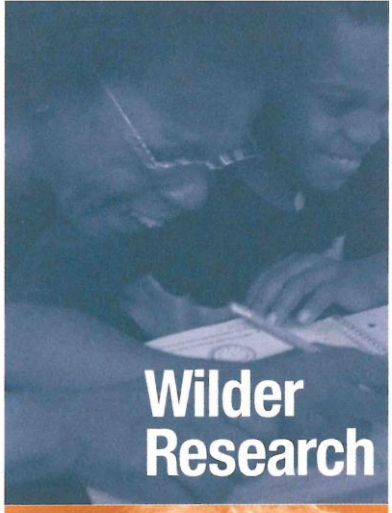

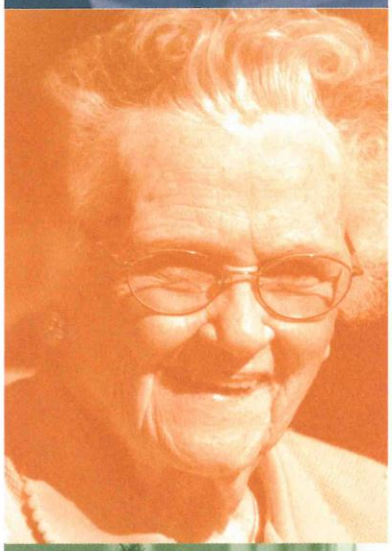

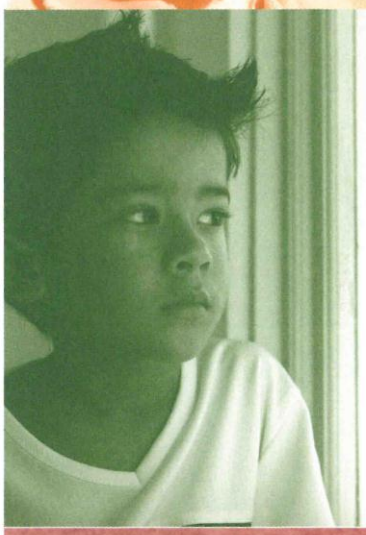

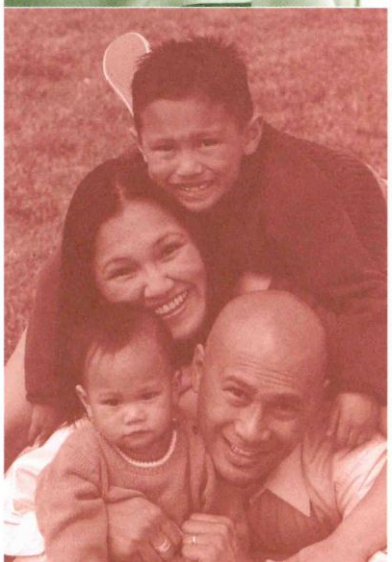

Community engagement

Stakeholder perspectives on the 2011 grant-making process for the Corridors of Opportunity

APRIL 2012

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Summary

To support the development of revised guidelines and processes for the 2012 community engagement grant-making cycle, Wilder Research surveyed 24 representatives of community-based organizations and 6 senior staff and Policy Board representatives for feedback on what worked well and less well during the 2011 grant-making cycle. The results will be used by the Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team to propose refinements to the grant-making process for the 2012 cycle. Grants awarded through the process support participation and leadership roles by members of historically under-represented communities around transit corridor planning and implementation.

Community representatives' comments about the 2011 process were generally positive. Positive features of the 2011 process that community representatives considered good or best practices to be preserved included:

- Helpful and accessible information meetings, and the availability of help in the application process
- The diverse, community-based review committee

Community representatives identified the following as the main opportunities to strengthen the process for 2012:

- More clarity and transparency about the kinds of projects to be recommended, and about the criteria for scoring and ranking applications
- More transparency about the process used to protect against conflicts of interest

Recommendations of the senior staff and Policy Board for features to preserve included many of the above, and also:

- Good grant criteria and RFP, grounded in the CoO's values and mission
- Good sequence of communication and discussion about the recommendations to the senior staff and then Policy Board, and the responsiveness of the CET to questions

The senior staff/Policy Board group identified many of the same opportunities for improvement as the community group, as well as the following:

- More clarity up front from the Policy Board about what is an acceptable mix of grants
- More scrutiny of applications
- Provide the senior staff and Policy Board with more accessible summaries including all proposals, not only those recommended for funding

