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Conover received \$6.5 million in grants for Conover Station, but according to city officials, applying for grants is not an easy task.

"(Completing) the application is the easy part," said Conover City Manager Donald Duncan Jr. "Completing the documents to start spending the money is the hard work."

In 2007 Duncan, along with a core group in the city government planning department, started applying for grants in 2007 for Conover Station after purchasing the property in 2005.

"We started off looking at grants to fit our needs," Duncan said. "That was not the right tactic. Then we started looking at various grant programs to see how we can mold the programs to fit our project."

That's when city officials discovered grants designed for "a distressed industry." The Conover Station site will sit on the former Broyhill Furniture production location. Because this was a location of a furniture business that closed because of "distress" in its production field, Duncan said it was a perfect fit.

"So we started (with that grant)," Duncan said. "The city started work on the site."

The first grant was a \$735,000 Economic Development Initiative grant, which Conover City Council credits U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole for her assistance.

From there, Conover "leveraged" grants to get other grants. By playing grants against each other, Duncan said man-hours spent doing the research and paperwork on the first grant, can be reformatted in to a different agency's format and resubmitted.

"You can leverage one grant multiple times," he said. "Take that money and look for other funding on other things. Take those two grants then leverage them a third time and then again. Keep building upon (the first grant). You have to get creative and read how the rules work (on each grant)."

Once a grant is awarded, paperwork is continuous and can last up to five more years for review, Duncan said.

"There are various requirements and each agency is different," he said. "They don't just send you a check. You have to put together a plan and there are audit reviews the city does, as well as audit reviews by that agency (awarding the grant)."

In addition, Duncan said the bidding process for each project has its own guidelines, such as the requirements that each bid has to be public and announced for a certain number of days before the process is closed to bidders.

Grant requirements also include matching funds. Duncan said by the end of the project, Conover could have invested about \$2 million.

"Everyone wants to see the local contribution," he said. "(The agencies) want to see that the community is invested in the project and (the grant) is not the sole funding source.

"We probably get turned down by as many (agencies) as we are awarded (grants)," he said. "It takes a lot of work."

Key players included in the grant application process, other than city employees, are Western Piedmont Council of Government, agencies like N.C. Department of Transportation and the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, as well as other state and national cities with similar projects.

"We consider ourselves very fortunate," Duncan said.

Grants Conover received for the Conover Station include:

1. \$735,000 Economic Development Initiative Grant from U.S. Housing and Urban Development for water, sewer and streets.
2. \$2.1 million Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program grant from U.S. Federal Highway Administration program through the N.C. Department of Transportation to rehab an existing building into a multi-modal center.
3. \$200,000 Environmental Protection Agency Brownfield Grant to clean up contaminants in area, part of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.
4. \$415,719 N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund.
5. \$1 million N.C. Dept. of Commerce Community Development Grant for Economic Development for construction.
6. \$1.5 million U.S. Dept. of Commerce Economic Development Administration grant for construction

Grants MSC has secured

1. \$200,000 Golden L.E.A.F. for equipment, research and development
2. \$300,000 N.C. Rural Center for equipment and operations

Total grants to date \$6.5 million

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Conover Station has \$6.5 million in grants, so far. Conover City Manager Donald Duncan Jr. said applying for grants is more work than people realize.

CONOVER, N.C.

Staff Writer

Observer News Enterprise

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