Tatiana Ausema 00:01

Hello everyone, and welcome to the prospective applicant webinar for the Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge Grant opportunities offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am Tatiana Ausema, a Senior Program Officer in the Office of Challenge Programs, and I'm so glad you decided to view this webinar to learn more about the upcoming deadline. I hope that over the course of the presentation I'm able to answer some questions that you may have about the program and application process. Since this is a prerecorded webinar, there is no chat or ability to ask questions during the presentation. If you still have questions after reviewing the Notice of Funding Opportunity, this webinar, and the other resources we're going to talk about today, we strongly encourage you to reach out to us directly via email at challenge@neh.gov. My colleagues and I will do our best to answer any questions and set up a call if necessary.

01:00

During the next 40 minutes or so I'll be discussing both the Capital Projects and Digital Infrastructure Notice of Funding Opportunities, or NOFOs. While these are two distinct opportunities, they have many similarities, and most of the application requirements are the same. I'll begin today with an overview of the program, some considerations that you may want to think about as you start developing your project, the process of applying for a challenge grant, we'll talk a little bit about the review process and review criteria, and then wrap up with some tips and resources as you prepare your project.

01:36

All of the information I'm going to discuss today can be found on the program information page, on NEH's website. From the homepage, click on "Grants," which will take you to an option to search by program or division. Challenge programs is the first listing on the page. The program page highlights a few changes to the to the Infrastructure and Capacity Building grant program that have occurred in the past year. I'll go over all of these in the course of the webinar; however, one of the changes we are most excited about is the expansion of our funding to support projects requesting up to $1 million in federal funds, up from $750,000 in our last funding cycle, and a lower, 1:1 match ratio for smaller projects requesting up to $150,000 in federal funds.

02:25

The purpose of the Challenge Grants program is to strengthen the institutional base of the humanities by enabling infrastructure, development, and capacity building. The awards aim to help institutions secure long-term support for core activities and expand efforts to preserve and create access to outstanding humanities materials. The program funds two distinct types of projects, each with its own Notice of Funding Opportunity.

02:54

The first is Capital Projects, and this is the bricks and mortar part of Challenge, and supports the design, purchase, construction, restoration, or renovation of facilities for humanities activities. It includes the purchase and installation of related moveable and permanently affixed equipment for exhibiting, maintaining, monitoring, and protecting collections (whether they're on exhibit or in storage), for critical building systems, such as electrical, heating, ventilation, security, life safety, lighting, utilities, telecommunications, and energy management. Projects could include purchase or construction of a new building, renovation of a gallery space, build out of a humanities center within a larger building, or renovation of an existing historic house, site, or landscape.

03:43

The second Notice of Funding Opportunity is for Digital Infrastructure, which supports the maintenance, modernization, and sustainability of existing digital scholarly projects and platforms. Some examples of this work might include development and modernization of digital architecture; you might pay developers to rewrite your software or improve the user experience for an existing digital tool; improvements to data management systems and formats; upgrading software and hardware systems by purchasing a new server, new licenses; training and outreach to teach people how to use your system, but there needs to already be an established audience; you might apply to Digital Infrastructure for digital preservation (changing data formats, converting data formats to conform to preservation standards); you can use this grant to support associated personnel costs for all of the activities I mentioned; or to develop a long-range plan for financial viability of the project. But as a reminder, for the Digital Infrastructure, they need to be existing digital scholarly projects and platforms. If you're looking to do preliminary digitization or build out a new tool or platform, NEH has other grant programs apart from this one that would support that work.

05:09

Fundraising is what sets Challenge Programs apart from most of the other programs at National Endowment for the Humanities and puts the "challenge" in Challenge Grants. Having funds to match is a great motivator for potential donors, for board members, and it can help expand your base of support within the community and nationally. If your organization's application is successful, you are required to raise third-party, non-federal funds in order to receive the funds from NEH. Gifts may be from individual donors, foundations, state grants, or other sources; however, you may not use your organization's own operating budget to meet the match. You are also not required to have all funds in hand at the time of the application; in fact, many of our applicants take the full first year of their project to focus entirely on fundraising and complete project plans. If you would like to begin fundraising in advance of your application, you can do so no more than five months before the application deadline.