- For 2012, provide feedback about first-round grantees' activities and learnings to date
- A more full and frank discussion at the senior staff meeting to surface and discuss any tensions about the recommendations before they are forwarded to the Policy Board
- The environment in the Corridors of Opportunity initiative is different in 2012 compared to when the first round of grants were made. There is now a more broadly shared understanding of what "community engagement" means in the corridor planning process, and both community organizations and public agencies have developed new understandings for how it can be positive and helpful to all those involved. As a result, it is not as essential to include all of the features of the 2011 process that were designed primarily to build trust in the process.
- Based on the community and initiative representatives' feedback, we see three main issues to consider:
- ***Build more links between the review committee and the senior staff and Policy Board.*** The process would move more smoothly from the review committee's selections to the final approval of the grants if it included more links among all of the "tables" at which the decisions are discussed. These links can smooth communication about the deliberation process, build confidence, and facilitate greater integration of different sectors into decision-making.

Build in more clarity and consistency in the scoring of proposals. In 2011, although reviewers used a common set of criteria and common forms for rating proposals, there was not time to check the consistency of scoring. Developing ways to do this would help improve confidence in the results. It would also make it easier to communicate with senior staff, Policy Board members, and applicants about the reasons for choosing certain proposals over others for funding.

Manage expectations from the start about the number and mix of grants that can be funded. A number of organizations that were not funded in 2011 were encouraged to re-apply in 2012. It is likely that many other organizations will apply in 2012 for the first time. This will be the last cycle of grants, so unsuccessful applicants cannot be invited to try again later. It will be important that no applicant be encouraged to feel that their experience in 2011, or their relationship to a partner organization in the CoO, provides any kind of guarantee of funding. Both applicant organizations and CoO partner organizations must also be mindful that with seven corridors in the initiative, with many different kinds of community interests to be advanced through transit planning, and with many different historically under-represented groups to be engaged, it will be impossible to fund every worthy proposal with the dollars that remain.

Introduction

Background and purpose

The Corridors of Opportunity (CoO) initiative includes a community engagement component, funded by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Sustainable Communities grant. One of the major activities under this strategy is the re-granting of $750,000 to community-based organizations to support active engagement, by historically under-represented communities, around transit corridor planning and implementation. This funding does not replace existing efforts, but is intended to supplement them with increased community capacity. Greater community participation, in turn, is expected to contribute to planning that better ensures that development equitably benefits all residents.

The CoO Policy Board adopted overall guidelines for the process to guide the first round of grant-making in 2011. The process was led and coordinated by the initiative's Community Engagement Team (CET), consisting of the leaders of Nexus Community Partners, Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, and the Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing. Organizations eligible to apply for grants were formal or informal community-based entities who were representative of and/or led by low-income communities, communities of color, immigrant communities, or people with disabilities. Grant funds could be used for work that engaged under-represented constituencies to identify issues of community importance related to transit corridor development and planning. Examples included affordable housing, job opportunities, workforce development, economic development, and capacity building, and the work was required to involve people from under-represented constituencies in decision-making and leadership in transit corridor planning and implementation.

The details of the grant review and decision-making process were developed by a broadly-based Community Engagement Steering Committee working with the Community Engagement Team. These were further developed and refined by a Grants Review Committee recruited for experience in grassroots organizing as well as philanthropy with grassroots groups.

There is a second round of grants to be made in 2012. These will occur in a different environment, in part because of changes in perceptions and relationships that have occurred as a result of the first round of grant-making. When the 2011 grant opportunities were announced there was little common understanding in the region about what "community engagement" involved, and the prior history of transportation corridor planning in the region had left a residue of frayed relationships among some stakeholders that did not encourage open participation. In addition to the basic purpose of shaping better community

decisions by supporting community participation, another part of the purpose in the first round of grant-making was to build trust. The success of the first round of grant-making has helped to create an environment in which the tensions are somewhat fewer or less acute. Much of the gain in trust on the community side can be attributed to the community-driven process used in 2011 and the fact that the CoO Policy Board accepted the recommendations that came from this process. On the public agency side, trust has been built in part by the work of the Community Engagement Team to bridge relationships between the agencies and community-based organizations, and will also be affected by their experiences working with the grantee organizations.

Methods

The Community Engagement Team requested help from Wilder Research to collect feedback from stakeholders about the 2011 grant-making process. To supplement the Team's own learning from the process, Wilder Research surveyed 24 representatives of community-based organizations and 6 representatives of the senior staff and Policy Board during March 2012. Wilder selected the people to interview from longer lists provided by the Team.

