AQUETONG WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

Draft Final Report

Aquetong Creek Watershed Assessment

Funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP)
Growing Greener Grant Program.

Growing our Economy
Growing our Communities
Growing Greener

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Description of the Project

As the AWA was completing its activity under a Growing Greener grant to establish the association, the AWA began to assemble available data on the condition of the Aquetong Creek from federal, state and local sources. This provided some data, in particular physical, chemical and biological data collected by Solebury Township's environmental consultants in connection with an annual monitoring program conducted as part of the Township's water resources program. We found that while the previous data provided valuable baseline indications, we did not have enough information, or sufficient know-how to develop an over-arching, strategic view of the watershed's condition, problem areas and possible solutions. It was clear to the AWA that we needed more expertise and knowledge, particularly in the following areas:

1. Examining water quality,
2. Understanding bank and riparian buffer conditions,
3. Identifying problem areas,
4. Observing the condition of benthic macroinvertebrates,
5. Studying the impacts of land use, new development, and invasive plants, and
6. Understanding the role of municipal policy and ordinances.

The overall execution of the project stayed very near true to form in meeting our objectives. The only deviations were mainly due to timing and these were primarily caused by poor communication and planning on the part of the selected contractor.

The primary success of this project was the volume of information collected by the AWA. Undoubtedly, the knowledge gained by the association about the Aquetong watershed is the primary product of this project. The reason for this success was the dedication and diligent research performed by the AWA Board of Directors. This effort led to the creation of an Action Plan (Appendix A)

A major problem was the overall time it took to complete the project. From the time the grant was written to the date of this report was about three and one-half years. This was far too long and in hindsight totally unnecessary and unacceptable. The long time frame to complete the project and the inability to create a working relationship with the selected technical contractor created internal dissention on our Board and a loss of enthusiasm on the part of just about everyone involved from the AWA.

The AWA spent countless hours researching all available information as it related to the Aquetong watershed. Thanks to volunteer efforts and various Board members, we were able to complement the data collected by the technical contractor. Also, due to a well coordinated communications strategy, the AWA informed the community of what we learned and have generated an Action Plan (Appendix A) for the municipalities and community to follow. As part of this project, the AWA worked with a communications consultant to prepare a press release, newsletter, presentation, web-site and letters to the municipalities to disseminate the information and knowledge gained from the study. In addition, the AWA prepared a detailed Lessons Learned (Appendix B) document so that

future projects such as this an be improved and other organizations can build on our experiences.

Throughout the grant period, the AWA was diligent in keeping within budget and conscientious to its grant agreement.

Here is a summary statement suitable for sharing with the public:

"The Aquetong Watershed Association has completed an assessment of the Aquetong Creek watershed located in Solebury Township and New Hope Borough through a Growing Greener PA DEP grant. The study found that the watershed is generally in good condition. Continued vigilant efforts are required to maintain and improve its condition."

Description of the Aquetong Watershed

The Aquetong watershed encompasses about eight square miles in Solebury Township and New Hope Borough, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Most of the watershed is located in the center of Solebury Township, with a portion of the downstream section located within the borough of New Hope. The drainage network consists of the mainstem of Aquetong Creek, which flows from Aquetong Lake, a 15-acre impoundment currently owned by Solebury Township. The mainstem flows due east for approximately two miles before entering the Delaware River. Aquetong Lake is formed by a 500-foot long earthen dam constructed around 1870, which is fed by Aquetong Spring, known locally as Ingham Spring. This limestone artesian well produces approximately 2,000 gallons of water per minute, and is thought to be one of the most productive springs in southeastern Pennsylvania. Aquetong Spring is owned and operated by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. Several other smaller impoundments exist throughout the watershed, including Honey Hollow pond. These impoundments are found on tributary branches upstream of the confluence with the Aquetong Lake tributary.

Geologically, the far upper reaches of the watershed are underlain by Stockton sandstones. Much of the center portions of the watershed flow over Cambrian and Ordovician limestone and dolomite, while the lower portions of the watershed are situated in Brunswick siltstones and mudstones. Land use in the watershed is a mixture of agriculture, developed land, and woodlots. Despite significant growth in recent years especially along the Route 202 corridor, woodlands and agricultural lands remain present throughout the watershed.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection classifies the entire drainage network as a High-Quality Cold Water Fishes (HQ-CWF), PA Code 25, Chapter 93. This water quality designation offers special protection from proposed development and infrastructure projects, requiring plans that meet anti-degradation criteria.