06:18

The amount that your organization must raise to release NEH funds depends on your institution type and the amount of funds requested. We offer an encouragement for specially designated organizations that are eligible for a 1:1 match regardless of the amount requested from NEH. These are Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, two-year community colleges, federally recognized Native American tribal governments, and Native Hawaiian organizations. For these organizations, successful applicants must raise $1 in gifts for every $1 they are requesting from NEH, regardless of how much they are requesting. All other applicants must raise $1 for requests up to $150,000 or less; $3 for every $1 for requests up to $500,000, and $4 for every $1 in requests from $500,001 to $1 million. So, if you request $500,000 from NEH, you would be responsible for raising $1.5 million for a total project cost of $2 million. You can see that in our house diagram on the side here.

07:45

In this slide, you see the same information in a somewhat different format. NEH recognizes that many applications will be for one part of a much larger capital campaign. The Maximum Total Project Costs that you see on the bottom line refers to the upper limit of the portion of the project you will support with NEH funding, plus your required match; your organization's overall cost for the project may very well exceed this number. In your application, you will propose a fundraising schedule, also known as a match and release schedule, as part of your application package. That schedule will tell NEH when you plan to

raise funds over the course of your project. Applications requesting $150,000 or lower may only request up to two years to fundraise and complete all of the project pieces that are proposed in the application. Applications requesting above that amount may request up to five years to fundraise and complete all of the proposed work. If your organization has a development office, we strongly recommend you meet with them early to discuss your fundraising plans and ensure that it matches with their ability to support your project and their ability to fundraise.

09:10

Challenge grants are complex, and if you are viewing today's webinar, there's a good chance you already have a project in mind. Perhaps you've talked about it with your board of trustees, other staff members, maybe the general public, and maybe you've already started your fundraising campaign. Successful applications usually involve input from the whole project team, and this likely includes administration, your board, facilities staff. If you're doing a digital project, you'll need to have expertise in that area as well, and we would encourage you to involve every member of your team in the planning and grant-writing process. Just like a successful team includes a wide range of voices, a successful application will bring together disparate threads of fundraising, long-term strategic planning, project management, and long-term sustainability into a coherent and compelling (and concise) narrative. A strong application will clearly lay out both the project activities and fundraising and align them with past planning and future goals. A detailed explanation of review criteria is found in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, but I'd like to spend a few minutes focusing on a few key areas that staff and reviewers look for in Challenge applications and that we would like you to consider as you're planning your project.

10:36

The first thing that we want to make sure that that you're considering is the humanities significance of what you plan to do. We are the National Endowment for the Humanities after all, and so the humanities focus of your organization and the focus of your project should be front and center in your application. One of the changes in this year's application package is that NEH is requesting all applicants include a statement in the first part of the narrative that describes your organization's humanities purpose and activities and connect them explicitly to the work proposed as part of your capital or digital project. This introductory statement should offer a through line connecting your organization's humanities mission, the humanities function of the specific proposed project, and final humanities outcomes for the public, scholars, or other end-users.

11:33

The second important consideration as you're planning your project is the scope. For some projects, the NEH funding plus your match is going to cover the entire cost of what you hope to do. So that the slide with the house that we saw before where it's $500,000 from NEH, you're raising $1.5 million for a $2 million dollars total cost, that $2 million may cover the cost of the entire project. But for many of you, what you hope to do may be much larger. You may have a $70 or $80 million dollar building project. As you're thinking about applying to NEH, think about what specific activities are going to be supported through this grant and the matching funds. In the $2 million example, what bit of your larger project is that money going to cover and how are you going to present that as part of your larger project in the application?

12:29

The third important consideration is your timeline. We ask for a work plan as part of your project application package and we will look to see if the dates on the work plan, your budget, and the period of performance all align. We'll want to see if you're fundraising at the right time in order to be able to start your project when you say you will. Have you allowed for sufficient time for fundraising, for planning, and particularly for compliance with any applicable federal, state, and local regulations?

