

Vermont Sustainable Energy for Municipalities and Schools Program

Questions and Answers regarding the January 8, 2024, Request for Proposals

- 1. If an Applicant has received funds through the School Heating Assistance with Renewables and Efficiency (SHARE) Program, would they be ineligible for funds for a new/different project from the Sustainable Energy for Schools and Municipalities Program? Would they be ineligible for the project that has also been awarded SHARE funds?**

The SESM funding is from a separate federal funding source than the SHARE grants. Thus, having received funding from the SHARE Program would not disqualify an applicant from being able to access an award from the Sustainable Energy for Municipalities and Schools (SESM) program, however, the SESM funding shall not be eligible as required matching funds for the SHARE Program and SHARE funds shall not be eligible as required matching funds for the SESM program.

- 2. Are Fire Districts, Water Districts and/or Solid Waste Districts eligible as Municipalities for the Sustainable Energy for Schools and Municipalities Program?**

Fire districts, water districts and solid waste districts are eligible to apply as municipalities.

- 3. Can a municipality apply for a solar array that would be connected to storage through this program for resilience applications during grid disruptions?"**

Yes. The maximum system size allowable to receive funding from this program is 15kW so if a system 15kW or smaller were to be funded through this program, the fact that it will be paired with storage would not make it ineligible, however this program is not offering funds for storage projects, so any storage project expenses would not be eligible for reimbursement with grant funds.

- 4. Given the size limit is $\leq 15\text{KW AC}$, would it be possible for this project to be part of a larger project where the grant would be awarded for the proportional part of it? For example, a Vermont school proposes a 15KW project in the proposal for a project that is actually 50KW (more closely meeting their electrical needs and has better economics due to its scale), could the school apply for a grant for 30% (15KW/50KW) of the cost of the larger project minus their 20% required cost share?**

No. PV systems sized "15kW or smaller..." are eligible to receive funding from this program. In the example given, the system size is 50kW and so it would exceed the allowable size for systems funded through the program.

- 5. How does an entity know if it qualifies?**

Eligible Recipients include Vermont Elementary or Secondary Schools or Vermont municipalities.

- 6. How does one know whether they are underserved?**

Applicants will need to describe characteristics of the population served by the school or municipality for which they are applying on behalf of that would indicate that they somehow face barriers in accessing services based on income disparities, race or ethnicity, geographic location, language isolation, etc.

Resources for identifying underserved communities include the [CJEST Mapping Tool](#) for disadvantaged communities and the [AOT Equity Framework Web Map](#) from the VT Agency of Transportation. *This is not an exhaustive list of characteristics of underserved populations or resources for the determination of underserved populations.*

7. I believe I am reading that the town can apply IF the school does. If our school does not apply, does that mean that we cannot apply either?

A town and a school within that town can both apply. It is not required for one to apply for the other to be eligible.

8. The RFP says, “must complete the project(s) no later than September 01, 2025”- does this mean the projects must have signed contracts with a contractor by that date (money obligated), or does it mean that the physical project must be complete and usable?

Projects funded through this program need to be completed no later than September 1, 2025, which includes the completion of construction and commissioning of the project as operational. There may be opportunities for extension of this deadline with approval from the US Dept. of Energy.

9. If we submit the grant request in the next two weeks how soon will we know if we are to receive the grant?

The evaluation and selection process will begin following the March 1, 2024 application deadline. The evaluation and selection process timeframe will be dependent on a number of factors including, but not limited to: the volume of applications received for funding requests; time it may take for any requests for additional information; or responses to follow up questions that the selection committee may have following the review process.

10. Would applicants be able to apply for refurbishment/upgrades to an existing system—or is this only for new installations?

The funding from this program is for new installations and for projects that include repairs, upgrades, or improvements to existing systems so long as it is an eligible system.

11. We have a quote that involves a couple of heat pump units that are equipped with propane backup for exceptionally cold weather. Would a project with a heat pump that includes an integrated propane backup for exceptionally cold weather be eligible for the SESM Program?

