John Cox 00:10

Hello everyone, and welcome to the prospective applicant webinar for the Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge Grant (ICB) opportunity offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I'm John Cox, Senior Program Officer in the Office of Challenge Programs, and I'm so glad that you've joined this webinar to learn 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 the application process.

00:40

During the next 30 minutes or so I'll be discussing the ICB Notice of Funding Opportunity, or NOFO. I will begin with an overview of the program, discuss some of the considerations that you may want to think about as you start developing your project, describe the process of applying for a Challenge grant and a bit about the review process and review criteria, and then end with some tips and resources, and time for questions.

01:12

All of the information I'm going to discuss today can be found on the program information page, on NEH's website and in the NOFO. From the homepage, click "Grants," which will take you to an option to search by program or division. Choose "Office of Challenge Programs" for our office's two funding opportunities, which should appear. 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, but to start I'd like to mention two important changes this year. For one, NEH will offer only a single ICB competition this year, so there will be no September deadline for this program. So, if you want to apply, apply now. Also, there's no longer an ICB program to fund digital infrastructure projects, though we do fund capital projects involving digital equipment.

02:17

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 Capital Projects program supports the design, construction, restoration, or renovation of facilities for humanities activities. This includes the purchase and installation of related movable and permanently affixed equipment for exhibiting, maintaining, monitoring, and protecting collections (whether on exhibit or in storage), and for critical building systems, such as electrical, heating, air conditioning, security, life safety, lighting, utilities, telecommunications, and energy management. Projects might 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.

03:30

Fundraising is what sets Challenge Programs apart from most of the other programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities and puts the "challenge" in the Challenge Grants. Having funds to match is a great motivator for potential donors, for other funding organizations, or 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 NEH support. Gifts may be from individual donors, from foundations, state grants, or other sources; however, you may not use your organization's own operating budget to meet the match. You are not required to have all funds in hand at the time of the application; in fact, many applicants take the full first year of their project

to focus entirely on fundraising and to completing 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, in this case, no earlier than December 18, 2022. That is, funds raised before that date can't be used for the NEH match.

04:50

The amount that your organization must raise to release NEH funds depends on your institution type and the amount requested. A number of specially designated organizations are eligible for a special 1:1 match regardless of the amount requested from them. 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. In this scenario, successful applicants must raise $1 in gifts for every $1 they are requesting from NEH. All other applicants must raise $1 for requests up to $150,000 or less and $3 for every $1 for requests up to $500,000. 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. New this year is the opportunity to apply for a Chair's Special Award. If you are proposing an ambitious project of exceptional significance and impact, you may request a Chair's Special Award up to $1 million to be matched at 4:1, unless you otherwise qualify for the 1:1 match. Chair's Special Awards are rare; NEH typically awards no more than or two per year. Please note that NEH may make an offer at a reduced level of funding, in which case the match requirement would be at the ratio stated in the NOFO. For instance, if you request a Chair's Special Award of $750,000 with a 4:1 matching ratio, NEH may offer you a $500,000 offer with a 3:1 matching ratio instead.

06:48

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 here 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. You will propose a fundraising schedule, also known as a match and release schedule, as part of your application. That schedule will tell NEH when you plan to raise funds over the course of your project timeline. Applications requesting $150,000 or lower may only request up to two years to fundraise and complete the project. 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 to discuss your fundraising plans.

08:00

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, or 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, boards, and facilities staff. We 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, strategic planning, project management, and long-term sustainability into a coherent, compelling, and concise narrative. A strong application will clearly lay out both the project activities and the fundraising and will align them with past planning and future goals. A detailed explanation of review criteria is found in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, but I want to spend a few minutes focusing on some 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.

09:25

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

10:13

The second important consideration as you're planning your project is the scope of the project. For some projects, the NEH funding plus your match is going to cover the entire cost of the project. So, if you're renovating a house and request $500,000 from NEH and raise $1.5 million to match perhaps that $2 million dollars covers the entire project. For other projects, however, the total cost might be much larger. You may have a $70 or $80 million building project. As you're thinking about applying to NEH, consider which specific activities are going to be supported through this grant and the matching funds. In that $70 million example, what bit of your larger project is the $2 million going to cover and how are you going to present that as part of your larger project in the application? Remember to keep your focus on the humanities significance as you consider the project scope and think too about raising the required matching funds for this component of the larger project.

11:23

The third important consideration is the 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. Are you fundraising at the right time in order to be able to start your project when you say? Have you allowed for sufficient time for fundraising, for planning, and particularly for compliance with federal, state, and local regulations?

