

INNOVATION Fund Application Round 4 - Dec. 8, 2015

Submission Date	2015-12-08 18:14:17
Organization Name	New England Center for Investigative Reporting
Tax-exempt status	501(c)(3) organization
EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)	04-2103547
Website address	www.necir.org
Phone Number	(617) 353-4546
Applicant's name	Joe Bergantino
Title:	Executive Director
Contact email	jbergant@bu.edu
Proposed Project Start Date	02-01-2016
Anticipated Project End Date	08-01-2016
Total estimated budget for the proposed project	\$65,000
Request amount from the INNOVATION Fund:	\$35,000
What is the total annual budget for your organization or, if you are a fiscally-sponsored project of another organization, the total annual budget for your fiscally-sponsored project.	\$1,398,000
In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.	The mission of NECIR, an award-winning nonprofit investigative reporting news outlet based at WGBH (PBS and NPR, Boston) and Boston University with a national and regional focus is: to ensure the survival of serious, in-depth investigative journalism. NECIR accomplishes this by a) producing high-quality, high-impact multi-media stories that trigger changes in policies and practices; b) training both aspiring and experienced journalists; and c) introducing high school students to professional journalism through acclaimed summer workshops. In addition, NECIR is a pioneer in generating a diversified stream of earned revenue to support its programs and help ensure its financial sustainability.

Describe in detail the business experiment for which you are requesting funds. How does it fit with your sustainability plans? Explain the need for this project, and how you expect it to increase revenue and/or audience engagement.

One of the biggest mistakes traditional news media has made in recent years is the belief that its consumers are uninterested in local news and in how local and state government work. Facing declining readership in a time when many consumers get their news from Facebook first, and particular media outlets second at best, if at all, city newspapers and television stations have slashed local and especially local investigative reporting, putting their resources instead into subjects perceived to be safe bets: crime on the local level, and, mostly, the same national news stories their consumers can, and do, get anywhere else.

These decisions have been shortsighted. Most cities across America are experiencing unprecedented growth for at least two generations, with much of that growth fueled by a generation of so-called Millennials with a profound interest in local involvement and civic engagement.

We at the New England Center for Investigative Reporting (NECIR) believe there has never been a better time to revitalize local and regional journalism by giving citizens the tools, resources, and help to engage in meaningful citizen journalism with the potential for real impact. One of NECIR's organizational goals is to help build community through journalism; our proposed project is meant to break down the traditional walls between citizens and news media by inviting curious citizens to dig into local government themselves and, with us, share those findings with the public.

This summer, NECIR tried an experiment: Following a Boston Globe article about a higher-than-usual number of earmarks in the state budget, we decided to let our readers know more about what those earmarks were. We created a Twitter Bot, (@MassBudgetBot) that tweeted from a list of hundreds of earmarks in the state budget — allocations of money, often substantial, that faced none of the contracting and competitive bidding requirements of normal state contracts, and which are written into law by a show of hands in obscure legislative sessions.

Our experiment with @MassBudgetBot created an instant buzz, with ordinary citizens and state policy buffs alike following the bot, and re-tweeting and sharing earmarks they found questionable, appalling, or even just amusing. The project was heralded as an innovative way of educating the public about what earmarks are and how they influence policy.

We ourselves reported on a small handful of these earmarks — but the simple truth is that a small organization like ours could only scratch the surface of what turned out to be hundreds upon hundreds of these public funding allocations, totaling \$142 million.

We request support from the INNnovation Fund to build on this success and this concept of journalism as a tool for informing citizens. Rather than simply provide fodder for online conversations, we propose to host a series of public events in which we provide ordinary citizens the tools to look for themselves. We anticipate we will hold 2-4 events in the Boston area.

At each event, which will be promoted heavily through NECIR and our partner organization WGBH, NECIR will provide the raw data for areas chronically under-covered — earmarks in the Massachusetts state budget, campaign finance data, and local budget data to citizens eager to try their own hands at exploring how public money is used and how political influence is wielded in their own communities.