Both groups of respondents included a mix of geographies (urban, both east and west, and suburban). The senior staff/Policy Board group also included a mix of public (city and county) and private (philanthropic and nonprofit) representatives, and the community group included a mix of corridors and constituencies. The community group also included people with a variety of experiences with the 2011 grant-making process including 5 who had participated in the Steering Committee, 7 who had been part of the grants review committee, 10 applicants who were funded, 7 applicants who were not funded, and 6 representatives of organizations that had not applied (some respondents were in more than one of these categories). While the number of interviews was not large enough to consider responses fully representative, they were enough to ensure that a wide range of experiences and opinions were heard.

Questions for the community-based representatives of organizations were about:

- The outreach to inform organizations about the grant opportunity
- For non-applicants (N=6), reasons for not applying
- The application criteria and process and the support available to help with the applications
- For applicants (N=17), the grant review and notification process
- For unsuccessful applicants (N=7), their intentions to re-apply in 2012

Additional questions for members of the grant review committee (N=7) were about:

- The orientation the committee received
- The grant review process that was used

Representatives of the senior staff and Policy Board were asked about the process used in 2011 for bringing recommendations from the review committee to the senior staff and Policy Board.

All stakeholders were asked what they felt were good or best practices in 2011 that should be preserved, and what one or two opportunities they would most recommend for improvement in 2012.

Findings

Overall impressions of community-based respondents

Outreach activities appear to have succeeded in informing a wide range of eligible organizations. Respondents from organizations that did not to apply for grants most commonly cited a lack of staff or capacity to complete the application, while those who did apply most often reported they were motivated by the opportunity to address the issues important to the constituency they represented.

The majority of community-based respondents felt that information meetings were convenient, helpful, and open. Most were aware that they could ask for help with the application process, but most also did not feel that they needed help, feeling that the application process was clear.

Most respondents reported that they had trusted the process. There were a minority who had some initial reservations until they knew more about who was on the review committee. There was considerable appreciation for the diverse community-based review committee and for the process they used to screen and rate the applications. In comments, respondents also mentioned appreciation for the capacity building that was provided, both through the availability of assistance in the application process, as well as through feedback to unsuccessful applicants about how proposals could be strengthened for the second round of grants.

The community-based respondents, including those who did not apply and those who were unsuccessful in their applications, generally shared the perception that the process had resulted in the funding of good projects that would help to promote better community participation in regional decision-making.

The best practices most often cited for preservation in the 2012 process were:

- The open, convenient, and helpful information meetings

> They brought in detailed information about the project and outcomes. They did a great job.

- The availability of help, if needed, in the application process

> I definitely got the help I needed. This was very helpful in planning our project and what we wanted as well as what the funders wanted.

- The diverse and community-based review committee, and the process used for reviewing and rating grants

> I thought the use of people who are active in the community …was very positive. The community members had a good understanding of what makes a good community based organization [and] what they are up against, and this helped them to evaluate what we proposed.

The primary suggestions for improvement in the grant-making process were:

- More clarity from the Policy Board about bottom-line conditions (e.g. whether all corridors and/or underrepresented groups must be included), and more restraint in honoring the results of the community-based process

> One other thing that was distressing was the fact that the Policy Board accepted the Panel's recommendations but then added an additional project to be completed and took money away from the pool of the next round of grants … It showed a lack of respect for the process and the Panel.

- More clarity and transparency about the criteria for scoring and ranking applications, and more consistency in the use of those criteria

> I wasn't aware who was on the review committee, what the review criteria were, and not aware of how those selected measured up with the criteria.

- More transparency about the process used to protect against conflicts of interest when some review committee members also were associated with applicant organizations

> There were …some struggles in competing organizations regarding some conflicts of interest, but they were resolved.

It should be noted that the review committee did have a formal process, based on one used by a long-standing community foundation, for identifying and avoiding potential conflicts of interest. Responses to the survey indicate that some applicants were not familiar with this process.

Review Committee's orientation and decision process

Review committee members who were interviewed almost all felt that they received an orientation that provided the needed background on the Corridors of Opportunity and the work of the Community Engagement Team. They also agreed that the review committee included a good mix of people.

They also had quite positive impressions of the process used to review and select proposals, despite the fact that much of the process was new and previously untried.