12:00

Challenge grants require two distinct, but interrelated, timelines. The first is the fundraising timeline. This is the period during 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, 2022 can be used to meet the match. 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 cannot start earlier than March 1, 2024 and will extend no 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.

13:00

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. Is this a priority for your development office? How are they going to support this particular project with a number of other institutional goals going on? 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 the fundraising, so tell us in your application about who will ultimately be responsible for fundraising and describe their experience in this area. What type of fundraising has your organization done in the past? How does this fit in with existing donors? Will it expand your base to new donors? In your application, tell us 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 an "Administration of Challenge Grants" guidance that's available on our website to help you determine what gifts may or may not be eligible. And we're happy to have conversations with you about that, both before but especially if you've been made an offer, we'll talk about what types of gifts are allowable.

14:30

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

15:03

You can only apply for one Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge grant per year. If your organization has or currently holds a Challenge grant, you may apply for a new Challenge grant if you are in the final year of your period of performance. You will be required to complete all project activities and submit all final reports before NEH will issue a new award. Please 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!

15:55

Here are 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 into 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. It should be succinct, self-explanatory, and well organized. That's where you're going to lay out exactly what you're going to do. You're going to tell us about your humanities significance, you're going to tell us about your project, you're going to tell us about your fundraising--and you're going to do it all within ten pages. So, you have to think very clearly and concisely as you lay out all of this information.

16:52

You will submit your project budget using the SF (or standard form) 424C. Please also submit a budget justification that includes your proposed match and release schedule, as well as a breakdown of cost items included in your SF-424C. Depending on where you are in project planning, you may have estimates from contractors or outside consultants. If you have these materials, please attach them to the justification. Your proposed budget should include only the funds you are requesting from NEH and your required match. For larger projects, please designate which part NEH will be supporting. As I noted before, if you are requesting $500,000 from NEH, you have a $1.5 million match, so we would like to see a budget for $2 million, even if your total project is above and beyond that amount. So, decide which portion of a larger project NEH will be supporting and just include that in your budget. If you need help sorting this out, we're happy to have conversations about your project scope and budget. Again, if the NEH-funded portion and match is one part of a larger project, be sure to explain how this funding fits into the larger project and let us know in the narrative and/or the budget justification what the total project cost is. Your work plan, which is a separate attachment, should align with your narrative and budget. It must include a

schedule that provides 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 historical preservation review, which I'll talk about in some detail just now.

If your Capital Project proposes construction, renovation, repair, rehabilitation, or ground or visual disturbance, NEH will determine if the project is subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. If subject to a review, it may take from a few months to a year, and NEH will assist you 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 floodplain or other vulnerable locations. 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 this 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 and your 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 the NEH historic preservation review works. As I noted earlier, if your application is recommended for funding, NEH will work with you to comply with the 106 and NEPA process as relevant. 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 that already have finalized construction documents or are on a tight schedule. If that might apply to your project, please be sure to watch the recorded information, review the resources, and reach out to us with questions. And I should note it's important to remember that no work within scope of the NEH-funded portion plus the match may begin until after 106 and any other conditions are met, so it's important not to start construction or work on your project if you're applying for NEH funding. Again, feel free to reach out to staff to discuss this.

There are a number of other federal rules and regulations that you should consider when applying for an NEH Challenge grant. All of these requirements are listed in the NOFO; however, I want to highlight two especially important requirements here. First is the Davis Bacon Act, which ensures that all trade 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 proposed costs.

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 and electrical must have a domestic content procurement requirement. The domestic content procurement preference means that all iron and steel and the construction materials used in the project are produced in the United States. This includes steel and iron, manufactured products, non-ferrous metals, plastic and polymer-based products, glass, lumber, and drywall. Additional information is

available on our website, and you can contact us with specific questions. Again, however, please alert any contractors or builders of this requirement so they may estimate costs accordingly.

23:05

These are complicated projects, and we some resources online to help you through our process. On our program resources page, you'll find the Notice of Funding Opportunity as well as a Frequently Asked Questions document that will perhaps answer some of the questions you might have about submission details. You will find many of the resources I've listed previously, such a webinar with additional information on Section 106 and NEPA and the "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 sample applications in particular can be helpful to see what successful applicants have done and how they've constructed their project and their narrative. Keep in mind that we have changed the format of the narrative, so these narratives don't incorporate the new format, but I think they're still really helpful for thinking about how you may propose your project and communicate it to NEH and our reviewers.

