

Tips for Improving Your TIF Applications

A practical guide for tribes preparing applications to the New Mexico Tribal Infrastructure Fund (TIF)

Why This Guide

The Tribal Infrastructure Fund (TIF) awards are competitive. The TIF Review Committee (TRC) scores every application against a fixed 100-point metric, and the difference between funded and unfunded projects is generally in the details of the narrative, justifying the critical need, the readiness documentation, and the budget. This guide will provide lessons learned from successful applications, the TIF Board Guidelines & Procedures, and broadly accepted grant-writing standards.

Tips for improvement:

1. Know How You Will Be Scored

Before you write a single sentence, become familiar with the TIF scoring metric. The application must provide information for all four scoring categories. This information is available in the TIF Board Guidelines on the IAD website, in TIF Application trainings, and within the TIF Application portal when completing the application.

Scoring Category	Points	What the TRC is Looking For
Critical Need	30	Health, safety, welfare, or economic-development need supported by data. Justify your narrative with reports, studies, and analysis.
Readiness	30	Project can start and finish on time, with all components in place. Are planning documents available? Is this project charted by leadership?
Capacity	25	Demonstrated, timely compliance with prior grants over the last three years. Is the project team listed and named?
Leveraging	15	Cash match relative to the TIF request must be documented.

2. Sharpen the Critical Need Section (30 pts)

The project must address a specific, documented problem. A general statement that the community needs improvement is not acceptable.

- **Lead with the problem.** State the problem in one clear sentence, then quantify it. How many homes; how many residents; how many feet of failing line; how many days per year is service interrupted?
- **Anchor to the Tribal Infrastructure Act (Act).** Tie the project explicitly to one or more of the four statutory drivers — health, safety, welfare, or economic development — using the language of the Act (NMSA 1978, § 6-29-1 to -9).

- **Use evidence, not adjectives.** Cite Indian Health Service assessments, New Mexico Environment Department notices, engineering studies, sanitary surveys, road inventories, outage logs, community surveys, etc. Untriaged claims do not score.
- **Show the recommended solution.** If a study or Preliminary Engineering Report has been completed and recommends a solution, name it, date it, and attach the executive summary.
- **Describe what happens if it is not funded.** Quantify the consequences of inaction: boil-water orders, emergency hauls, bus routes, lost economic activity, exposure events, etc.

3. Demonstrate Readiness (30 pts)

Readiness is about credibility. The application must demonstrate that, if awarded, at least 5% of the award will be obligated within six months, 85% of the award will be expended within three years, and the project will be completed on or before the IGA reversion date. Reversion of funds is a real problem, and readiness will be scored as such.

- **Confirm ICIP entry.** The project must be in your Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan (ICIP) before completing the application. Confirm the ICIP year, rank, and page reference in the application. Please note, however, that the ICIP project rank is not scored.
- **Bring the right documents.** Match the readiness package to the project type. This may include but is not limited to: Planning projects need Tribal Council resolution and community support; Design projects need Right of way/easements, Tribal Historical Preservation Office (THPO) clearance, survey, and community input; Construction projects need 100% construction documents, a phasing plan, and secured matching funds.
- **Show a realistic schedule.** Include a Gantt-style schedule that shows tasks, responsible party, start and finish dates, and how the work fits inside the TIF time limits.
- **Align Scope, Schedule of Values, and budget.** Provide a Scope of Work that mirrors the budget line for line, and a Schedule of Values that ties dollars to deliverables.
- **Address permits and clearances head-on.** List environmental, archaeological, and permitting steps and where each one stands. Pending National Environmental Policy Act or THPO review is fine — silent on it is not.

4. Prove Capacity (25 pts)

Capacity is the TRC asking: “can this project be completed?” The Guidelines define capacity as demonstrable compliance with grant requirements within the past three years. Treat it as a track-record section.

