

Independent Decision Review

CAPABILITIES SAMPLE

Subject: New York Public Radio - "Preservation and Digitization of the NYPR Archives," NEH Challenge Grant narrative (May 2019); published by NEH as a funded sample application.

Type: Independent read of the proposal as presented - findings, gaps, and the questions a matching funder or reviewer should resolve before relying on the plan.

This demonstration sample was prepared from a public, NEH-published grant narrative to illustrate the review format. It reads the document on its own terms and is decision support, not a funding recommendation.

BOTTOM LINE

This is a strong proposal, and it was funded. The collection's humanities value is vividly and credibly established, the preservation need is real and urgent, and the request is coherent. A decision review does not re-litigate that. Its job is to surface the questions a matching funder, a board finance committee, or a program officer should still press before relying on the plan - the places where the proposal asserts what it has not yet shown.

The pattern across the findings: the case for why the work matters is airtight; the case for how it will be funded, paced, and measured rests on figures that do not fully reconcile, a match that depends on one pending decision, and an evaluation that measures more than the project can take credit for.

MATERIAL FINDINGS

1 The budget figures as stated do not reconcile.

The narrative gives a total project budget of \$3,813,173, a requested NEH grant of \$750,000, and required matching funds of \$3,000,000. But \$750,000 plus \$3,000,000 is \$3,750,000 - roughly \$63,000 short of the stated total. A reviewer cannot tell from the page whether the match is understated, the total is overstated, or a cost sits outside the two headline figures.

Ask → which figure is authoritative, and what accounts for the approximately \$63,000 difference between the stated total and the federal-plus-match sum.

2 The entire challenge-grant premise rests on one pending decision, with no stated contingency.

A challenge grant works only if the federal award unlocks the match - here, \$3,000,000. The plan's anchor is a single proposal "under consideration" with the Leon Levy Foundation, quoted as a wide \$1.5M-\$2.5M range; every other named source is "exploring." Even at the top of that range, \$500,000 of the match is unidentified; at the bottom, \$1.5M is. The proposal names no fallback if the anchor grant lands low or is declined.

Ask → what the fallback is if the Leon Levy grant comes in at the bottom of its range or not at all, and which "exploring" prospects are actually in the pipeline - with amounts and expected timing.

3 The digitization pace and scope are asserted, not quantified.

The proposal says that approximately one-third of the archive had been digitized by 2019, leaving more than 40,000 vulnerable assets, and proposes to "complete the digitization of the majority" within a five-year timeline. That implies a sharp acceleration over the historical pace, yet the timeline carries no annual target and no vendor-throughput figure; Years 3 through 5 read almost identically ("ongoing asset prep; digitization and preservation"). "Majority" is also undefined - moving from one-third to just over half would satisfy the word while falling well short of the rhetoric.

Ask → the numeric completion target, the annual digitization volume, and the outside-vendor capacity that makes the five-year pace credible.

4 The evaluation measures outcomes the project cannot cleanly take credit for.

Of the quantitative metrics, only the first - items digitized and catalogued - directly measures the project. The rest (increases in downloads, reference requests, newsletter subscribers, and estimated audience of programs using archival material) are downstream and confounded: a single viral segment or a marketing push moves them as much as digitization does. The proposal cites useful baselines - about 9,000 downloads and 670 requests in 2018 - but sets no target increase against them, so "success" has neither a defined threshold nor clean attribution to the grant.

Ask → target thresholds against the stated baselines, and how the project's contribution will be isolated from marketing and programming effects.

5 The DAM creates a permanent operating cost funded largely by one-time money.

The new Digital Asset Management system requires a new full-time manager plus ongoing maintenance - recurring costs - while the funding described is largely one-time challenge and centennial-campaign money. The proposal states it "will sustain" the role long-term and points to three existing archives staff as evidence of capacity, but does not identify the recurring revenue that covers the new salary and system upkeep once grant funds are exhausted.

Ask → the operating-budget line or endowment income that funds the DAM manager and system maintenance in year six and beyond.

SECONDARY FLAGS

- The prioritization rule is gestured at, not operationalized. With 40,000+ assets and a finite window, "priority given to high-value, at-risk materials" names a principle, not a decision rule.

- The centennial framing and the timeline are tight against each other. A five-year plan from a May 2019 proposal completes around the 2024 centennial at best. Confirm that centennial deliverables are scoped to arrive by it.

QUESTIONS TO RESOLVE BEFORE PROCEEDING

1. Which budget figure is authoritative, and the approximately \$63,000 reconciliation.
 2. The match contingency if the Leon Levy grant lands low or is declined; status, amounts, and timing of other prospects.
 3. Numeric digitization target, annual volume, and vendor capacity behind the five-year pace.
 4. Evaluation targets against stated baselines and the method for attributing change to the project.
 5. Recurring funding for the DAM manager and system maintenance beyond the grant period.
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Method & sourcing. Every factual statement resolves to the NEH-published grant narrative; no external fact is asserted. This review reads a strong, funded proposal for the questions a matching funder, board finance committee, or program officer should still press - not to second-guess the award. A deeper engagement would test the figures against the full application budget and attachments.