

FAST GRANTS

The Fast Grants program is intended for active citizens who take a stand on issues such as mismanagement in local government, wasteful use of public resources, land use plan manipulations for personal gain, new construction projects of dubious public merit and other issues which threaten the public interest and/or citizens' rights. The Fast Grants program has an application deadline once a month in order to provide money quickly to groups addressing pressing issues.

In 2015 Via Foundation supported 36 Fast Grants projects which responded to unanticipated or dire problems in various Czech communities. The total amount distributed was CZK 750,000 (\$30,960). Fast Grants program donors include the Bader Philanthropies, the Anti Corruption Endowment Fund, individual donors as well as runners who fundraise for VIA through the Prague International Marathon races (we call them "Philanthropy Emils" in honor of the Czech runner Emil Zatopek).

FIGHTING FOR A GAMBLING-FREE COMMUNITY.

The "Gambling Free Prague 7" civic association was established to inform the public about a referendum on a universal ban on gambling in the Prague 7 district. Thanks to a Fast Grant from Via Foundation, the association implemented an outreach campaign encouraging citizens to vote in the referendum. They held a community discussion forum featuring gambling addiction experts and organizations addressing gambling issues, followed by a meeting where citizens could talk one on one with representatives from the civic association. The referendum was promoted on the Internet and social networks and the association also created a Gambling Gallery, which citizens filled with photos of casinos in their neighborhood. The good news is that new Czech legislation effective since January 2016 gives city districts the authority to restrict or ban gambling and Prague 7 has opted for a zero gambling tolerance that is now being implemented.

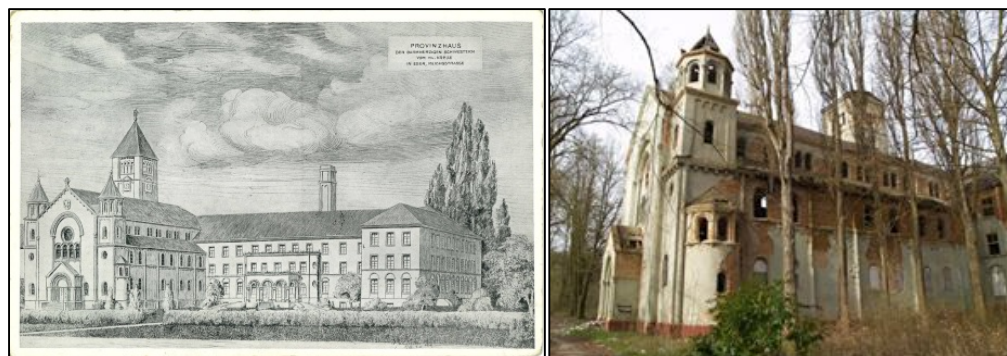


WE CARE ABOUT SAVING HISTORICAL BUILDINGS.

The Society for Preservation of the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Cheb was founded in December 2014 to address the rapid deterioration of the convent, which was established in the 1930s. In early 2015 the convent owner, Beta Games s.r.o., filed for a demolition permit. The members of the society mobilized to save the convent before the planned summer demolition date.

In May 2015 they held a community panel discussion entitled "Sisters of Mercy Convent – a Problem or an Opportunity?" They invited representatives of the convent owner, Cheb city officials, local architects, representatives of the local district museum and the public. This was the first and only community forum where people from various sectors with differing points of view could present and discuss their opinions in public. Everyone except for the city representatives spoke in favor of saving and restoring the convent. The mayor and city officials explicitly called for immediate demolition of

the convent. Unfortunately, the two sides did not find common ground but the society and local residents are continuing to try to save the convent. Working with the FOS Sokolov photo club, they put together an exhibition of photos in the convent to show residents the convent in its current condition.



KARLÍN UNTO ITSELF.

A Fast Grant was awarded to the association “Karlín unto itself”, a longstanding voice for effective local government and public space engagement in the Prague Karlín neighborhood. When the association discovered that the Karlín district council had approved a residential development project that was incompliant with the local land use plan, it used a Fast Grant to implement an outreach campaign that touched over half of the area’s 10,000 residents. It then filed a lawsuit that stopped the development project. Owing to the outreach campaign, many more neighborhood residents have since joined the association, become regular donors and offered support in other ways.

MAŘÍŽSKÝ PARK.

Another Fast Grant was awarded to the Mařížský Park association to help it engage the community of Slavonice (pop. 2,400) in saving an allée of trees that was an instrumental element of the town’s landscape character. In late 2014, the municipality initiated a project to re-engineer the stream bed running through the town center and take down linden trees lining it – without any plan to restore the vegetation or any dialogue with residents. With a Fast Grant, the Mařížský park association was able to order an unbiased expert assessment and to engage the community in the issue. The assessment confirmed that the trees were healthy and should be preserved, the town decided to preserve the allée and the community is working to restore the area through community work days.

LOCAL ACTIVISTS’ CLUB

In spring 2015 we set up a Fast Grants local activists’ club in Prague. During the year we held two meetings where active citizens had an opportunity to connect and share information about current issues, legislative changes or other topics they are grappling with.

WHY ARE FAST GRANTS NEEDED?

Twenty-seven years after the Velvet Revolution, community engagement in the Czech Republic is still fraught with fragility. Lacking the solid 200-year foundation of public engagement enjoyed by western countries, Czechs do not take their right and responsibility to engage in the public sphere as a given. The post-revolution elation in 1991-92 about the potential for citizen-initiated change was quickly drowned out by economic and political realities and disappointments in the 1990s and 2000s. Today, more often than not, Czechs are disheartened by what they see in both national and local public affairs – and they disengage.



This citizen passivity is compounded by the fact that local governments often make it difficult for citizens and non-profit organizations to engage in public processes. In some cases, officials hamper public access to information and many politicians continue to label civil society organizations as self-appointed enemies of elected representatives. Corruption is still present at every level of society.

However, this bleak landscape of engagement paralysis is dotted by bright oases where individuals and groups are standing up to defend public interests in their communities. Many of these viable grassroots community groups work on short-term projects in a rapidly changing political environment that necessitate immediate action and funding.

In this environment, the Fast Grants program is a valued source of support. Fast Grants have proven that they encourage and empower local people to make their voices heard in local politics and community issues, participate in decision making processes and advocate for community interests and more equitable local government. Often, single-issue organizations grow into broader community development initiatives and also encourage local government to take an inclusive approach.

Two aspects of Fast Grants make them particularly impactful: the frequency of calls and immediacy of funding. We have monthly application deadlines and disburse funding to selected projects within four weeks from the given application deadline. Electronic submittal of applications is preceded by a personal or telephone consultation between the applicant and Via Foundation program manager. Submitted applications are then assessed by a 3-member jury according to defined criteria, which include:

- the project team's tie to the project area
- the issue's urgency
- the timeliness of the project
- the public interests at stake
- the clarity of the project goals
- the strategic nature of the implementation plan
- the justification of budget items

Fast Grants are also unique in the Czech environment in terms of applicant eligibility: aside from registered NGOs, informal groups of at least three people can apply. This allows people to respond to an urgent situation without having to wait to register themselves as a NGO.

In 2015 the Fast Grants program:

- supported 36 community groups addressing pressing issues with grants
- directly impacted approx. 7,200 people through these 36 projects
- initiated a club where 26 community leaders regularly exchange experiences
- provided consultations and advice to another 136 leaders
- supported one regional issue in which we connected 5 community groups with consultants who helped them develop their projects