

KAN STEP 2.0 -- program growth bringing changes

The Kansas Small Town Environmental Program (KAN STEP) was created in 1998 as a way to provide Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to communities that find it impossible to raise matching funds in order to compete in the CDBG annual competitions. Thus, the program was created to match CDBG dollars with local volunteer labor, donated land and equipment in order to build buildings and lay waterlines.

Since its inception, the KAN STEP program has operated on a first-come, first-serve basis. This means if an applicant completed all the necessary paperwork and followed all of the steps, the applicant would eventually receive a KAN STEP grant. Through this

system of grant allocation the Program has funded 57 projects totaling \$14 million dollars. Rural Kansas communities matched the Program to the tune of \$10 million in volunteer labor, donated equipment and land.

Through the years, the Program faced a problem of too many funding requests and not enough dollars to invest. This meant that applicants had to wait in line in order to eventually receive funding. This was not bad in and of itself, however, this system did not give the Program staff the ability to prioritize or decide the neediest of the projects.

The Program eventually funded every entity that submitted an application.

In an effort to make better decisions on where to invest our limited KAN STEP funds, the Department made the decision to shift away from a first-come, first-

apply and compete for KAN STEP funding. The purpose of this article is to lay out that competition process.

The application process

Effective January 2008, the KAN STEP Program will shift to a competitive application process

In an effort to make better decisions on where to invest our limited KAN STEP funds, the Department made the decision to shift away from a first-come, first-serve method of funding to a competitive grant process. This means applicants will have to apply and compete for KAN STEP funding.

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with pre-applications due January 2, and July 1 of the year, and all subsequent years. The process will



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Volunteers in Corning in Nemaha County completed the installation of an entirely new water distribution system through the KAN STEP program in 2004. Kansas Commerce awarded the city a KAN STEP grant of \$ 258,235 of which the city returned \$ 23,846.

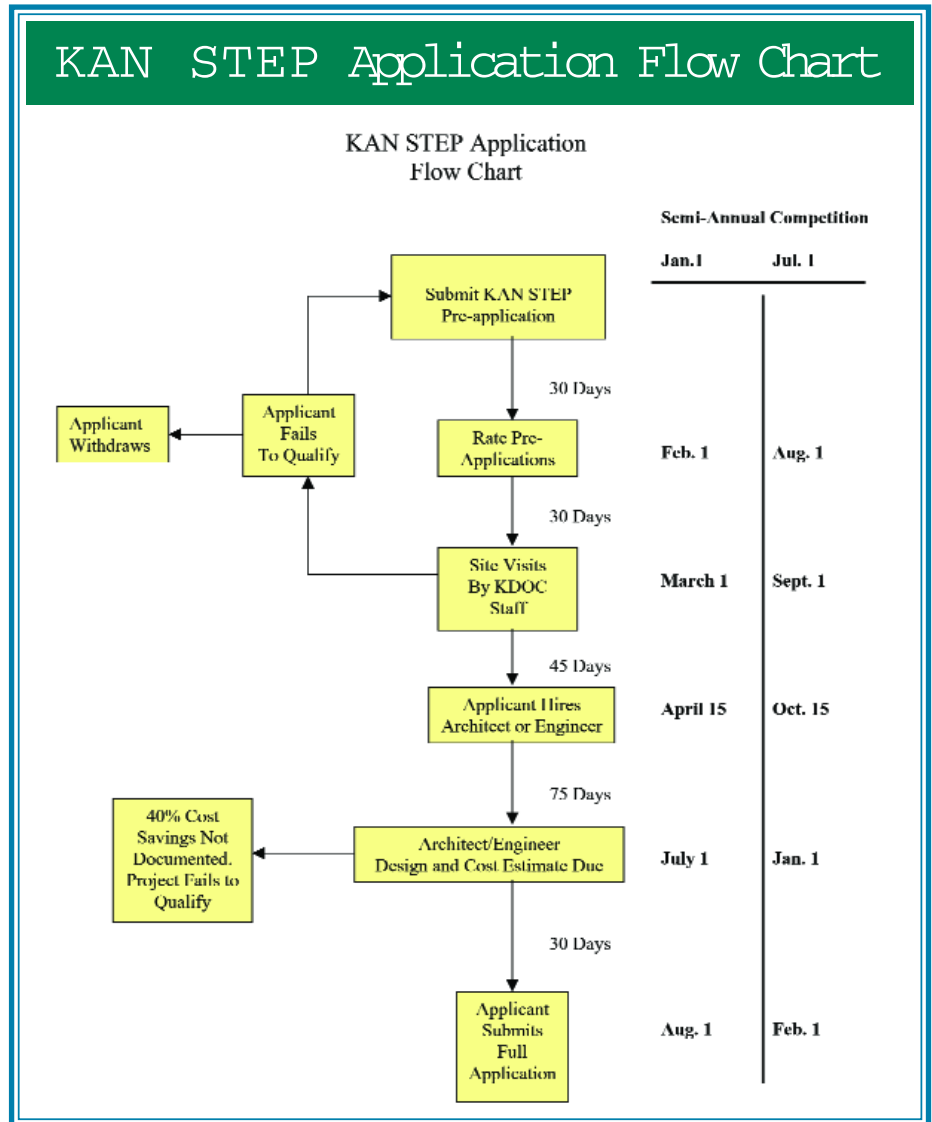
start with the applicant submitting a pre-application to the Department of Commerce. The pre-application will lay out the applicant's case for the need it wants to meet. The applicant must look at all the resources at its disposal, and what it is able to bring to the project. This will be the time the applicants will, in as much detail as possible, describe the cause of the need, ways it plans to tackle the problem, and in short why it should be funded. Lack of detail in the pre-application will be detrimental to the applicant's chance of getting funded. The new funding process will be heavy on up-front work, in that, if the applicant makes it through the pre-application it will not have much work to do when it finally submits the application.

