

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.

To ensure a quick turnaround and year-round funding accessibility, we have monthly application deadlines and disburse funding to selected projects within four weeks from the given application deadline. 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.

Fast Grants program donors include the Bader Philanthropies, the Anti Corruption Endowment Fund, ČSOB Bank and individual donors.

Community leader/activist club

We launched the Community leader/activist club in 2015 with the aim of sharing experience in citizen rights' initiatives and connecting people who share the goal of protecting public interests. To date we have held seven club meetings, all open to the public, with average participation of 30 people. Issues addressed include e.g. building permitting processes, investigative information gathering, information campaigns, etc.



'Rescue Rangers'

We added the 'Rescue Rangers' component in 2015 in response to grantee demand for help with planning information campaigns. The process is as follows:

- A local citizen initiative wants to address a problem in its community but lacks the expertise to communication with other people in the community, engage key stakeholders and plan an information campaign

- Through a two-day site visit, Via Foundation's consultant team leads them through the entire process
- The work may result in e.g. a series of community debate meetings, establishment of a working group, a informational brochure about a local referendum, etc.
- Citizen initiatives that have received Rescue Rangers assistance may or may not apply for a Fast Grant.

What difference does the program make?

In 2016 the Fast Grants program:

- supported 35 community groups addressing pressing issues with grants (total amount distributed: CZK 780,000 (\$34,000, EUR 30,000))
- directly impacted approx. 7,000 people through these 35 projects
- initiated 4 meetings where community leaders regularly exchanged their experiences
- provided consultations and advice to another 140 leaders
- supported two regional issues in which we connected community groups with consultants who helped them develop their projects

Sample projects supported in 2016

A gambling-free community

A gambling ban went into effect in the town of Jablonec nad Nisou on January 1, 2015. However, the mayor subsequently submitted a proposal to appeal the ban and despite protests by citizens and opposition party town council members, the appeal was approved by the town council coalition. In order to compete against the town hall's media reach, a group of active citizens developed a brochure and distributed it to 15,000 postal addresses, which is 70% of Jablonec households. The group also informed citizens about a referendum planned for early 2018. The group also organized a community meeting to discuss gambling. More than 30 citizens, including all key stakeholders, took part in the meeting, which was accompanied by a press conference and regional media coverage.

Saving a historical allée



An old carriage allée connects the towns of Radkov and Dubová in the Opava region of northern Moravia. The allée was planted with linden trees in the mid-19th century and is a unique example of solitaire linden tree cultivation in allée format. It originally connected the castle in Dubová with the church in Radkov. Today a 500-meter section of the allée remains in the landscape. It is a one-way track approximately 3.5 meters wide that is used by cars as well as pedestrians and bicycles but the vehicle traffic makes travel for those on foot or bike dangerous. In 2015, the local road authority

sought to take down 13 of the linden trees but its plan failed to take into account the allée's unparalleled value to the region or to propose revitalization measures. A local association led citizens in expressing their objections at a public meeting. They used a Fast Grant of CZK 25,000 (\$990) to organize the public meeting, publish and distribute a brochure about the allée and commission a professional opinion. Thanks to their efforts the linden trees were saved and a bi-pass project was initiated.

Citizens stopped a proposed quarry project

A limestone quarry was proposed in the small town of Hvozdečko u Bouzova in the Olomouc region. Local residents were concerned that the proposed quarry, which was to contain a stone-crushing facility, would impact the surrounding environment with dust and other pollution. A group of citizens applied for a Fast Grant. Via awarded them CZK 20,000 (\$880), which they used to hold a community meeting, inform other residents about the issue and cover the costs of legal advisory services. Hundreds of local residents came out for the community meeting and in the end, the local government took citizens' concerns and a petition with 3,000 signatures into account and the quarry project was dismissed.



VIP developer of the Trutnov town hall

The city of Trutnov lacked clear rules for assuming ownership of infrastructure built by developers constructing single family homes. In some cases, the city buys the infrastructure from developers for up to 70% of the cost and in other cases the city did not buy the infrastructure at all. This ambiguity paved the way for corruption and clientelism. In one case the support given to a developer was so unusual that it violated the criminal code. The project "VIP developer of the Trutnov town hall" was intended to show the broad public how the Trutnov government favored a specific developer and initiate a community discussion about the reasons why. The project also sought to convince the town to set clear rules for purchase of infrastructure from developers. The Krkonošská poradenská a informační o.p. s. and TUarch (the association of young architects in Trutnov) compiled and distributed flyers about the issue. There was a community meeting attended by 150 citizens and an informational video was posted. A working group was established to set new rules, which it subsequently shared with the public.

Referendum about an outdoor swimming pool

Closed for years, the outdoor swimming pool in Úvaly u Prahy gradually began to fall into disrepair. The local government refused to fund repairs due to the cost, claiming that reconstructing the swimming pool would drain funding from other needed repair work. An association of residents was convinced that the repairs could be managed at a reasonable cost and without infringing on other repair expenditures. The group organized a referendum, which saw a 5% higher turnout than the last local elections. A Fast Grant of CZK 20,000 (\$880) was used for a public information campaign about the referendum, in which 75% of those who cast their ballots voted to save the swimming pool. The

referendum results are binding and the association now hopes to work with the local government on the reconstruction project.



Program background

Twenty-eight 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.