Any fossil-fueled appliances, including those that have renewably fueled elements, are not eligible for funding from this program. Funding from this program may only fund a renewably or electrically fueled heating system. A eligible heating system may include a separate fossil fuels appliance that provides backup/supplemental heat, but funding would only be eligible for portion of the project that is renewably or electrically fueled.

12. Could this funding help us with the repair and improvement of our wood chip boiler? Could this funding help fund an update to the original controls? Could this also help with repairs to the fire brick inside the boiler?

Yes. The funding from this program is for new installations and for projects that include repairs, upgrades, or improvements (including controls) to existing systems so long as it is an eligible system.

13. We are interested in finding funding to install a solar array at our High School to provide electricity for the school. Please confirm if this is allowed under this program.

This funding can be used for the installation of solar arrays (PV) on school and municipal property for PV systems that are 15kW (AC) and smaller.

14. The guidance states no larger than 15kW system which is standard for a ground mount. However, we would be looking at a roof mounted system. Can we apply to put 3 systems on the same roof? Or, can additional systems be installed on different buildings?

First, applicants may only submit one proposal ([RFP](#) at p.5, "Number of Proposals"), which should be read as one application for one award. Additionally, as proposed in the question, this would be a system size of 45kW, which is greater than the system capacity allowed under this program – 15kW. The system being mounted on a roof, or the ground has no bearing on the allowable kW system capacity eligibility.

15. What "barriers in accessing services" would be relevant? Would the "services" be those offered by the community center in general? Would the "barriers" be what prevents some portion of the community from taking advantage of those offered services?

"Barriers" refers to the impediments that prevent disadvantaged communities from access to services leading to those disadvantaged communities being underserved and thus further disadvantaged. The barriers to accessing services would be those characteristics that may lead to the community being defined as "disadvantaged." The "services" that they have not received the benefits of may include funding from government grants similar to this program.

16. Would a church organization be eligible to apply grant funds through your program for energy-efficiency improvements "for schools and municipalities"?

No, a church organization would not be eligible to receive an award through this program. Eligible recipients are "Vermont Elementary or Secondary School[s], or a Vermont municipality[ies]" (RFP p.3).

17. If a church organization was to apply in a collaborative venture with a school supervisory union/district would that project be eligible?

If a church was applying in a collaborative venture with a school supervisory union, the supervisory union would need to be the lead applicant as the eligible recipient (RFP at p.3). Additionally, the project "must be installed in schools or municipal buildings" (RFP at p. 2) so while there could be a collaborative effort between the church organization and the supervisory union, a project installed must be installed in a school building; installing in the church organization's building would not be permissible through this program.

18. Is this exclusively for schools, or are town halls also eligible?

Eligible Recipients include Vermont Elementary and Secondary Schools as well as Vermont municipalities (RFP at p.3). This funding “must be installed in schools or municipal buildings” (RFP at p.2) so a town hall would most likely be eligible if it is a municipal building.

19. If we want to put solar panels on the town hall roof, how detailed should the application be? Is an estimate from an installer enough? Or do we need a detailed and firm price?

While a detailed estimate is not required, the proposal should be as detailed as possible based on the time allowed.

20. Is there a monetary limit on these grants?

The monetary limit on awards is \$250,000.

21. What kinds of information would be useful to include in the RFP for us to improve our chance of being awarded a grant?

The “Evaluation Criteria” are included in the RFP in “Method of Award” section of the RFP on pages 7 and 8.

22. How will this funding interact with the Municipal Energy Resilience Program (MERP)? Will applicants be able to stack this funding with MERP funds or other funding sources?

The SESM funding is from a separate federal funding source than the MERP grants which are funded with ARPA funds. Stacking funds from SESM with MERP funding is allowable from the PSD perspective, however, neither MERP funds nor any other federal funds shall be eligible as required matching funds for a SESM award. Applicants should verify the allowability of the stacking of SESM with MERP with the administrator of the MERP Program – The Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services.