Once a pre-application has been submitted to the Department, Agency staff will have 30 days to review the pre-applications and decide which among the pool will move to the next step. Applicants that don't make the cut will be advised on ways to improve their pre-application. Those applicants that make the cut will receive a site visit from Department staff. During the site visit, agency staff will meet with city or county leaders, project leaders (spark plugs), project volunteers, etc., to learn of the ability, availability and enthusiasm of local volunteers to pull the project together.

Following site visits, recommendations will be made to proceed to the next step, or to reject the project due to insufficient community commitment. For those projects that are allowed to proceed, applicants will be directed to hire an architect or engineer. Applicants will have up to 45 days to procure the professional service. Following the procurement of the professional service, the architect or engineer will have up to 75 days to design the project and produce cost

estimates. During this 75 days, the architect or engineer must not only finalize the design of the project, but the applicant and its sparkplugs must ensure that the cost estimate is all encompassing

generated, the project will not qualify as a KAN STEP project, and the application fails. By the end of the 75 days, the applicant's chief elected official must sign the cost estimate and submit it to the



and as accurate as possible, as the estimate is the basis for the application budget. At this stage the architect or engineer will also demonstrate the 40% cost saving the Program requires. The 40% cost savings is proven by the architect or engineer by dividing the labor savings and any donations by the total project cost. If a 40% cost savings is not

generated, the project will not qualify as a KAN STEP project, and the application fails. By the end of the 75 days, the applicant's chief elected official must sign the cost estimate and submit it to the KAN STEP Coordinator. Following this step, the applicant will have 30 days to submit the official application to Commerce offices. The application is no more than official forms, resolutions, public hearing notice and project budget. All the major work is accomplished up front.

As previously mentioned, KAN STEP will have two

application due dates, January 2 and July 1. Applicants may apply at either of the two due dates. Applicants that don't make the cut or fail to reach the application stage may apply during the following application round.

Applicants will also have two chances to make it through the KAN STEP funding process. Applicants that fail to make it through the second time will be barred from applying again for that particular project. However, an applicant may find a different KAN STEP project to apply for and that particular project will have two opportunities for funding assistance through KAN STEP.

Like everything else in life, this funding system is a work in progress. I am sure we will find ways to improve it and eventually we may change it altogether. As time goes on please let us know your thoughts and comments as the agency will use them to improve the program so that it may better serve you.

You may reach me at the Kansas Department of Commerce by calling me at 785/296-3610 or by emailing me at salih@kansas-commerce.com.



Upper photo: Volunteers in Morrill stand up a wall of their community building/fire station. The lower photo shows volunteers eagerly leveling concrete in Washington.

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