There are about 6,000 persons and 3,000 private properties and businesses residing in the Aquetong watershed. The population growth in the past fifty years has been substantial. The people of the watershed living and working in Solebury Township and New Hope Borough depend upon groundwater wells for their drinking water and other uses. The

Route 202 corridor in the center of the watershed is zoned residential and commercial and is serviced by private and public water supply systems. The watershed also contains many private septic systems and a public sewer network managed by the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority. Waste (sewer) water in this area is pumped to the Lambertville waste water treatment plant via the New Hope Lambertville free bridge. After treatment, the water is discharged into the Delaware River. Because of this, a water deficit is created in the watershed hydrologic budget due to a large amount of water not being available to recharge the Aquetong watershed.

Supporting Documents (in pdf format) – *Appended*

Appendix Content

A. DEP's Goals and Accomplishments Worksheets (on compact disc)
B. Final Report: "Aquetong Creek Watershed Project" dated June 29, 2011, Aqua Link, Inc (on compact disc)
C. AWA's Action Plan (see below)
D. AWA's Lessons Learned (see below)
E. Newsletters (on compact disc)
F. Press releases (on compact disc)
G. Presentation to the AWA Annual Membership October 20, 2011 (on compact disc)
H. Photos (on compact disc)
I. Time Reporting In-Kind Matches (on compact disc)

AQUETONG WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

Appendix C

AWA Proposed Action Agenda

Recommendations from the AWA Assessment of the Aquetong Creek Watershed

2008 - 2011

Water Quality

1. Homeowners with wells that supply drinking water have responsibilities to their families and the community to monitor and safeguard their water supply. We need to develop a well testing education program and providing guidance so that homeowners can have their well water tested annually to ensure its quality and safety.

2. We need to work with Solebury Township to ensure passage of the Act 537 Sewage Facilities Plan and to educate property owners with onlot septic systems on good management practices to reduce the potential for contamination of the water supply.

3. There are moderate to high nitrate levels present in the surface and ground water from fertilizers via residential and agricultural sources. We need to educate property owners on how to increase the use of meadows and rain gardens and apply fewer chemicals to lawns; and work with local conservation districts and the county agricultural officials to improve agricultural practices.

Water Quantity

1. Various studies conducted by Solebury Township have concluded that the Aquetong watershed may have a water deficit of 500,000 gallons per day in normal precipitation years, and 750,000 gallons a day in drought years. Over the past ten years, we have only one drought year and seven years with above average rainfall. Yet, with population increases, continued exporting of waste water outside the watershed to Lambertville, and changes in weather patterns, we could face significant challenges if we are faced with two successive drought years (which has occurred 17 times in the past century). The time to prepare for such a possibility is now.

Watershed Conservation, Protection and Preservation

1. Our local streams, ponds and lakes experience elevated temperatures during hot summer days, resulting in impaired conditions. The higher water temperature is exacerbated by the impact of dams, impervious surfaces such as parking lots and roads, impounded waters and the lack of adequate tree cover along much of the streambanks. We need to continue to seek ways to reduce the amount of water subjected to dams, improve stormwater and impervious surface ordinances, protect riparian buffers from encroachment, encourage people to stop mowing down to the streambanks, and plant more trees.

2. Continued development along the Route 202 corridor threatens to create more impervious surfaces and runoff into the Aquetong Creek. We need to be more systematic in our review of proposed developments and re-zoning proposals. In addition, we need to work

to improve green and low impact development practices, and create demonstration projects to protect the stream corridors.

3. Riparian buffers serve a key role in protecting streams from encroachment, pollutants and excessive runoff. We need to be vigilant in finding ways to protect and preserve these areas from development, poor land use practices and poor maintenance.