13:05

Challenge grants require two distinct, but overlapping, timelines. The first timeline is the fundraising timeline. This is the period which applicants can raise and certify funds in order to receive NEH matching funds. It begins five months prior to the application deadline. For this round, funds or pledges received for your project since December 18th may be used to meet your match, but I'd like to reiterate that you're not required to have funds in hand in order to apply to this program. The second timeline is the period of performance which is when the project activities will occur. For this round of Challenge grants, the Period of Performance may not start earlier than March 1, 2023 and may not extend longer than five years beyond that period. Your work plan, fundraising schedule, and period of performance should all align and reflect the time necessary to complete all activities proposed in your application.

14:09

The final important consideration that you need to make sure you have in your application is to tell us about your fundraising capacity. As I mentioned before, some of you may have a development office that has been doing this for a long time. Consult with them, ensure that this a priority for your development office along with their other institutional goals and other projects they're fundraising for. Some of you may not have a development office and you may be relying on a board of trustees or your staff to be doing fundraising, so tell us in your application about who will ultimately be responsible for raising these funds and their experience in this area. What type of fundraising has your organization done in the past? How does this fit in with existing donors? How will it expand your base of new donors? In your narrative, tell us about the types of gifts you may be getting. For example, do you have an established relationship with another philanthropic organization or a particular donor? What other organizations fund the work you're proposing? Are you pursuing state or local grants? Given the range of gift types and sources, NEH has developed "administration of challenge grants" guidance that's available on our website to help you determine what gifts may or may not be eligible. We are happy to have additional conversations with you about eligibility, both before the application is submitted, but especially if you have a successful application, we'll go through funds you may have on hand and possible additional sources of funding.

15:45

Challenge Programs has a number of eligible applicant types. In order to apply, you must either be a U.S.-based non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, an institution of higher education, a state or local government, a federally recognized Native American tribe or a Native Hawaiian organization. Your organization must have a connection to the humanities and your project must be humanities-based.

16:24

You can only apply for one Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge grant deadline per year and that applies to both the digital projects as well as the capital projects. If your organization has a current Challenge grant, you must complete all work and submit all of your final reports prior to submitting a new application for review. You may not have two active Challenge grants at the same time. Finally, please do read the NOFO closely and ensure that all application materials are submitted on time, in the

correct format, and that they adhere to page limits. NEH is unable to accept late materials or amend application packages after the published deadline, so please check and double check that your application package is complete!

This slide shows some of the major components you'll need to create and assemble for your application. Some of the materials are standard forms, but for many of them, you'll prepare a document and ultimately save it as a PDF for uploading in Grants.gov. Please follow formatting requirements and naming conventions carefully. The narrative provides a comprehensive framework and description of all aspects of the proposed project. Your narrative should be succinct, self-explanatory, and well organized. This is where you're going to lay out exactly what you're going to do in this project. You're going to tell us about the humanities significance of your organization and your project. You're going to tell us about exactly what you're going to do with your project: when you're going to start, when you're going to finish. You'll tell us about your fundraising and you're going to do all of this within ten pages, so you have to think very clearly and concisely as you lay out the information.

Your budget will be submitted using the standard form 424C. Please also submit a budget justification as a separate attachment. The budget justification should include your proposed match and release schedule, as well as a breakdown of cost items included in the standard form 424 C. Depending on where you are in project planning, you may have estimates from contractors or outside consultants. If you have these materials, please do attach them to the justification. Your proposed budget should only include the funds you are requesting from NEH and your required match. For larger projects, please designate which part NEH will be supporting, if possible. So, using the example as before, if you are requesting $500,000 from NEH, you have a $1.5 million match, and your total budget will be for exactly $2 million, even if your project is above and beyond that amount. So, decide early which portion of a larger project NEH will be supporting and if you want to have additional discussions about scope or how to select that portion of your project, please do reach out and we're happy to have conversations about that. Your application will also include a work plan, which is a separate attachment, and that needs to align with your narrative and budget. Your work plan must include a schedule with the anticipated start and finish dates and critical milestones for your project, including fundraising, planning, and construction activities. You should build in time to account for environmental and historic preservation review, which I'll talk about in some detail next.