24:08

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 it gets pretty overwhelmed in the few minutes before the midnight deadline. If your institution has a grants office, they can help; they do this a lot. Grants.gov support is available 24-7. Complete your Grants.gov registration, submit your application early, and ensure that you have a confirmation email from Grants.gov. Check your file formats and make sure that if a file needs to be in PDF form that it's in PDF form, 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, submit your application early if possible and confirm that submission is correct. You'll get an email when it's confirmed.

25:24

Here we've included screenshots from Grants.gov with directions on how to properly fill out your budget requests on the Supplementary Cover Sheet--because it's a little confusing. You'll find the cover sheet under "Mandatory Forms" on Grants.gov. I'll go through this quickly but remember that this webinar and the transcript will be posted on our website so you can refer back to this as a resource. Since Challenge grants doesn't allow outright funds, the first highlighted box should be left blank; you'll put the amount requested from NEH in the second and third boxes. Then, in the fourth box you'll indicate the amount you will fundraise to receive those funds based on the matching ratio that your institution qualifies for. And in the last box, you'll put the total project cost which is the sum of the NEH award and the matching funds you will raise. Please use only whole dollars.

26:28

I want to touch on the review criteria again that our panelists will use to evaluate your application. These are included in a table on page 29 of the NOFO, and you'll see that each narrative section corresponds to one of the criteria. To the best of your ability, 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 for clarity. The reviewers will be generalists, sometimes former project directors or participants, or individuals from a similar type institution. Be sure to write for this knowledgeable, but general, audience. Try to avoid gaps or asking reviewers to make assumptions about your project, expertise, or staffing. I will often say to

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 reviewers are going to know your staff or your institution. If possible, ask a colleague to review your application with these criteria in mind, and ask for feedback on how well your proposal responds to each of these areas.

So, you have assembled and submitted your application—now what? All applications for NEH grants go through a lengthy review process, which has several stages. The first step is going to be that the NEH staff will review applications for eligibility and completeness. We make sure that 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'll then meet virtually to discuss the applications and provide feedback and comments to NEH staff. NEH staff review those evaluations and make our own recommendations. Those recommendations are considered by the National Council on the Humanities which includes twenty-six people 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 ones to fund. It's a long process but it allows for rich review. This description of the review process may also help explain why it takes almost a year between when your application is going to be 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 you want to revise your project or proposal for next time.

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

1. Reach out early with a short description of your project. For phone consultations with NEH staff, it's helpful to have both the project director and a development person on the call.

2. Secondly, carefully read the materials on our website: the NOFO, the FAQs, sample narratives, sample work plans, etc. It's dense material, but helpful. Pay attention to the file names, budget conventions, page limits, and other details.

3. Involve all project participants in the application draft. If you work with a grant writer, be sure that they are talking to your engineers and 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.

5. Send a draft in for comments. This is optional, but applicants have reported that the review and comments are helpful. The draft deadline for this round is April 5th, 2023.

6. And finally, please request panelist comments, whether you were successful or not.

So, on behalf of my colleagues in the Office of Challenge Programs thank you for joining this webinar today. We look forward to hearing from you, reading drafts, and seeing applications later this spring. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us either by phone or email. Here's our contact information. Thank you all for joining us. We'll move on to answering questions now, so if you have questions please put them in the chat and we will try to answer them.

Jess Unger 31:05

Thanks John. This is Jess Unger with the Office of Challenge Programs here. It seems that there might be a technical issue with attendees being able to access the chat at the moment so we're just trying to get that resolved. If you do have a question and are able to see a button to access the chat, please do go ahead and put a question in there. It seems that some folks may not be able to at the moment. Just to reemphasize that we are available to field questions by calling us on our main line listed here or emailing us at challenge@neh.gov. But I do see a question coming through, John, so that's good. "Do you submit the copy for review through the same portal as the grant?"

John Cox 31:53

That's a good question! And if you would like to submit a draft to us, then no, please just email that challenge@neh.gov. And we don't need the entire application, we really want the narrative, the budget, and the budget narrative I think are particularly important to us. But I should also add that if on April 4ᵗʰ you only have half of a narrative written, you're welcome to submit half a narrative to us and we will give you the feedback that we can on what you've completed. So, it doesn't have to be perfect in order to be submitted as a draft and it has no bearing at all on your final submission.

Jess Unger 32:40

Great, thank you! Another question just came in: "Can proposals include the renovation of buildings to house educational facilities such as classrooms?"