Similar events, often known as "hackathons," have proven incredibly popular, precisely because they pair people with a broad skill set and a hunger for civic engagement with organizations that can help channel those skills into meaningful outcomes.

Following an introduction on what earmarks are and why they're important, we'll divide participants into groups and give them a list of 100s of earmarks proposed but not yet approved in the state budget. After a quick explainer on how to interpret the data, we will turn the investigation over to the groups of citizen reporters. The idea is to create an environment in which the group looking at earmarks related to the tourism industry, for example, finds a sharp uptick in money set aside for the development of historic tourism sites, or perhaps a parent catches an earmark to continue funding a program at their child's school that doesn't exist. As we work, we will encourage everyone to update one another with what they're finding, share their thoughts and questions on social media using a given hashtag, and generate interest that goes beyond those attending. Reporters will intermingle with teachers, advocates, researchers, service workers, and above all, citizen taxpayers, to spark opportunities for investigative reporting in the public interest.

Our project will not revolve around the creation of apps, but around the production of meaningful citizen journalism. Citizens will be empowered to do their own reporting, sharing findings with each other in real time and with the wider public via a standalone web destination by NECIR with the help of the INNnovation Grant.

NECIR will serve in turn as the custodian of these findings, using our own staff and expertise to publish meaningful findings in a public forum — and potentially producing our own investigative reporting based on citizen findings.

We will work in collaboration with our partner, WGBH News, to build attendance at these events using on-air appeals, events announcements, email marketing, social media appeals, and more. In addition to earned media pitches to local publications, we will also engage in paid advertising on digital, social, and public media. We would also explore the possibility of live-streaming the event to engage participants remotely.

This project contributes to our long-term sustainability in that it helps us uphold both aspects of our mission statement: to produce high-impact investigative reporting, and to train a new generation of investigative reporters. A project of this nature would further solidify the NECIR as a premier journalism-training provider, help us develop leads for additional training programs and participants to our existing training offerings, and build the audience upon whom we turn to for donor support.

We plan to use the experience and outcomes of this pilot project in our own locality of Boston as a potential model for similar events throughout Massachusetts, New England, and beyond. This is a very scaleable and replicable project that would be of use to all INN members who cover state government.

Which of the following statements best describes your proposed business experiment?

Principally an audience-driven project that will generate leads to convert and monetize in the future

Is this a new project?

Extension of an existing project. We are doing this now or have done it in the past year.

Who will help carry out the project? Describe the key staff and capabilities. If you plan to use outside partners, consultants, or vendors, tell us why you chose them (or how you will select them). Will you need to hire additional fulltime or part-time help to complete your proposed project?

The project will be led by Troy Shaheen and Isaiah Thompson, with participation from Shawn Musgrave and overall management from Joe Bergantino. •

Troy Shaheen is NECIR's Audience Engagement Director, and works to develop the reach of the Center as well as to build enrollment in our journalism training programs. Prior to joining NECIR, Troy directed digital outreach and managed educational programs in Latin America and Europe, as well as a freelance features reporter for VTDigger.

Isaiah Thompson, reporter, has reported for the Miami New Times, the Philadelphia City Paper, Pro Publica and This American Life, among other places. He has covered a wide range of issues and received many awards for his stories on sex offenders, police-involved shootings, civil forfeiture and other investigations.

Shawn Musgrave, NECIR's Digital Producer and Reporter, leads the digital presentation of NECIR's investigative reporting, including graphic design, multimedia editing, coding and database development. Before joining NECIR, Shawn was Projects Editor at MuckRock, an online watchdog news and government accountability outlet. With a focus on public records and freedom of information, Shawn's investigative work has appeared on the front page of The Boston Globe and in VICE and The Marshall Project.

Joe Bergantino, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the New England Center for Investigative Reporting. He has been an award-winning national and local investigative reporter for 35 years, including at WBZ-TV in Boston, WPLG-TV in Miami and ABC News' World News Tonight, Nightline and Good Morning America. He is a clinical professor of journalism at Boston University and has taught journalism courses at Boston College since 1995.