If your Capital project proposes construction, renovation, repair, rehabilitation, ground or visual disturbance, NEH will determine if it is subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA. If your project is subject to a review, it may take from a few months to a year and NEH will assist with the process after an offer of support is made. In order to determine if a review is required, we ask all applicants to respond to a series of questions regarding the project site, past site use, historic or archaeological resources in the area, and environmental factors such as location in a flood plain or other vulnerable location. As you answer these questions, please include as much detail as possible. The more information we have with your application, the faster we may be able to initiate and complete our determination. If you anticipate a complicated review process or want to hire a consultant to manage the review, these are eligible costs that may be included in your budget.

As you prepare your application, NEH offers a range of resources to help you better understand how Section 106 and NEPA might impact your project timeline or work plan. Reviewing these resources carefully is essential if your project is already underway or will be underway by the time offers are made. Resources can be found on the Office of Challenge Program's Infrastructure and Capacity Building landing page, including a 20-minute presentation that goes through, step-by-step, how NEH historic preservation review works. And again, I would strongly encourage you to review that material if you anticipate doing any construction work before submitting the application or during the review process. As I noted earlier, if your application is recommended for funding, NEH will work with you to comply with the 106 and NEPA process. That said, it is exceptionally important to build enough time for this review into your work plan and to understand especially how it might impact projects already underway or that you have finalized construction documents for. If that might apply to your project, please do reach out to us with questions.

22:26

There are a number of other federal rules and regulations that you need to consider when applying for an NEH challenge grant, especially in the area of capital projects. All of these requirements are listed in the Notice of Funding Opportunity; however, I want to highlight two especially important requirements here. First is the Davis Bacon Act, which ensures that all trades and laborers working on a federally funded project receive appropriate compensation. When requesting quotes for an NEH project, please remind your contractors that Davis Bacon wages apply, so that they can incorporate them into their estimates.

23:05

The second is a relatively new requirement called the Build America Buy America Act, or BABA. BABA requires that federal projects involving construction, alteration, maintenance, or repair and related utility upgrades such as water, HVAC, and electrical must have a domestic content procurement requirement. The domestic content procurement preference means that all iron and steel and other materials used in the project are produced in the United States. In addition to iron and steel, it also includes non-ferrous metals, plastic and polymer-based products, glass, lumber, and drywall. Since this is a new requirement, NEH is still developing specific guidance; however, please alert any contractors or builders of this requirement so they may estimate costs accordingly.

24:05

These are complicated projects, and we have additional resources online to help you through the process. On our program resources page, you'll find the Notice of Funding Opportunity for both Capital Projects and Digital Infrastructure. You'll find a Frequently Asked Questions document that will perhaps answer some of the questions you might have about submission and some of the details. You will find many of the resources I've listed previously, such the webinar with information on Section 106 and NEPA and the very important "Administration of Challenge Grants" document that can give you information about fundraising and eligible gifts. Perhaps most importantly, you'll find sample application narratives. These samples can be really helpful to see what successful applicants have done and how they've constructed their project. Keep in mind that we've changed the format of the narrative in this past year. We don't have any narratives that use the new format, but I think that the ones that are available are still incredibly helpful for thinking about how you may propose your project, talk about it in a larger context, and communicate it to NEH and our reviewers.

25:17

Applications for NEH grants, like many federal grants, are submitted through a web portal called Grants.gov. It's a fairly smooth system, but it would be good for you to spend some time getting familiar with it before you submit your application. You need to register at least a month before applying. We strongly urge that you apply early, as the portal can get fairly overwhelmed in the five minutes before a deadline. If your institution has a grants office, they can help, they'll already have a Grants.gov log-in; they do this all the time. Grants.gov support is available 24-7. If you do have a grants office, again, reach out to them early and see if they have an early submission deadline, particularly universities will ask applications to be submitted to them a week, two weeks, three weeks before the final deadline. If you are going to be submitting your application in Grants.gov yourself, complete your Grants.gov registration early and ensure that you have all of the necessary registrations. When you go to upload your files, check your file formats and make sure that all of them are in .pdf form and properly named. You can resubmit your application package up until the deadline, but no materials can be added after the deadline, including letters of recommendation or parts of the package that are formatted incorrectly. So, again, please submit your application early and confirm the submission. You'll get an email when it's confirmed from Grants.gov.