John Cox 32:49

They can, yes. What you'll want to do is make very clear in that application how that is significant for the humanities. So, you know, I would say proposals that are renovating a fairly generic sort of classroom building sometimes have a harder time arguing for humanities significance, and so I think you want to really talk about how is this space particularly useful for or important for humanities instruction and learning and how will it be used by humanities faculty or classes.

Jess Unger 33:32

Another question: "Should we use the email on the screen to reach out with project ideas?"

John Cox 33:38

Yes, please do! Send those to challenge@neh.gov and one of us will get back to you as soon as we can.

Jess Unger 33:50

"How many applications are received and how many get awarded on average?"

John Cox 33:57

I think recently we've had a funding ratio of--Jess, I'm going to ask you for clarification, is it 20 percent, a little more than that?

Jess Unger 34:10

I believe it's about 27% across the program's history. And number of applications received: in the past few years we've had a couple of deadlines per fiscal year, and we're averaging I think probably about 120 applications a fiscal year. There's another question for you, John: "What's the smallest award amount that will be considered in the 1:1 match range?"

John Cox 34:41

You could ask for $5 of matching if you wanted! So, there is no minimum, but just note that it's a very complicated application and it's a complicated project to run. There are a lot of regulations to go along with federal funding, and so I think if it's too small of a project it might simply not be worth the trouble. But by all means, feel free to reach out to us and we'd be happy to discuss that with you and what the pros and cons of applying for a smaller project would be. So, there is no minimum. I should also mention that the program statistics are on the program page, and so you can for a little more information go to that page.

Jess Unger 35:39

Great, thank you John. Another question: "We are seeking funding for design and pre-construction costs. We will have the matching funds. Should we still consider applying?"

John Cox 35:50

Sure. NEH funds can be used for design and construction documents, yes.

Jess Unger 36:06

"Do you consider equity across states and regions when giving out awards?"

John Cox 36:10

That's not one of our program criteria. We do (NEH as a whole) likes to make sure that funding goes all over the country, and we work very hard to assist applicants in all 50 states and territories. There's no prohibition for instance against two projects from the same or the same state getting funded, and that's not a criteria for each program, but that's not to say that the Chair might not take those kinds of things into consideration when she's making her final funding decisions. But by and large I would say as an endowment we work very hard to fund all over the country in all regions and states, but in any particular program we want to fund lots of different projects in different areas but that wouldn't guarantee any kind of funding for instance.

Jess Unger 37:17

"Can matching funds come from an annual gift or is that still considered funds from the applicant?"

John Cox 37:25

I think it depends on the source of the funding. So, who's giving that annual gift? It might be that gift during the allowable fundraising period might be able to be used. I think you would probably want to check with our Office of Grant Management or check with us to see for particular kinds of questions about that. So, it's difficult to say clearly or definitively yes or no, it would really depend on a number of factors, but it's possible, I think.

Jess Unger 38:12

"For non-profit organizations, are city or state funds eligible for matching funds?"

John Cox 38:18

They are, as long as they don't originate with the federal government. So, some money from, for instance, Housing and Urban Development, that goes to a city couldn't then be used to meet a match, but if the funds originate with the city or state then yes, they can be used to meet the match.

Jess Unger 38:48

Great, and I think that is it for the questions that I see right now and again apologies if anyone did have technical issues accessing the chat feature for the program today. We welcome your questions through our challenge@neh.gov email address or through our phone number here. One more just came in, John: "Is a pledge sufficient for a match or do you need funds in hand?"

John Cox 39:14

So that's a good question and the pledge is sufficient to meet your sort of yearly goal for instance, so if you've told us that in the second year of your grant award period, you'll raise $100,000 and some of that comes in as a pledge, that's fine, you may use that. However, the pledge has to be realized by the end of the award period so before your project period ends, you have to have the cash in hand, you have to have the money, the pledge has to be realized. So, the pledge as it comes in can be used for the match as long as you'll get the funding before the end of the award period.

Jess Unger 40:02

Great, thanks again John, that seems to be the end of questions for now so I turn things over to you to close it out.

John Cox 40:09

Ok, well thank you again everyone for joining us. Again, we will encourage everyone to reach out to us at challenge@neh.gov or the phone there, 202-606-8309 and we will respond as promptly as we can. Get in touch, ask questions, and send us a draft proposal by April 5th. We look forward to seeing lots of drafts and getting lots of questions. So, thank you everyone for joining us and stay in touch with us.