4. The region's infrastructure was severely damaged and altered by the combined impact of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee in 2011. Many roads are closed, bridges severely damaged, rivers flooded over their banks, lives threatened and there were hundreds of thousands of dollars in property losses. If the natural resource protections that were enacted in the last two decades had not been in place, the impacts of these storms would have been even more severe. We need to continue to work to protect and strengthen ordinances; scrutinize and challenge development that does not sufficiently protect the environment; participate in any comprehensive planning conducted by the township or borough; and work with local governments on the key findings of the assessment and problem areas identified. In addition, we need to be diligent to encourage municipal engineers and Planning Commissions to maintain a holistic perspective of the watershed and the water resource safeguards as projects are reviewed for approval.

5. We continue to see the advance of invasive plants and the high concentration of the deer population. Invasive plants and deer crowd out or destroy native flora and generally distort the ecological balance of the forests. We need a long-term and integrated program to find ways to restore the balance, by working first in designating areas near the headwaters of main stream stems and proceeding downstream to mitigate negative impacts throughout the watershed.

6. We need to encourage Solebury Township to diligently develop the Aquetong Lake property for the community. First, the dam and cold water by-pass issues are clear commitments need to be resolved and implanted by the Township.. Second, we need remind the Township that a park plan needs to be developed, shared and discussed with the community, and completed with proper phasing. Once a plan is approved, community support and funding need to be secured. The future restoration of a community building is one part of the overall plan to develop the property.

7. The Association needs to meet with Solebury Township and New Hope Borough officials to inform them of the findings of the assessment study and share the proposed actions listed in this document. In addition, the meetings will serve to provide the AWA the opportunity to present and discuss specific issues that may require township or borough initiatives.

AQUETONG WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

Appendix D

LESSONED LEARNED BY THE AQUETONG WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

The following report summarizes many of the lessons learned by the Aquetong Watershed Association (AWA) in leading a new project. The AWA is sharing our lessons learned so that future projects can be improved and other organizations can build on our experiences. Our goal here is to inform and reflect on the experience, sharing what we have learned as part of the project's 'journey.' It is intended as a reference document for the AWA, its members, other watershed associations, grantees and sponsoring organizations.

All opinions expressed herein are the opinion of the AWA, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Bucks County Conservation District (the project sponsor), the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Background

The Aquetong Watershed Association (AWA) was formed in 2007 by a group of citizens in Solebury Township and New Hope Borough in Bucks County Pennsylvania. The purpose of the organization is to preserve and protect the Aquetong Creek watershed, which is entirely contained within the two municipalities. The Aquetong watershed has a total surface area of eight square miles and flows into the Delaware River through New Hope. The watershed serves the residents by providing drinking water from springs and groundwater sources, creating recreational opportunities and maintaining the natural beauty of the area. The Aquetong Creek and its tributaries have nearly twenty-three linear miles of streams. Its main stem flows from Ingham Spring to the Delaware River.

The AWA's formation in 2007 was funded by a combination of funds from a founding grant under the Growing Greener grant program and private contributions from annual and lifetime members. The initial focus of the AWA was recruiting a board; writing a charter and by-laws; creating a legal organization and tax status as a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation; communication by community wide mailings, education through workshops, and initial demonstration projects such as tree plantings.

As this initial start-up phase was completed, the AWA began to assemble data on the condition of the Aquetong Creek from federal, state and local sources. This provided some data, primarily physical, chemical and biological data collected by Solebury Township's environmental consultants in connection with an annual monitoring program conducted as part of the Township's water resources program. We found that while the

data provided valuable directional indications, we did not have enough information, or sufficient know-how, to develop an over-arching, strategic view of the watershed's condition, problem areas and possible solutions. It was clear to the AWA that we needed more expertise, particularly in the following areas:

1. Examining water quality,
2. Understanding bank and riparian buffer conditions,
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4. Observing the condition of benthic macroinvertebrates,
5. Studying the impacts of land use, new development, and invasive plants, and
6. Understanding the role of municipal policy and ordinances.

Growing Greener Grant for Assessment of the Watershed

In April 2008, the AWA board of directors decided to seek outside support for conducting a complete assessment of the Aquetong Creek and watershed to develop a deeper understanding of the "health" of the watershed and an action plan. In May 2008, the AWA submitted a Growing Greener grant application. We were pleased to be notified in March 2009 that a $47,000 grant was approved by the DEP.

