

FIRST Washington

Fundraising Outside the School Ecosystem

Meeting Minutes and Detailed Notes

Date: July 28, 2026

Duration: 57 Minutes

Facilitator: Lila Cohen, Director of Development & Community Relations, FIRST Washington

Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of this session was to discuss fundraising strategies for FIRST Washington teams in light of reduced external funding resources and to provide practical guidance on grants, sponsorship development, corporate partnerships, fundraising events, volunteer engagement, and long-term sustainability planning.

Opening Remarks

Lila Cohen explained that FIRST Washington has experienced reductions in state and philanthropic funding sources, requiring teams to take a more active role in fundraising. FIRST Washington continues to pursue renewed funding through OSPI, the Governor's Office, and a dedicated capital campaign focused on team support.

Budget Planning Discussion

Teams discussed the importance of developing realistic annual budgets before the season begins. Budget estimates presented included rookie FTC teams (~\$6,700), returning FTC teams (~\$4,700), and FRC teams commonly ranging from \$30,000 to \$50,000 or more when travel and championship participation are included.

FIRST Headquarters Grant Opportunities

The group reviewed grants from organizations such as Gene Haas Foundation, John Deere, NASA, and BAE Systems. Team representatives noted several eligibility challenges including geographic restrictions, mentor requirements, rookie team status requirements, and demographic qualifications.

Kindora Grant Research Platform

FIRST Washington introduced Kindora, an AI-supported prospect research platform that can help identify grant opportunities and potential funding partners. Teams were encouraged to contact FIRST Washington for assistance.

Corporate Matching and Volunteer Programs

Participants discussed employee matching programs offered by companies such as Microsoft, Boeing, and Google. Teams were encouraged to survey parents and mentors regarding employer matching donations and volunteer-hour programs.

Local Business Partnerships

Recommended outreach targets include banks, dentists, auto dealerships, manufacturers,

agricultural businesses, and retailers. Teams were encouraged to diversify fundraising efforts and avoid dependence on any single funding source.

Alumni Engagement

Participants highlighted alumni as an important long-term fundraising and mentoring resource. Alumni can provide financial support, mentoring, and introductions to corporate sponsors.

Fundraising Events

Examples included silent auctions, spaghetti dinners, teriyaki feeds, sponsorship drives, and community showcase events. Teams shared lessons learned regarding attendance, donations, and community engagement.

Community Organizations

Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, Lions Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, and Masonic organizations were identified as valuable sources of funding, volunteers, mentors, and judges.

Summer Camps

Teams reported success using FLL and FTC summer camps to generate revenue, build leadership skills, recruit future participants, and strengthen community engagement.

Cost Control Strategies

Key savings opportunities discussed included transportation alternatives, hotel negotiations, room sharing policies, event food planning, and in-kind donations.

Strategic Themes

1. Diversify fundraising sources.
2. Build budgets before the season begins.
3. Leverage corporate matching programs.
4. Engage alumni and community partners.
5. Develop long-term relationships.
6. Explore summer camp fundraising opportunities.
7. Manage costs as aggressively as revenue growth.

Action Items for FIRST Washington

- Share fundraising templates and sponsorship materials.
- Provide grant research support.
- Continue state funding advocacy efforts.
- Expand mentor and volunteer matching programs.
- Explore lodging and travel partnership opportunities.

Action Items for Teams

- Finalize annual budgets.
- Review grant opportunities.
- Survey parents for employer matching programs.
- Develop sponsorship packets.

- Build alumni outreach plans.
- Engage civic organizations and community groups.
- Explore fundraising events and summer camps.

Closing Remarks

The meeting concluded with encouragement for teams to focus on relationship-building, persistence, and diversified fundraising approaches. FIRST Washington reaffirmed its commitment to supporting teams while pursuing broader funding solutions.