Provide a framework for pilot implementation
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Next Steps

- Establish initial pilot communities
 - Form core support team
 - Deliver Milestone 1 workshops
 - Begin phased implementation
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End of White Paper