We believe that one of the reasons our grant was awarded was our commitment to share lessons learned with other organizations. It is important for watershed organizations to have a sense of the benefits, obligations and challenges they will face in managing projects that span multiple years, numerous technical details, volunteer involvement, outside consultants, reporting obligations, community engagement and oversight by sponsors and regulators.

It is essential for any organization applying for a Growing Greener Grant, especially an all-volunteer non-profit, to assess its ability and perseverance to manage such a project and ensure that it can commit the resources necessary to see it through to completion. Clearly, grant monies are not 'free' and, in fact, they come with sizable costs in money, time and attention required of the grantee.

Lessons Learned by the AWA as it Conducted the Assessment Project

Grant Writing

1. An organization considering writing a grant needs, first and foremost, individuals able to commit a substantial amount of time. Multiple skills are required to reach the point of submitting the grant. Most importantly, the development of concept behind the grant request needs to be understood by the stakeholders of the organization. Some of the technical skills that are needed to write the grant are:
    a. Capability to conduct research and author an initial draft,
    b. Ability to develop the time and expense budget,

   c. Capacity to do a detailed review and edit of the grant documentation as well as checking for completeness of the application and ensuring that the application deadlines are met.

2. In our situation, the time from start to finish was *three weeks*; this compressed timeframe helped keep us focused, however, it essentially meant that it took over the lives of at least two board members for those three weeks. We recommend that organizations applying for grants budget substantially more time to complete a grant application.
3. The grant writing effort would be been helped if previous grant application submissions were made available on-line by the DEP.
4. For new organizations, it helps to have an organization such as a county conservation district act as a sponsor. The sponsor provides technical support, interim funding, enhanced credibility with the DEP, and grant writing advice. The sponsor can provide support and advice throughout the life cycle of the project. We believe this is especially important when nonprofit organizations have no full-time personnel or executive director to manage a project.
5. When writing a grant request, focus on the deliverables of the proposed project. These represent tangible outcomes expected to occur as a result of the project. They are important criteria for the grant evaluators, and will be the core of what your organization will be driving to complete over the course of the project.
6. Ensure that your board is fully committed to the project's goals and what is required for its completion. Projects often require two years to complete, and, during that time, the board's priorities can change as well as the composition of the board.
7. Make sure that the grant project is a permanent feature of the board reporting package over the entire life of the project.
8. Upon being notified of the grant award, expect that time will be needed to set up the record-keeping and grant reporting. The DEP holds a ½ day mandatory seminar for grant administration and reporting. We suggest that the organization's treasurer be responsible for grant administration and financial reporting.
9. Almost within days of being notified of the grant, we were required to submit a quarterly status report, even though the project had not actually commenced. This is an example of the 'instant-on' feature of receiving a grant.
10. Consider building into your proposal some ways to gain a higher return on the project investment, including such features as communication to the public, education, best practices implementation, credit to volunteers and participants, youth programs and lessons learned. These initiatives serve to share and build knowledge, inspire others to serve, and help build a stronger community. This

public involvement and awareness will extend public support for the Growing Greener program while increasing environmental awareness and broadening support for your organization.

11. A major focus needs to be placed on gaining letters of support from across the community, including the local municipalities, civic and conservation organizations, and residents. This is a good opportunity to deploy your entire board in gathering the letters from their contacts.
12. Landowner permissions are critical to the process. We recommend that you seek out these permissions very early in the process. This is a critical step to take before you submit the grant request.

Consultant Selection

1. On projects where outside consultants play a critical role, the selection process requires a very rigorous time commitment from your organization. Expect to devote several weeks to draft the Request for Proposal (RFP), develop a list of qualified consulting firms, evaluate proposals, interviewing finalists, making a decision and preparing the contract.
2. Form a selection committee to evaluate prospective contractors and make a recommendation of the best candidate to your board of directors. Ensure that all members of the selection committee are present for ALL interviews of the finalists so that the decision-making process is performed in a consistent manner.
3. Build into your process a comprehensive reference-check process. This should consist of:
    a. A list of all projects conducted over the last year by the consulting firm or consulting team
    b. Contact names and role in the project
    c. A set of 3-4 questions to be asked by your organization to each reference contacted, including an open-ended question such as 'would you recommend, without qualification, this consultant to an organization such as ours.'
    d. Also ask those questions of your sponsoring organization.
    e. We recommend that no final decision be made on the consulting firm selection until the references are checked and reviewed.
    f. Gain a clear understanding of the working relationships, style and communication practices of the potential consultant.
4. Weigh/rank the merits of selecting the firm on all points of importance to your organization.
5. Pay close attention to the size and strengths of the firms being considered. Our experience suggests that we might have been better served by a larger firm with

