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Building. Renovating. Infrastructure. Oh My! Here's a New Toolkit for You!

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Build it and they will come? Not a good idea when it involves a sustainable capital project. Indeed, a building alone does not bring a nonprofit mission to life. And yet, in communities across the country, there comes a time for many nonprofits to face the real decisions of whether to build or renovate a physical space that hopefully will position their missions to thrive.

In these decision-making moments, what we often see is that board and staff who are dedicated to serving their mission must suddenly also become adept at

conversations most have never had before – and might not have again for a long time. They must be the voice for the mission as it functions inside the walls and, at the same time, hold their own with experts about the walls themselves. For many, this is a strange, new journey. Has this been you? Is it you now? Could it be you in the future?

This scenario occurs time and again, and yet – before now – few resources were available for organizations as they ventured down the path of a capital project. Instead, well-meaning board and staff are left to trust experts who know design and construction, but may not understand what makes for a sustainable project – considerations like how missions are delivered in a community or what constitutes a nonprofit business model. Without a focus on these elements, it's too easy to miss or rush through the essential step called “pre-development,” usually to the detriment of the outcome that was desired and needed in the first place.

What is pre-development?

This term describes the steps between the origination of the concept and the initiation of design. It is the period of gathering information, exploring options, and making decisions about the direction of a project. In other words, this is the step where boards and staff make huge decisions that will have a lasting impact on their missions, their bottom lines, and their communities for decades to come. When done well, the right capital project can contribute to the viability of each, while the wrong project can threaten all three.



What is a sustainable project?

This is the question we set out to answer in 2006, when my organization, [The Foraker Group](#), launched our Pre-Development Program (Pre-D) as a collaboration

between us, the [Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority](#), [Denali Commission](#), [Mat-Su Health Foundation](#), [Rasmuson Foundation](#), and other funders. Our purpose was to give Alaska organizations taking on capital projects the information they needed to succeed, and to provide a platform for funders who wanted to work together on projects. The ideal outcome of Pre-D is a sustainable capital project – one that is more than just a building. Rather, it’s a project that contributes to the long-term viability of a mission, an organization, and a community. Over the course of running the Pre-D program, we learned much about the [attributes of a sustainable project](#).

What is the new tool?

Our Pre-D program has had a very successful run. We partnered with Alaska nonprofits, tribes, local governments, and many others to prepare them as they planned for libraries, health clinics, domestic violence shelters, museums, community centers, and so much more. When the program had to end, we committed ourselves to preserving and sharing what we learned along the way.

The result is our online [Pre-Development Toolkit](#) – the first of its kind and a resource that’s available at no charge to any nonprofit in the country that wants to know more about creating sustainable capital projects.

This work is truly an exercise in “go slow to go fast.”

With the influx of federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, it is more important than ever that organizations, governments, and tribes are prepared to use funds as efficiently and effectively as they can to develop structures that serve their communities. Our toolkit is an excellent resource for that process.

You are considering a capital project. What are your next steps?

If this is a new adventure for you, or even if you’re a seasoned pro, much work lies ahead. For that reason, we have created a few navigational guides to help you pace yourself both through the toolkit and through the project itself. You will find those in

the section on [How to Use This Site](#), which is where we urge you to start.

We've divided the Pre-D process into three phases that are represented on this [flow chart](#). You can print the chart and keep it handy as you conduct your research and engage in discussions with your board and other key stakeholders. We strongly encourage you to complete each step in the order it's presented because each step builds on what you and your team learn along the way. Decades of learning have taught us that skipping a step only means more time, more money, and less chance for long-term success. This work is truly an exercise in "go slow to go fast." Take the time, your mission is worth it.

This site is for you!

Ultimately, our goal for this toolkit is not to make you an expert. Instead, it is to provide you with a framework to ask essential questions, to be confident when you hire experts, to work better as a team, and ultimately to ensure your project is the right design and size to support your mission and serve your community.

[Let's get started.](#)

Laurie B. Wolf, MNPL, CFRE, is the President and CEO of The Foraker Group. As a born and raised Alaskan, she has been with Foraker since its inception more than 20 years ago and regularly writes and speaks about the power of the nonprofit sector in our economy and its vital contributions to our communities. Laurie is a proud board member of the National Council of Nonprofits.