Best practices identified by the review committee respondents included:

- The diversity, membership, and relevant experience of the review committee members

> There was a very good cross section of experience that was represented on the panel. There were people from transportation and philanthropy so there was a good mix.

- The CET's support for and facilitation of the review process, and modeling of the open, participative decision making process that was desired

> I appreciated the fact that the CET were all very strong members and they made a strong effort to reach out to underserved communities and organizations – just their level of wanting to engage underrepresented communities. …That was one thing that I saw that I don't see very often. … Making the attempt and not giving up on it is something I really appreciated.

Review committee members who were interviewed identified the following as the most important opportunities to strengthen the process in 2012:

- More time allotted for the review process (longer meetings)

> Because the meetings were set up so that we are going to meet 2-3 hours, that was all people made time for and it wasn't enough – ever [and some people left before we were done].

- More clarity and transparency about the procedures for protecting against conflicts of interest when members of the review committee were affiliated with an applicant organization

> There were two minor conflicts of interest with people insisting that proposals be brought back. But they were resolved.

- More guidance provided to review committee members to ensure greater consistency in scoring and deliberations

> I think some people were better at explaining at proposals than others. Those who were better at explaining the proposals or the site visits tended to benefit the organization proposal that they reviewed.

- More clarity in the initial guidance from the Policy Board about what must or must not be included in the set of recommendations (e.g., Must all corridors be represented? All under-represented constituencies? Should first-round grantees be eligible for renewed funding?)

> I think the guidelines for review should include clarification of things like "did every corridor have to be funded"? We struggled with that - did we have to fund all seven? … We asked if all under-represented communities should be funded.

Modeling of community engagement practices

Responses to several different questions in the survey elicited responses that mention the model set by the Community Engagement Team during the grant-making process. The grant-making process was conducted to provide a model of community engagement practices, through the involvement of community-based stakeholders in developing the process, broad outreach, efforts to build capacity of organizations to be able to participate (apply), consultation during the review process to ensure equitable participation by those with less experience, and follow-up after decisions were made to help unsuccessful applicants understand reasons for the decisions.

> I want to recognize the facilitators and the leaders of this project because I think they really tried to model what they were trying to achieve here.
>
> I like who they assembled. There were a diverse set of people of color and I really liked that they opened up the space so they weren't intimidated – they created a space that was open and they could talk.
>
> It was transparent. It was touching that they came to talk in person about why [our application] was denied - that was empowering.

Communication of recommendations to the senior staff and Policy Board

The interviews with the senior staff and Policy Board stakeholders focused on the process by which grant recommendations were communicated from the review committee to the senior staff and Policy Board tables, although respondents were given an opportunity to comment on other aspects of the grant-making process as well.

There were many common elements in the responses of the stakeholders from the public sector (city or county) and the private sector (philanthropy or nonprofit). Both groups commented on the excellence of the review committee membership, the quality of the projects that were funded, and the value of the sequence of discussions at the senior staff

table first and then the Policy Board. There was also agreement that this two-stage process in 2011 had helped to strengthen the usefulness of the information materials provided to the Policy Board about the recommendations. Private sector stakeholders also commented on the solid grounding of the process and criteria in the CoO initiative's values and mission as well as the more specific community engagement objectives.

In other respects, the two groups diverged in the flavor of their comments, revealing significant differences in their perceptions. The differences illustrate some of the tensions inherent to the integration of stakeholders from different kinds of organizations in a common table. Private sector respondents expressed more positive impressions about the review process, whereas public sector respondents expressed a need for greater scrutiny, more transparency, and more detailed information to be reported out. For example, the table below contrasts different perceptions of individual respondents about how the conflict of interest issue was handled; about the independence of the community-based process; and about the level of scrutiny of the applicants' requested budgets and activities.

