

Thursday 13 December 2012 01:10pm EST.

Development corporation to fund West Harlem nonprofits

by [Chris Meyer](#)

The West Harlem Local Development Corporation will start accepting applications for grants to fund community projects on Friday, it announced at a series of meetings this week.

The organization will fund grants of up to \$350,000 per year to solve problems for the community, WHLDC executive director Kofi Boateng told nonprofit leaders Monday and Wednesday.

Under the Community Benefits Agreement, which Columbia signed in 2009 as a concession for constructing the Manhattanville campus expansion, the development corporation is responsible for allocating \$76 million to the neighborhood for housing, employment, education, and other local needs.

“Our job is to make real the Community Benefits Agreement,” Boateng said. “We are going to start giving awards to community organizations that do things that benefit West Harlem. That’s the central thing.”

The grant program comes as the corporation is [ramping up its efforts](#) in response to some local criticism for lack of transparency. It funded internships for local youth this summer and helped open the Teachers College Community School in September, but has so far used only about \$2 million of its funding.

The grant program will begin its first cycle in January, when initial applications will be due. A more thorough application will be due in early February, with the WHLDC issuing its final decisions in March.

All nonprofits that receive funding will have to check in with the corporation after six months to ensure that they are using the grant efficiently. Dean Morris, WHLDC director of programs, said the review process would be a learning experience for new activists in the area.

“We have to create a hybrid approach for younger organizations, especially given that there are younger groups that are just starting out,” Morris said. “And a learning-focused approach is something we will have to incorporate into how we evaluate grants.”

While Morris said the corporation hoped to reach out to as many organizations as possible, it cannot fund construction efforts, general operating costs, or projects with an exclusionary religious affiliation, among other restrictions.

Attendance at the two meetings varied wildly, with only four environmental representatives showing up on Monday, as opposed to the roughly 40 people who packed the corporation’s small office on Wednesday night.

On both nights, the attendees represented an assortment of nonprofits in the neighborhood. Kenneth Williams, an outreach coordinator for GreenThumb, which supports over 500 community gardens citywide, said his organization would need funding for multiple years.

“Our work can never be finished,” Williams said. “We’ve had gardens here for the past 30 years, and they require funding based on whatever conditions they are dealing with.”

Boateng said projects would be re-evaluated every year, so successful programs would be able to win a new grant if they applied again.

“We don’t need to see that the tree has fully grown, but you have to show that you have planted the seed,” he said.

Other nonprofit representatives ranged from local resident Randy Cameron, whose company, Skyponics, will provide sustainable, indoor-farmed fish to West Harlem, to Travis Rundlet, who sits on the board of directors for Harlem Seeds, a nonprofit that works to provide healthy food options to Harlem youth.

news@columbiaspectator.com