- **Identify your team.** Name the people: project manager, technical lead (architect/engineer/owner’s rep), grant administrator, and approving authority. Attaching short bios or an organizational chart is helpful.
- **Show project-management depth.** Walk through your project-management process across all six phases: concept, planning, design, permitting, construction, and close-out.
- **Document past performance.** List of recent awards (TIF and otherwise), award amount, expended-to-date, percent obligated, and on-time/on-budget status. Acknowledge any prior issues and how you resolved them.

- **Show administrative discipline.** Confirm administrative readiness: budget tracking, file organization, audit status, and Public Finance Accountability Act (HB 493, 2025) (NMSA 1978, §§ 6-3B-1 et seq.) compliance.
- **Map your approval chain.** Identify the bureaucratic path: who approves change orders, pay applications, and close-out documents on the tribal side.

5. Maximize Leverage (15 pts)

Leveraging tells the TRC the project is a shared priority and reduces risk to the State. Cash match and in-kind support both count and may include funds that cover indirect costs that severance tax bond proceeds cannot pay.

- **Stack diverse sources.** Tribal capital outlay, NM State Capital Outlay, federal sources (EDA, HUD, IHS, BIA, USDA-RD), and philanthropic or NGO contributions are all valid.
- **Quantify in-kind.** Show the value of land, staff time for project management, engineering already paid for, and grant administration. Use defensible dollar values.
- **Attach proof.** Provide award letters, memorandums of understanding, or board resolutions for every leveraged source. Unsecured pledges weaken the score.
- **Tie leverage to phasing.** Pair leveraging with phasing. If TIF is funding Phase 2 of a larger build-out, show what Phase 1 paid for and who paid it.
- **Cover the gaps TIF will not.** Use leverage to cover items TIF cannot — legal fees, administrative costs, FF&E that does not meet capital-asset tests, and other indirect costs.

General Grant-Writing Standards That Apply:

These tips track widely accepted standards from sources such as NIH, USDOT's grant-readiness guidance, and university grant offices.

- **Follow the instructions exactly.** Read the TIF Act, Notice of Funding Availability, the TIF Board Guidelines & Procedures, and the scoring metric before drafting. Rewrite the prompts in your own words to confirm you understand them.
- **Be concise.** Use short sentences, plain language, and define acronyms once.
- **Mirror the scoring metric.** Use headings that mirror the scoring categories.
- **Build a defensible budget.** Every cent in the budget needs a justification narrative. Round numbers and missing line items invite skepticism.
- **Use visuals.** Maps, photos of failing infrastructure, site plans, renderings, and simple charts strengthen Critical Need and Readiness scores.
- **Get a fresh-eyes review.** Have someone outside the project team — ideally with no context — read it cold and tell you what is unclear.
- **Submit before the deadline, not at it.** Submit early when the application is ready. The TIF Portal generally opens the first Friday of February (American Indian Day) and applications are accepted at any time before the deadline. Last-minute submissions are where problems may arise and late submissions are not accepted.

Pre-Submission Checklist:

Following this checklist will ensure all the required information is provided:

1. Project is in the current ICIP, and the rank/year is cited. While the rank is not scored, it is important that it is a current project.
2. Applicant is in compliance with the Public Finance Accountability Act (HB 493) (NMSA 1978, §§ 6-3B-1 et seq.).
3. Critical Need is quantified with cited data and tied to the Act.
4. Scope of Work, Schedule of Values, and budget all reconcile.
5. Readiness documents match the project type (planning, design, or construction).
6. Realistic schedule fits inside TIF time limits (2 or 3 years, depending on the type of project).
7. Capacity narrative names the team and lists past performance.
8. Leverage is documented with letters, MOUs, or resolutions.
9. Phasing plan and funding plan are consistent.
10. Application has been proofread by someone outside the project team.
11. Attachments are complete, labeled, and submitted before the deadline.

A Final Word

A strong TIF application is not the longest one — it is the one that provides the TRC the information needed to award points. Lead with the need, prove you are ready, show you can deliver, and stack your leverage. Do that, and your project will compete on its merits.