26:58

Here we've included screenshots from Grants.gov with directions on how to properly fill out your budget request on the Supplementary Cover Sheet--because it's a little bit confusing for Challenge grants. You'll find the cover sheet under "Mandatory Forms" on Grants.gov. I'll go through this quickly but remember that the webinar and the transcript is always here for you to refer back to or send along to the person who is going to be filling this out when the time comes. Since Challenge grants don't allow outright funds, the first highlighted box should be left empty and you put in the amount requested from NEH in the second and third boxes. Then, in the fourth box you'd indicate the amount that you will fundraise to receive those funds based on the matching ratio that your institution qualifies for and the amount that you are asking. In the last box, you put the total project cost which is the sum of the NEH award and the matching funds you will raise. As you do your budget and enter project costs, please use only whole dollars. You may round up or down, but please do not include cents in your budget.

28:09

As we move to close, I want to touch on the review criteria that our panelists will use to evaluate your application. These are included in a table on page ten of the Notice of Funding Opportunity, and you'll see that each narrative section corresponds to one of the criteria. To the best of your ability, please be sure to clearly include each one of these elements in your application—and you can even use the criteria as subject headings in your narrative. The reviewers that will be looking at your application are generalists, sometimes former project directors or participants, or individuals from a similar institution type. Be sure to write for this knowledgeable, but generalized, audience. Avoid gaps or asking reviewers to make assumptions about your project, expertise, or staffing. I will often say to our applicants that you don't want to confuse the reviewers because they're always going to assume the worst so be very clear and don't assume that they're going to know your staff, your institution, or even your community. If possible, ask a colleague to review your application with the review criteria in mind, and ask for feedback on how well your proposal responds to each one of these areas.

29:30

Once your application is assembled and submitted into Grants.gov, what happens? All applications for NEH grants go through a lengthy review process, which has several stages. The first step is going to be that NEH staff will review for eligibility and completeness. We'll make sure all of the required forms are there and that you're an eligible organization. The next step—and it's central to the work that we do at NEH—is the peer review panel. During this peer review process, evaluators read the applications, write comments, and post a rating. They meet to discuss the applications (for the foreseeable future, they'll be virtual meetings) and then provide feedback and comments to NEH staff on each application. NEH staff review reviewer's comments and make our own recommendations. Those recommendations are considered by the National Council on the Humanities which includes twenty-six individuals that are scholars in the humanities, nominated by the president, and approved by the Senate.

The Council then makes recommendations to the endowment's Chair, who takes all of this into consideration and makes the decision on which projects to fund. It's a very long process but it allows for a rich review. But I hope that it helps explain why it takes about a year between when your application is submitted to when you're going to hear the results of the competition. After grants are announced, you can request comments from your evaluators and if the proposal is not funded, the reviewers' comments can help you think about how to revise your proposal for next time.

31:10

I'm going to wrap up with just a few tips and reminders:

1. Please reach out to us early with a short description of your project if you happen to have it. For phone consultations with NEH staff, it's helpful to have both the project director and a development person on the call. It's not required to have a consultation with us before submitting an application, though.

2. Carefully read all the materials on our website: the Notice of Funding Opportunity, Frequently Asked Questions, sample narratives, sample work plans, etc. It's all very dense, but very helpful. Pay attention to the file names, budget conventions, page limits, and other details.

3. Involve all of the project participants in the application draft. If you work with a grant writer, be sure that they're talking to your engineers or digital specialists or fundraisers.

4. Use NEH's search feature to find other institutions that may have already received a Challenge grant and reach out to them for feedback or suggestions about your proposal.

5. This probably should be our first application tip: please send a draft in for comments. Drafts are entirely optional, but applicants have reported that the review and comments are very helpful as they think through their project. The draft deadline for this round is April 6th.

6. Finally, whether your project is successful or not, please request panelist comments. They're a rich trove of information for both funded projects and those that might be resubmitted.

32:50

So, finally, on behalf of my colleagues in the Office of Challenge Programs and everyone at NEH, thank you so much for taking the time to view this webinar today. We're really looking forward to hearing from you, reading your drafts, and ultimately your final applications this spring. Again, please reach out with any questions and best wishes as you work on your submission to the NEH Infrastructure and Capacity Building Grant program. Thank you so much.