more technical resources, strong project management and communication skills and quality control.

6. Remember that once a consultant/contractor is selected, an organization has little to no option other than to stay with said consultant/contractor throughout the study.
7. Try to ensure the "personality and working style" of the final consultant candidate is compatible with your organization. Interviews should be set up to show not only what knowledge the consultant has, but how he/she interacts with people.

Consultant Contracting

1. It is essential that the data collected, photographs, and the report itself be retained as the intellectual property of the organization, and that this is specified in the contract rather than designated as the property of the consulting firm. Alternatively, your organization should have a permanent right to use all the data specified in the contract.
2. Ensure that any contract is reviewed by your organization's attorney; and that the intellectual property provisions are appropriate.
3. Do not accept blanket assurances from consultants that they will provide special reports or communications, unless they spelled out in writing. For example, if someone asks "Can you provide 'x'," and the answer is 'Sure, we can do that', 'x' must be written in the contract and signed by the consultant for there be a reasonable certainty of delivery.
4. Build into your contract a list of deliverables to be delivered, and specify reductions in the pricing/penalties if specific deliverables are not provided.
5. Specify the standards for any laboratories that will process samples taken during your project, and indicate that no compensation will be paid if those standards are not adhered to.
6. Consultants should be required, in the contract, to provide a quarterly summary of the hours worked by major category and by person.
7. Consultants should be required, in the contract, to provide quarterly status reports within 10 days of the end of the quarter. There should be monetary penalties indicated in the contract for failure to provide those reports on time.
8. Also specify that your organization must be notified, in writing, within 30 days of any missed deadline for water testing or for loss of samples. For instance, some collection of macroinvertebrates must be completed by May 15th in Pennsylvania; if that target is missed, your organization needs to know this immediately.
9. Protect your organization by specifying a fixed maximum amount in your contract, one that can only be increased with the pre-notification by the consultant and only if approved by the board. Be clear during the project that this is a strict limit and no surprises at the end of the contract will be considered.

Timekeeping and In-kind Matches

1. Since your grant application committed a significant amount of time from board members and volunteers, ensure that you immediately and consistently keep track of time devoted to the project, by person, by month and by activity. We recommend that this be reported to the board monthly to ensure that the proper recordkeeping is maintained.
2. The contract should require the contractor to provide you early in the process with a detailed projected timeline depicting all stages of the project and to notify you promptly of any anticipated changes. If possible, the contract should include a provision stating that the timeline is subject to the reasonable approval of your organization.

Stream Assessments

1. If using technical equipment such as GPS units, provide training on calibration, measurement units to be applied and hands-on instruction for volunteers.
2. Establish a standard file naming structure for all photographs and locations and ensure all volunteers are aware of the standard. Also, provide instruction on proper photography techniques for stream surveying.
3. It would be best to provide for at least two in-field training sessions due to the difficulty of scheduling a convenient time for all of those involved.
4. Recognize that the more volunteer teams that are evaluating sections of the stream, the more variation you will have in the final results. Demand performance standards and common training be attended by all team members; and make the hard choice to not allow stream evaluations be performed by anyone who has not attended the full training. Also, consider having one key data 'leader' to accompany all teams and to exchange team members to help create more uniform evaluations. An organization cannot underestimate the value of "quality control" in this process.
5. Completed field work forms should be promptly delivered to the contractor and the contract should require the contractor to review them within a reasonable period of time, no more than two or three weeks, and to notify you promptly if any of the forms are in any way deficient or require additional work.
6. Specify to all team leaders that they must use the standard forms provided. Completed field work forms should immediately be reviewed by the person responsible for the data to ensure compliance and completeness before memories fade. Provide Google Map print-outs of each stream section to your teams and ask them to mark problem areas, test locations and photos taken on those maps.
7. We believe it is important to have some form of limited liability insurance in place for volunteers in case of an accident. It is good practice to check with your sponsoring organization as to the availability of insurance coverage, and consider

buying some limited liability insurance from organizations such as the Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers.