1. Contrast of perspectives of private and public sector representatives

Feature	Private sector respondents	Public sector respondents
Awareness of conflict of interest protection	Feature to preserve: "Some of the individuals involved in choosing projects were members of organizations that got funding. When it was explained how carefully they were kept apart from the discussion, that was incredibly good."	Feature to strengthen: "I would want them to explain clearly how they are dealing with the conflict [of interest] potential. In most federally-supported [projects], staff have to sign a non-compete sort of thing - maybe they did, but they did not share it with us."
Independence of the community-based process	Feature to preserve: "The Policy Board is more about mission, vision and outcomes, not so much about micromanaging the process."	Feature to strengthen: "Maybe there could be a way to hold out a little money for the Policy Board to play with [i.e. to add an additional grant again]."
Level of scrutiny of proposals	Feature to be preserved: "They chose not to [reduce the grant amount from what was requested], to ensure that the funded projects would be successful. … It is very important, if the organization knows the project will cost $20K and they only get $15K, how can you expect people to accomplish what they planned. We need to show that we appreciate the worthiness of the activities that are proposed."	Feature to be strengthened: "They had taken [applicants'] budgets on face value and did not really ask them to better define what they were going to do. I think that is a good place to have a conversation [with applicants], especially with fairly new organizations - they don't always have experience with federal money to help them be safe about what they are doing. Again I felt like it was due to the CET's respect for a distance to be maintained, but I feel that if they have a line in their budget for, say, consultants, they should ask what the consultants would do - especially for big dollar amounts."

The main suggestions from senior staff and Policy Board respondents for best practices to preserve were:

- Criteria and RFP that were well grounded in the initiative's values and mission, which gave room for recruiting proposals that might challenge communities and public agencies to think about transit development differently
- Membership on the review committee that was diverse and included skilled, knowledgeable participants
- Effective sequence of communication to the senior staff first and then to the Policy Board, and responsiveness of the CET to questions during the process

The main opportunities this group of stakeholders identified for strengthening the process in 2012 were:

- More clarity up front from the Policy Board on what is an acceptable mix of grants
- More scrutiny of applications (e.g. about budget requests, claims of other organizations' support; what is the "opportunity" to be addressed
- More accessible summaries of all applications, not only those recommended for funding
- Feedback on first-round grantees' activities and learning to date (and not only if they are being recommended for continuing funding)
- A more full and frank discussion at the senior staff meeting that surfaces and discusses any tensions around the recommendations before they are forwarded to the Policy Board

Issues to consider

The environment in the Corridors of Opportunity initiative is different in 2012 compared to when the first round of grants were made. Thanks in large part to the successful completion of the first round of grant-making, there is now a more broadly shared understanding of what "community engagement" means in the corridor planning process, and both community organizations and public agencies have developed new understandings for how it can be positive and helpful to all those involved. As a result, it is not as essential to include all of the features of the 2011 process that were designed primarily to build trust in the process – although the community-based stakeholders' feedback clearly indicates that the early gains in this respect could be just as easily lost if trust were taken for granted.

Based on the community and initiative representatives' feedback, we see three main issues to consider:

Build more links between the review committee and the senior staff and Policy Board. The process would move more smoothly from the review committee's selections to the final approval of the grants if it included more links among all of the "tables" at which the decisions are discussed. These links can smooth the communication about the initial deliberation process and its results, and help build confidence in both. They can also facilitate greater integration of different sectors into the decision-making process.

Build in more clarity and consistency in the scoring of proposals. In 2011, reviewers shared a common set of criteria and common forms for rating proposals. However, given the short time period for the review process, there was not time to check on how consistent different members were in their scoring. Development of ways to test consistency would help improve confidence in the results. It would also make it easier to communicate with senior staff, Policy Board members, and applicants about the reasons for choosing certain proposals over others for funding.

Manage expectations from the start about the number and mix of grants that can be funded. A number of organizations that were not funded in 2011 were encouraged to re-apply in 2012. It is likely that many other organizations will apply in 2012 for the first time. This will be the last cycle of grants, so unsuccessful applicants cannot be invited to try again later. It will be important that no applicant be encouraged to feel that their experience in 2011, or their relationship to a partner organization in the CoO, provides any kind of guarantee of funding. Both applicant organizations and CoO partner organizations must also be mindful that with seven corridors in the initiative, with many different kinds of community interests to be advanced through transit planning, and with many different historically under-represented groups to be engaged, it will be impossible to fund every worthy proposal with the dollars that remain.

Appendix: Detailed survey results

Outreach about the grant opportunity

Applicants named a variety of ways in which they had heard about the grant opportunities, illustrating the breadth of strategies employed by the CET to spread the word. Means of learning about the opportunity included from emails, Facebook posting, or other community buzz (N=7); from a CET member or one of the CET organizations (N=6); at a meeting (N=4); or through being on the CET Steering Committee (N=2).

The majority (two-thirds) reported they trusted the process from the start, and others indicated they were initially skeptical until they became more familiar with the review committee's membership and review process.