23. As a Regional Planner, I'm looking for guidance on whether we should encourage ALL of our communities to apply for SESM funds, or just those that have "shovel-ready" projects? Or perhaps just those that seem to have less of a chance of getting the MERP implementation grant (i.e., Schools as they cannot access MERP)?

Any eligible applicant is encouraged to apply for funding through the SESM Program. However, those with “shovel-ready” projects may be better positioned to meet the September 1, 2025 as well as being better positioned to present a fully fleshed out project in their application. It is not likely that MERP eligibility will come into play in determining awards from this program.

24. Many high energy burden communities in Vermont do not show up as "disadvantaged" on the Climate & Economic Justice (CJEST) screening tool that the RFP points to. Are there alternative resources to make that determination?

There are very few communities in Vermont that are designated as “disadvantaged” in the Climate & Economic Justice Screening Tool (CJEST). With that understanding, school and municipal proposals will need to describe characteristics of the population served by the school or municipality that would indicate that they somehow face barriers in accessing services that had disadvantaged the community. This disadvantage could be based on income disparities, race or ethnicity, geographic location, language

isolation, etc. In addition to the [CJEST Mapping Tool](#) for disadvantaged communities Vermont's Agency of Transportation (AOT) has an [Equity Framework Web Map](#)). *This is not an exhaustive list of characteristics of underserved populations or resources for the determination of underserved populations.*

25. When do you anticipate this Sustainable Energy grant will be awarded?

The evaluation and selection process will begin following the March 1, 2024 application deadline. The evaluation and selection process timeframe will be dependent on a number of factors including, but not limited to: the number of applications received for funding requests; time it may take for any requests for additional information or follow up questions that the selection committee may have of submitted proposal. We hope to have this process completed in a timely manner that allows a grantee to build their projects in the summer and fall of 2024.

26. Given the short timeframe for applications this year, will this same program open up for proposals next year? March 2025 perhaps?

This funding opportunity was made available through a federal FY22 congressionally directed spending authorization. The expectation is that this will be a one-time opportunity with no expected additional funding available in the foreseeable future.

27. If an applicant were aggressive in awarding a contract, and beginning work on the project we are seeking a VPSD grant on, may we still receive the grant funding for a project that is underway?

Grant/award funds cannot be used for projects that have already begun construction or for equipment purchases made before a grant agreement with the PSD has been signed/executed.

28. I have a question on eligibility for a potential project related to District Heat in Montpelier. Our current system has unused capacity and we've been trying to secure resources to add more buildings onto the system so could a project be eligible for this program if the scope was to design and connect one or more buildings to fully utilize the capacity available to us?

Adding one or more buildings to a district heating system would be allowable under the condition the building(s) were owned by a public school or municipality. Only school and municipal buildings are eligible recipients and only school and municipal buildings are eligible locations for funded projects.

29. It is our understanding that Richmond is not considered an energy burdened community, but we are very close to shovel ready. Because we are not energy burdened, would we be ineligible or a low priority for this grant program?

Any eligible applicant is encouraged to apply for funding through the SESM Program. While energy burdened and disadvantaged communities may have some priority, there are many other criteria that will be considered when deciding where to direct funds from this program. Those with "shovel-ready" projects may be better positioned to meet the September 1, 2025, deadline, as well as being better positioned to present a fully fleshed out project in their application.

30. We have a bond vote on Town Meeting and if it passes we will have more than enough for any cost share. We intend to replace the natural gas boilers with an innovative hybrid air to water heat pump system and the construction estimator estimated the cost of the system to be over \$500,000 not including markup and general conditions. We believe this system will be a good example of an innovative HVAC system and fits within the goals of the SESM program. If the bond vote fails, it is uncertain when we might get this project back up and running. Is it OK to apply for this grant when we do not know the outcome of the bond vote until March 5, Town Meeting Day?

