



CITY OF BELFAST, MAINE 04915

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CODE & PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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November 2, 2015

Deborah Johnson, Director
Office of Community Development
Dept Economic & Community Development
Augusta, ME

RE: 2016 CDBG PROPOSED PROGRAM STATEMENT

Dear Ms. Johnson: 

Once again DECD has been saddled with the unenviable and difficult task of trying to best address too many well deserving program needs with an ever shrinking amount of federal funds. This loss of funds is compounded by ever increasing construction and service delivery costs, which means that the diminished funding available through the program will accomplish even less today than even five short years ago. Unfortunately, the upcoming hearing is not a forum regarding where and how overall federal and state funding can best be invested to meet the laudable goals of the CDBG program, as the hearing is limited to considering how to allocate the available \$ 10,765,432 in funds.

I offer my comments from the perspective of someone who has worked with CDBG projects and funds since the program was established during the Nixon administration (yes, I am that ancient), and someone who has worked with the funds in two different states, the last twenty-five of which have been in Maine. I also believe that the CDBG program, as ably administered by DECD, has met the overall program goal of directly and indirectly benefiting low and low moderate income persons.

In the past 15 years, the City of Belfast has applied for and received funds through nearly every available program category. In many cases, the City used the CDBG funds as one component of a funding package to complete a project, and in some cases, the amount of CDBG funds received compared to the total project cost was quite minimal. That said, if the CDBG funds had not been available, the City may have been unwilling or unable to undertake the project. Due to the lesser amount of funds available to the program, and because CDBG funds alone rarely are adequate to complete a project, I believe the DECD should consider increasing local match requirements as a factor in determining the award of funds. This approach may also help ensure that only well conceived projects are more likely to receive CDBG funds.

Secondly, I concur with DECD's painful decision to reduce the total number of available programs which will be eligible for potential funding. For example, DECD eliminated community planning grants as a program in the past, and this year is proposing not to provide

funding for several program categories. When there are not enough funds to go around, I believe it is best to try and provide sufficient funds to a lesser number of programs so that these programs have a chance of success. While I support and understand your approach, I differ with your decision to eliminate funding for certain programs.

I would like DECD to reconsider its decision not to provide funding for Downtown Revitalization Grants, and as part of that, funds that are awarded to the Maine Downtown Center. I believe the Downtown Center has provided vital support services to a large number of Maine municipalities which have worked collaboratively with the State through a nationally recognized ground-tested model (Main Street Program) to help revitalize and grow the heart of their communities, their downtowns. While the Downtown Center has other funding available, similar to the City of Belfast which often uses multiple funding sources to complete a project, the Downtown Center's ability to secure other funds will be adversely affected by the loss of CDBG funds and State support. In a world of shrinking resources, I believe DECD should consider retaining and strengthening its relationship with the Downtown Center so that your limited funding can help meet the needs of many municipalities.

Also, although DECD often has provided Downtown Revitalization funding to only one community each year, I believe the program warrants being retained as a funded program. Municipalities that participate in the Main Street Program can use this program to pursue funds to help implement capital projects identified through their local program. Main Street programs involve collaborative relationships between the local government, local businesses and the public, and capital projects which are advanced through this approach are well conceived and much needed. DECD's funding priorities should support such efforts.

I would encourage DECD to set aside funding for the Downtown Revitalization Grant program, and believe that last year's allocation of \$500,000 is a reasonable target. That said, I am not certain which of the listed programs in the Proposed Program Statement should be reduced or eliminated to 'find' \$500,000 for Downtown Revitalization. Personally, I favor funding brick and mortar projects, such as the City of Belfast's recent Downtown Revitalization project on Cross, Miller and Spring Streets, or extending public utilities (sewer, water, stormwater and power) to help support housing for low and low moderate income persons, such as the City has done on three separate projects; Swan Lake Avenue, Wight Street and on Ryan Road. While I recognize that the State has chosen to shift more of the available funding to Economic Development projects, I am less certain that these projects have as much of a long-term benefit for low and low moderate income persons.

DECD and its staff is doing a great job of administering the CDBG program. Many thanks to all of you and the assistance that you have offered to the City and to me over the years. I wish you well in deciding how to proceed with the 2016 program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wayne Marshall", written in a cursive style.

Wayne Marshall
City Planner