

Fund your Natural Playground 101

- Bienenstock's goal is to get your nature-connection project funded and built as quickly as possible. Today, fundraising is more competitive than ever before and it requires a sophisticated, strategic approach. Having raised millions of dollars for hundreds of natural playground projects, we offer this guide as a companion to our fundraising workshop. We hope this helps to make your dream a reality. Remember the old proverb, "*the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time*".

Eight Sources For Funding

1. **The property owner.** Your project will increase property value for the owner and for the surrounding homes while reducing teacher absenteeism, bullying, and vandalism as well as enriching the health, intellect, and self-worth of students. This all adds value for them. Will your project fix existing drainage issues, repair surfacing, reduce maintenance costs, or improve curb appeal? Ask about their budget for property improvements. You will need their permission regardless of whether or not they contribute.
2. **Bake sales, bottle drives, and trivia nights...** I know, it sucks, but this is as much about building buy-in from the community and potential funders as it is about the money. This is about building your credibility across all funding platforms. Why should they invest in your project if you aren't?
3. **Foundations and NGOs.** There are loads of charitable organizations that have recognized the importance of connecting children and communities to nature. From TD Friends of the Environment Foundation to Trillium, to Sobeyes and Home Depot, these foundations provide millions in project funding every year. Local community foundations, Rotary, Civitan, Probus, Lions, and Optimists are always looking for projects to support.
4. **In-kind.** Take your project materials list and start knocking on the doors of local suppliers. You will be amazed at what they will contribute if you ask. Discounted materials are as good as cash. Call your local Landscape Trades Association; local chapters are always looking for projects to help their community.
5. **Wealthy individuals.** It is better to ask for advice on whom else to go to for support rather than simply asking them for their money. Building a network of support helps with all of your funding channels.
6. **Government.** All three levels (Municipal, Provincial and Federal) have something to gain by being involved in your project, and something to lose if they are not. Make sure they understand this. Ask them to match each others' support. Start with your local councilor and then move up the chain from there.
7. **Volunteers.** This is the fun bit. Just make sure there is ample water, snacks, washrooms, Band-Aids, and meaningful work available for everyone. If you have someone with a military background available for build days, which helps as well. *Contact Bienenstock for a full Community Build Guidebook to help with planning.*
8. **Corporations.** Large corporations have *Sponsorship Directors*, *Green Marketing* strategies, *Corporate Social Responsibility Charters* (ISO 26000), and *Human Resources Team-building* budgets. Natural playgrounds that are completed through a community build model offer an opportunity to engage each of these departments individually or all of them in combination. Team building budgets are often funded more generously than sponsorship budgets at the local level.

So... Where Do We Start?

- **Gather your community** together for a big meal and decide **why** you are doing this. What is it about your story that makes your project stand out from any other? How is your community unique? What is the change you are looking to accomplish? What is it that will keep your core team inspired to realize your project regardless of any opposition?
- **Write your story** down in a one page brief and a ten page report outlining the need and the solution. Your story will serve as a design brief and the foundation of your fundraising strategy.
- **Design your space** in colour and in 3D. Hire an expert with a proven track record in community-based design facilitation (as opposed to a prescriptive design process). Make sure that the project reflects the natural, cultural and industrial heritage of the site and your community. Create the ultimate dream project; do not water it down before you even begin. Remember that most of us need to be presented with a vision that we can picture ourselves in and be inspired by before we invest.
- **Make a quantities list** that details all materials, equipment, and labour (both skilled and unskilled) that you will need to complete the project.
- **Develop a communications plan.** Include a website and a social media strategy, and involve your local radio and newspaper. This will be important for many of your funders as a return on their support.
- **Create a multi-pronged strategy.** Of the 8 sources for funding listed here, we strongly recommend that you develop a plan to pursue every channel in parallel, and a team to manage the effort.
- **Assemble a steering committee.** You will never get this done alone (unless you are rich or superhuman). Organize your most dedicated community members as your core group, and assign tasks to team leaders. Ideally, your steering committee should consist of 4 to 9 people. Research shows that larger committees do not necessarily make better choices; they simply make them more slowly, while smaller committees fail to achieve buy-in and tend to burn out more quickly with the increased workload.
- **Post everything.** The website and social media plan will help to keep your campaign on track. It will also help you to engage more grant writers and community organizers.
- **Count everything** your committee does and place a value on it. This is your contribution and it counts!
- **Add a funding thermometer** to the website. Wait until you have secured your first 25% of funds before posting it. An empty thermometer is a downer.
- **Create information boards** to place at the entrances to your school and/or find local businesses that will allow you to place information about your progress in their storefront.
- **Create challenges and set targets** for every funding stream. Often, one family will match another's contribution, or one business will attempt to beat their competitor's bid.
- **Celebrate your successes.** We all need to acknowledge the hard work we have done, so have a party, make an announcement, or just jump up and down screaming whenever a target is met.
- **Break ground** in a public ceremony where you acknowledge your major supporters.

HAVE FUN! And never give up...
