

GrantsWatch

In lieu of listing available grants in this issue of Rural Roots, we are featuring the following article on how to raise funds in rural and small communities.

Small-Town Limitations Don't Reduce Fundraising Options

By Sabrina Jones

Quaint. Quiet. Peaceful.

Those are just some of the adjectives people often use when describing small-town life. Usually, most of these people have never actually lived in a small town. Those of us who were raised or are currently living in small-town America know that in order to accomplish something, you must participate and oftentimes be in charge of it. This article defines a small town as one with a population of fewer than 1,000 people. My town of St. John, Washington, has a population of approximately 600.

Small-town life is when you can walk the entire length of Main Street in three or four blocks. It's when you can pick up a few groceries, tools from the hardware store and a birthday card from the local pharmacy—all without taking your purse or wallet. It's when the idea of "going out on the town" involves dinner and a basketball game at the only school in town.

The purpose of this article is to help you discover the most effective way to raise money for your town's next project—and how to make it happen through planning, perseverance and patience. I know because I have done it. In just 15 months, the St. John Playground Equipment Committee I formed raised more than \$30,000 for a new playground structure at our elementary school in this farming town of 600 residents.

So, don't give up because you're small. Just scream really loud.

Where Do I Start?

Chances are, if you're the person reading this article, you're also the one who should be in charge of your fundraising

project. You've got initiative and drive—two of the most important attributes in making a project happen.

So you know what you need to raise money for: a new playground, skate park, swimming pool, children's museum or something else that you believe will enhance your community.

The first thing you need to do is talk. Then talk some more. Talk until you are so tired of talking that you can't do it anymore. This is an "informal survey" of local residents' reactions to your idea. You'll find out who might be willing to help, and who won't. If you get positive reactions from most people, then you can move on to the next step in the process.

How Do I Form a Committee?

Find people who are truly interested in reaching your goal and willing to invest their time to get there. Keep it small, with no more than 10 people. Remember, the more people on your committee, the more opinions you'll have and the harder it will be to reach an agreement.

How Should I Schedule Meetings?

The last thing most people want is one more meeting to attend. So when you have to plan one, make it at the *most* convenient time for *most* of the people on your committee. Tell them you will bring snacks. Food is a great motivator.

Have an agenda for each meeting and follow it. Set dates, deadlines and assign specific responsibilities to your committee members.

Have your meeting last about one hour. Many of your volunteers (including yourself) have other obligations. Encourage them to bring their kids (and provide them with games, puzzles or coloring books). Although your fundraising project is important, always keep in mind that your committee members are there because they choose to be, so make their time as effective and productive as you can.

How Long is this Project Going to Take, Anyway?

It's very important to establish a project timeline. Do you expect to be doing fundraising activities for 12 months, two years or five years?

As a committee, establish a realistic timeline that doesn't drag on endlessly because everyone starts losing interest—your donors, your committee members, even you. Start off running and don't pass up any money-making opportunity for your endeavor. Determine how many fundraisers your committee wants to undertake each season and an estimated dollar amount from each fundraiser. When is your community's "busy time?" Is the annual town celebration in July? Which high school sports draw the most fans? Do those Little League kids and their families go hungry because there's no dinner offered at their games? Are there any craft fairs, town garage sales, golf tournaments or home tours that your committee can participate in and earn money at? Get a calendar, find out what's already scheduled and get moving.

Be aware of existing fundraisers sponsored by other organizations in your community and don't conflict with them if you can help it. Don't compete—

complement! You may just find that some will donate a portion of their proceeds to your cause. Keep community members informed of your progress via local newspapers and other free media. Even signs taped on Main Street businesses keep your endeavor in people's minds.

What About Grants?

Grants are great, but grants take time. If you have time, then apply for one. There are lots of grants out there. Half the battle is to know where to look and then hope that someone on your committee has some writing skills to complete the grant application. A Web site worth looking at can be found at <http://www.schoolgrants.org>.

What Types of Fundraisers Should I Consider?