We will work in collaboration with our partner WGBH News to build attendance at these events using on-air appeals, events announcements, email marketing, social media appeals, and more. In addition to earned media pitches to local publications, we will also engage in paid advertising on Facebook and Twitter.

We will also engage a keynote speaker from a Massachusetts government transparency organization such as MuckRock, Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, or The Pioneer Institute Policy Center.

We will recruit outside consultants to help with the technical components of the hackathon, including the development of a third party site and the operational logistics during the event itself. We will contact other organizations to receive recommendations of potential consultants and then interview several candidates and their references to make our final decisions.

How will you measure progress? Please be specific and concrete about the metrics you will use? Suggestion: Keep the number of suggested metrics limited and make sure that they are actually measuring the results of the proposed business experiment.

We will measure progress in the form of the following metrics:

- Attendance at the events, both in number of attendees and diversity of communities represented (professions, neighborhoods, civic interests)
- Success of NECIR investigative articles written as a result of the hackathons' findings – measured by website analytics, media coverage, and impact.
- Media coverage of the events and of NECIR
- New social media followers and email subscribers
- New individual donors through a suggested donation at the event
- New leads to whom NECIR will market its already successful investigative reporting certificate programs and one-day workshops

Using those metrics, how will you know you have succeeded in meeting the objectives for the business experiment. Please be as specific as possible.

We will determine that the experiment to be a success if we achieve the following goals:

- Attendance: 50 in-person attendees per event
- New social media followers added starting 2 weeks before the event and ending 1 week after: 200
- New donors added starting 2 weeks before the event and 1 week after: 20
- New participant leads for NECIR's investigative reporting certificate program: 10

How will INN be able to validate the metrics and how the project did using those metrics?

We will compile a detailed report laying out our methods for compiling metrics, results and successes as measured against the aforementioned goals.

What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?

We hope to gain insight into who our local audience is, and what the best target communities are for further audience development and engagement locally. This series of events will be a learning experience from which we hope to better sharpen our local focus and solidify our place as Boston's best investigative news source.

Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?

As a small, non-profit organization focused on deep-dive investigations, we are one of the few organizations with the capacity, experience and expertise to take on Massachusetts earmarks in a meaningful, sustained way. Our proposed project team reflects expert skills in investigative reporting, training, audience engagement and digital operations. We are not bound by the breaking daily news cycle – we can conduct in-depth investigations. And, because we are not beholden to advertisers, we can commit to this project and provide invaluable information to the public on how their state government operates. We already have a strong track record of educating the public on earmarks, including our success with @MassBudgetBot and this empowering of citizen journalists is an extension of that position in the media ecosystem here in Massachusetts.

In addition to our editorial position of authority on the issue, NECIR is a leading organization in investigative reporting training. Each year, we train more than 300 aspiring, student, and professional journalists from across the country and around the world. We have proven experience in this field and a citizen reporting hackathon would be a natural extension of this effort.

How is this project similar/different than other projects you've researched ahead of this proposal? What can you learn that is different from what others have already tried?

This project is similar to other journalism hackathons that have focused on developing new platforms for publication and applications to enable data collection, but differs greatly as it is the first to focus on one specific policy issue and to engage citizens in reporting. There are excellent resources that we will use regarding how to throw a hackathon, but the content and the objective will be thoroughly new.

Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?

With the release of the 2016 Massachusetts state budget in the spring of 2016, and elections for national offices plus hundreds of offices in the state legislature as well, there will be intense interest around the contents of the state budget and the role of money in local politics. The hackathons will coincide with NECIR reporter Isaiah Thompson's coverage of earmarks, an issue on which he is already known as an authority, and will provide a platform for the public to become better informed on how their government works.

Upload your project budget

[INNovation Fund-Project Budget-NECIR-12-8-15.xlsx](#)