Yes, it is OK to submit a proposal in this case. The RFP requires applicants to demonstrate their required cost share of the project's total costs in the proposal. In a case where the cost share has not yet been secured, this should be explained in the proposal including details of when the letter of commitment identifying the cost share might be submitted as an addendum to a completed and timely submitted application.

31. We hope to complete the final design and go out to bid in late summer or early fall. Construction could start as early as this fall. Until the bids are in, we will not know the actual costs, nor will we know who the contractors will be. However, we have done preliminary design and have a 300 item professional construction estimate of costs. Our application is based on this estimate. Will this level of detail be sufficient for an application?

Yes. Applicants may be in varying stages of planning for the projects for which they are seeking SESM funding. While it will be easier to understand the timing and characteristics of more fleshed out project plans, any eligible projects that can be reasonably expected to be completed by the end date of the program – September 1, 2025, will be considered.

32. We intend to apply for a Municipal Energy Resilience Program grant as well. We certainly have enough energy improvements to meet the guidelines for cost share for both programs even if we were successful in receiving both awards from both programs. Two questions related to this issue:

- a. Can we apply for both?
- b. If we are successful with winning awards from both programs, can we accept both

Yes, a municipality can apply for both (schools are not eligible for the MERP). However, the SESM funding is from a separate federal funding source than the MERP grants which are funded through ARPA. Stacking funds from SESM with MERP funding is allowable from the PSD perspective. However, neither MERP funds nor any other federal funds shall be eligible as required matching funds for the SESM program. Applicants should verify the allowability of the stacking of SESM with MERP with the administrator of the MERP Program – The Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services.

33. My main question is: How do we physically/electronically complete the SESM application? When I click on the link on DPS's website, the application opens up, but I am unable to type anything into the boxes. We are supposed to submit our application online, but how is that possible if we can't complete the Proposal Summary Sheet online?

Applications cannot be submitted online but should be submitted electronically via email to christopher.heine@vermont.gov. If applicants cannot email proposals, they may be mailed to the PSD at the address below. Proposal Summary Sheets - Appendix A of the RFP - can be printed out, filled in and scanned. Alternatively, if preferred, a MS Word document with the Proposal Summary Sheet can be shared with applicants. The proposed budget should be completed in the Excel worksheet provided on the web page:

<https://publicservice.vermont.gov/renewables/clean-energy-development-fund-cedf/funding-opportunities-projects>

Vermont Public Service Department
112 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05602-2601

34. If our proposal consists of multiple distinct scope items (i.e. improvement to distribution system for a high efficiency pellet boiler, and replacing oil boiler (secondary heat source) with an air to water heat pump) and one or some scope items are not accepted, does that mean the proposal as a whole will not be accepted?

Proposals may consist of multiple measures. Proposals for eligible projects will be accepted and scored even if they include separate ineligible measures, but funding will not be allowed to be applied to any measure that is ineligible. Awards may be made that are lower than the requested amounts for a variety of reasons,

35. Is there a specific Purple Air device that is required? Are there any specific guidelines for what sort of emission metering is required?

The air-quality/particulate (PM 2.5) monitoring device needs to be outdoors and appropriately installed, have capability to be grid connected and be made accessible through a publicly available platform PurpleAir has a few options that meet these requirements but there is not a specific product in their line of options that is required, nor is the PurpleAir brand specifically required if a similar product that meets these requirements is available.

36. Concerning the permitting- environmental clearances... The site (an open farm field) for the project we are designing- where this grant would pay for the solar and boiler components- has been cleared by the Vermont SHPO archeologically (performed by the UVM Archeology Department) because it had been considered for a VTrans Park and Ride earlier. It would seem to suffice for this project also. In reading the RFP , and the PA with the DOE, the SHPO would seem to be enough- we can easily comply with the PA. Assuming we say we have the SHPO clearance, is that sufficient? The UVM investigation and results document is 15 pages....

Existing Vermont SHPO approval for the project would be beneficial to the proposal but there would still be environmental review required for the project and project site.