

Get Creative, Get Funding

*By Philip Saladino, PCI #449/EMSCI #046
Gretna Police Department (LA)*

So they tell you that they just don't have the money to get the equipment that you requested, or your bikes are getting too old and need to be upgraded. Now what? You can't keep patching the same tubes, and even if Wal-Mart does give you that shiny new bike, we all know that just won't cut it. You are not alone — most of us have been there too. So what do you do? You need what you need and there's no way around it. You wouldn't ask for it unless you needed it, right?

The first step to take in building a specialty unit is to find a knowledgeable person who believes in the capabilities of your unit — someone with a good “salesperson” approach. This person has to be well-spoken and have the ability to ask for funds without making it look like begging. Having knowledge of grant writing or your department grant writer on your side isn't such a bad idea either.

Once you have your person or team in place, it is time to do some research. “Free” money — money that comes without any obligations to certain areas or businesses — is best. So start looking for federal grants, but keep in mind that applying for grants and getting approval can be a long process. The Bureau of Justice Assistance Center, state community policing organizations and community block grants are great places to start. Funding from these sources can usually be used for overtime for special projects, technology advancements, and new equipment, usually with very little restrictions on where the equipment is used. Weed and Seed grants are another option available from the federal government. Once a neighborhood qualifies as a Weed and Seed community, vast resources become available to clean it up. The only drawback is that the equipment has to be dedicated to the designated Weed and Seed community.

What, you don't have time to wait for federal approvals? Try your local civic organizations. Economic development groups, judicial organizations (lawyer groups), and local clubs are great resources. Many of these organizations have more than enough money and actively look for creative ways to give it away. Stay in contact with these people. They will help you out when you need it most. One group helped pay the cost of having our aging fleet of five bikes painted, marked and upgraded. A local auto body repair instructor had his students paint the bike frames as a class project (for a grade). It was the perfect example of how community members can come to your aid.

Finally, you can seek direct support from a local business. While this type of funding may solve your immediate problem, be careful — it may cause problems later. Be very cautious when accepting this type of help, especially equipment donations. Ask yourself a few questions: Is this high-quality equipment that will hold up to my needs? Are there any strings attached, such as having to bring all of my business to this establishment? If I should have to take some type of enforcement action against the owner, will it become a personal problem? And finally, will my bike become a billboard? If you have a professional relationship with the business, most potentially problematic details can be worked out beforehand and accepting a grant or donation shouldn't become a problem.

Finding the right grants and donations can help your program out tremendously. By using the resources described above, my department has been able to double the size of the bike fleet and refurbish our older bikes with very little money from our regular operating budget. Remember: when it comes to funding, you've got to work hard, be patient, and get creative. And keep your ties with the community tight, treat everyone right, and the favor will be returned when you need it most.

Phil Saladino can be reached at psaladino@gretnapolice.com.

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