Most of us have had the "bake sale and car wash" experiences. They are old standbys and even in today's world, they still merit some attention.

Let's broaden our horizons a bit.

If you're like me, you're getting a bit tired of buying magazines you could otherwise live without. You can get cuter gift wrap at your local pharmacy.

Many large fundraising companies forget about us small-town types. How many children in a town of fewer than 1,000 people are going to earn \$1,500 in sales to qualify for the prize DVD player? But you *can* get your kids involved and excited about your fundraising project. How? By having a lot of different events with recognition for their participation. In other words, put their names in your local newspaper, or create a newsletter if you have to with pictures of "winners" and stories of who was there. They will soon start believing that they are a key element to your project's success.

Try to choose fundraisers relatively low-cost in terms of your labor and time, but high in the financial return department. Here are some of my favorite (and financially beneficial) fundraisers:

- **Business Mailings.** Yes, it sounds boring, but it works. Do this halfway through your project to remind local merchants of your past and upcoming

fundraisers, how much money you've raised to date and how much you would appreciate their financial support.

- **Donor Walls.** Businesses and people love to be recognized. Either choose a flat dollar amount (i.e., \$250 for any business or individual), or a varying level (i.e., lifetime, charter and friend members). Select your preferred method and then tell everyone about it (include it in your business mailing, above!).

Don't give up because you're small.

Whether they buy a brick, a picket on a fence or their name on a sign, this fundraiser is one of the easiest for your committee to conduct.

- **Auctions/Raffles.** An auction is a lot of work, but if your community doesn't have one yet, you must do it! Possible auction items can range from a child's artwork to a vacation package. Some of our highest bid items were those that offered three dozen cookies or a loaf of homemade bread each month for one year. Also, since babysitters are few and far between in small towns, consider offering complimentary babysitting at a local church during your auction.

- **A-Thons.** Whether it's a walk/run/rock/jump/read-a-thon, these are ideal for raising money *outside* of your community. Small-town businesses are asked quite frequently to donate to this and that, so it's important to give them a break. Tell the kids to call their Aunt Zelda in Walla Walla or their cousin Billy in Kalamazoo. Family members are usually pretty good about helping their extended family.

- **Community Service.** Providing a community service is a great way to earn money and help make your residents' lives a little easier at the same time. Ideas include raking leaves, mowing lawns, washing windows, recycling cans and papers, picking up groceries, general housecleaning and even making meals (think of it as a "personal chef").

- **School/Town Pride.** People in small towns love to show their spirit. Do

your residents have a school-colored antenna ball on their vehicles? Do you offer miniature wood storefronts to your alumni who have moved away? Does any group sell small pompoms to those little girls who idolize the high school cheerleaders?

- **Holiday Events.** Holidays are busy times, but they can also be money-making times for your cause. Does anyone put on a Halloween haunted house?

What about providing gift-wrapping services to those who don't have the time? Can your committee hang up holiday lights for businesses and private homes? Show the love

on Valentine's Day by selling heart-shaped, U-bake pizzas and delivering them to the door with (what else?) a few chocolate kisses.

- **Carnivals/Fairs.** Your community likely has an annual celebration. Is there an opportunity for your committee to make money at this event? If so, the possibilities are endless. Rent an inflatable jumping castle or climbing wall, set up a BINGO game with fun prizes, provide face painting or set up a You-Made-It Art Station. The key to your success is to find out what sells best based on your community's needs.

What's so Great About Forming a Foundation?

Forming a foundation can be a worthwhile effort. The basic premise for forming one is to make you tax-exempt and to make donations to your cause tax-deductible. To learn more about foundations, contact The Foundation Center at www.fdncenter.org or the Council on Foundations at <http://www.cof.org>.

There is nothing else quite like the feeling of accomplishment. After 15 months of planning and implementing fundraisers, organizing and conducting meetings, removing and installing equipment, our elementary school has one brand new playground structure that makes all 90 students smile. And, not one of them got a DVD player.

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