Monitoring

1. With limited funds it is important to make sure the experimental design of the monitoring program recommended by the consulting firm matches what is in alignment with the study objective.
2. With limited data sets, every data point is very important; therefore quality control and quality assurance is critical and should be built into your processes.
3. Before drawing conclusions about collected data, the new data must be compared to all available data from previous studies on your as well as reference watersheds to ensure that the drawn conclusions are consistent, rational and scientifically sound.
4. Consider building into the monitoring program a reference stream that has similar geological and geographical characteristics to compare your data to ensure that the drawn conclusions are rationale. Reference stream data can be obtained from concurrent field work or previously published studies.

Final Reporting

1. Arrange to have independent technical experts on your board or establish an expert review team so that they can contribute their knowledge and perspective to the draft report. If your organization is not fortunate to have a qualified technical expert on your board, seek out one or more qualified residents of the community who would be willing to advise you.
2. When providing corrections and changes, have one board member consolidate the review comments and provide them directly to the consultant.
3. Be sure to build time into the process for the review by your board and technical experts and final report revisions by the consulting firm.
4. Make sure the consultant delivers a meaningful "comprehensive plan" that is actionable and practical for your watershed and organization and appropriate for the consulting fee. A provision requiring this deliverable should be included in the contract.
5. Minimize the amount of "boiler plate" or general information in the body of the report and if necessary move to an appendix.

Community Communications Strategy

1. We recommend hiring a communications or public relations consultant to create a strategy and communications deliverables if no one on your Board has the ability or commitment to lead this effort.
2. Create a communication strategy early in the grant's term and put together a series of communications as the project unfolds.

3. Develop a plan and a series of communications (newsletters, press releases, web site information, a presentation package in PowerPoint) to be distributed over a defined period of time.
4. Most local newspapers will accept articles written by your organization if the communications are well written. Include photos with your article featuring volunteers and directors to gain more visibility for your organization's efforts.
5. The communications strategy could include:
    a. Press releases timed for major milestones of the project (receiving the grant, beginning the fieldwork, training of volunteers, completing the project)
    b. Briefings for your membership, local and state officials, community at large
    c. Updates to your website and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
    d. Key messages derived from the assessment
    e. Single-issue monographs on major issues addressed in the assessment
    f. A master PowerPoint presentation summarizing the study and actions required, and,
    g. 'News' to be distributed to your members and the community via a newsletter or a Constant Contact email blast.
6. If your project includes a review of local ordinances, ensure that the results of that review are shared with the local municipal officials for consideration in future ordinances.

Overall Recommendations

- In building a watershed assessment project that spanned a over a three-year period, we sacrificed time for what we hoped would be a more comprehensive assessment. With hindsight, we would have preferred to have chosen a more compressed engagement so that we did not have to wait all that time to receive a report and take action. We believe that our organization might have been better served by planning the assessment so that it would be completed in less than one year. This would have given us more visibility in the community, more time to educate people, and an ability to move on what was learned from study to action.
- Expect that the sponsoring organization and the granting organization will be performing oversight of the project and that good communications as to progress, meetings, action steps, deliverables and quarterly reports should be managed so that surprises are minimized.
- Work with your board or committee to develop a detailed action agenda based on the results and conclusions of the assessment report. This should

include a list of the problem areas within the watershed; opportunities to engage with organizations that have jurisdiction (e.g. municipalities or state organizations with responsibilities for culverts, roads, or dams); and other actions identified in the report. Prioritize the recommendations, document the follow-up actions and define responsibility for making them happen.

- Provide your board with the list of follow-up actions and report each month on their status.
- Celebrate the success of your project and acknowledge the contributions of your board, volunteers and all those who helped make it happen.

The AWA wishes your organization great success in applying for a grant and seeing it through to completion.

For more information, contact:
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