Reasons for applying or not applying

Nearly all of those interviewed (88%) reported that their organization was eligible to apply, and nearly all of those who were eligible (81%) applied. The main attraction of the opportunity they cited was the potential for support for the kind of work their organization does. Other reasons cited by at least three respondents were helping to strengthen ties to the community, or to build partnerships with other community organizations.

Those who did not apply reported their reasons were mainly due to a lack of capacity to complete the application process, though one also cited a mismatch between their work and the required geography (corridor-based).

Application criteria and process

Nearly all community respondents felt the grant criteria were reasonable (none felt they were unreasonable, but four replied they did not know or could not remember).

Most (two-thirds) indicated that a member of their organization had attended an information meeting about the grants. These were felt to have been held at convenient times and places, and all those who attended reported that their questions were answered. Only three stakeholders felt that the meeting times were not convenient, and three did not attend because they did not have time to do so.

Most (two-thirds) reported that were aware that they could ask for help with the application process if they wished to do so, although only three had asked for help. These reported that they found the assistance very helpful. For the most part, those who did not ask for

help felt that they had not needed it, although one respondent felt that in retrospect they should have asked for advice about the scope of what they should propose.

Applicants all agreed that they clearly understood the purpose of the grants, that the application process was easy to understand, and that they had all the information they needed to help them put their applications together. A few (5 out of 16) did not agree that they understood what they needed to include in their application, 3 of the 16 disagreed that the process was handled fairly, and 3 did not feel there was enough time to prepare the grant proposal. In their comments, 2 respondents indicated a concern about the handling of applications for organizations who had representatives who were members of the review committee, 1 mentioned they were not told the reasons for who was funded and who was not, 1 felt there were too many grants in Minneapolis vs. the east metro area, and one did not feel it was fair that a denied applicant was later asked to re-apply (for the additional Gateway grant).

Grant guidelines

The application guidelines included the following six requirements for the kinds of activities that could be funded.

1. Be *place-based* by serving a community or constituency within a targeted geography

2. Organize constituencies around transit corridor related decision making, planning, and implementation opportunities important to them

3. Lead to the engagement of under-represented communities in use of transit corridor development to expand access to jobs, affordable housing, and economic development particularly for people of color, low-income communities, and people with disabilities.

4. Either stimulate new and innovative organizing and engagement practices, or build on proven strategies with demonstrated results

5. Support long-term involvement of underrepresented constituencies in decision-making structures

6. If a partnership, clearly define the collaboration and the respective roles of the partners

Community-based stakeholders broadly agreed that these criteria were reasonable, with only 4 respondents expressing any disagreement with any of the criteria.

The grant review process

Most community-based representatives (13 out of 20) felt they understood how decisions were made to pick the projects to be funded. Those who disagreed suggested the following to improve the process:

- More transparency about the decision-making process, and especially more clarity about how proposals were scored
- More clarity about how the potential conflict of interest was handled
- More clarity about the relative importance of activities that were "place-based" vs. "constituency-based"
- Different methods and/or criteria for selecting the grants review committee

Among those with concerns, there was some perception that the process was new during the first round, which explained some of the lack of clarity, but it was hoped that this could be strengthened in the second round. Not surprisingly, applicants who were not funded were more likely than successful applicants to report that they did not understand how decisions were made, or did not perceive the decisions as fair.

Notification of review decisions

All but one community respondent (17 out of 18) agreed that the notice they received about the decision was easy to understand. Fewer (11 out of 18) agreed that the notice included the information they needed to know, though 14 out of 17 agreed they were able to get their questions answered. Those who disagreed suggested the following to improve the notifications:

- Initial information should include information about how decisions were made (not just whether they were funded or not funded)
- More information should have been made available about why some applications were funded and others were not
- Notice should have been more personal and/or should have included more discussion
- Two respondents reported that other unfunded organizations were upset about the Policy Board's decision to add funding to some organizations that were not recommended through the process

- Two unsuccessful applicants reported receiving individual communications explaining why their application was not funded, characterizing the process as "helpful" or "empowering."

Of 11 respondents who did not apply in 2011 or were not funded, 6 plan to re-apply in 2012, citing the need for the proposed work; increased capacity to apply and/or better understanding of what was not strong in the 2011 application; and encouragement from the CET. Of those who do not plan to reapply, each cited a different reason. One has gotten funding elsewhere; one feels the 2011 decision shows a lack of interest in the proposed activity or a bias against the organization; and one respondent is no longer with the same organization.