

## Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: January 7, 2021

For the Community Development Committee meeting of January 19, 2021

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of January 27, 2021

**Subject:** Regional Park System Competitive Equity Grant Program, 2021 Notice of Funding Availability

**District(s), Member(s):** All

**Policy/Legal Reference:** *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, Chapter 8, Strategy 4, September 2020 Budget Amendment ([BI 2020-210 JT SW](#)).

**Staff Prepared/Presented:** Jessica Lee, Senior Parks Planner, 651-602-1621

**Division/Department:** Community Development / Regional Parks

### Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the 2021 Regional Parks System Competitive Equity Grant Program Notice of Funding Availability attached to this report.

### Background

The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* commits the Council to develop a set-aside, competitive equity grant program to strengthen equitable use of the Regional Parks System. The Regional Parks System Competitive Equity Grant Program (Equity Grant Program) was formally established in 2019 through a pilot program with capital funding that resulted in awards for three Regional Park System equity projects. The pilot program, with feedback from the regional park implementing agencies and 2019 review committee members, illustrated the need for non-capital funding to support equity programming projects. The Council responded by authorizing \$1.4 million in Parks Interest Earnings for the Equity Grant Program. These dollars may be used to fund operating costs, including programming and staff.

The attached 2021 Regional Park System Competitive Equity Grant Program Notice of Funding Availability was developed after receiving input from the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, the Community Development Committee, the Equity Advisory Committee, and regional park implementing agencies' directors, planners, and outreach staff. The 2021 Equity Grant Program emphasizes partnership building, equity programming efforts, internal and inter-agency collaboration, and designing accessible capital projects that not only meet ADA requirements, but provide innovative ways to bring meaningful, rich experiences to users.

### Rationale

The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, Finance Chapter 8, Strategy 4 states that equity is a consideration in the Regional Parks System funding and investment. The Regional Parks Equity Grant Program is one Council strategy for advancing equity in the region.

### Thrive Lens Analysis

The competitive equity grant program seeks to advance the *Thrive MSP 2040* outcome of equity by increasing the equitable usage of the Regional Parks System by all residents of the region.

**Funding**

Up to \$2,064,000 is available in the authorized budget for the 2021 Equity Grant Program. This includes \$664,000 in Parks bonds and \$1.4M in Parks Interest Earnings.

# REGIONAL PARKS SYSTEM COMPETITIVE EQUITY GRANT PROGRAM

*2021 Notice of Funding Availability*



METROPOLITAN  
COUNCIL

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# The Council’s mission is to foster efficient and economic growth for a prosperous metropolitan region

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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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## 2021 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA)

This 2021 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) describes the Metropolitan Council's intentions for the Regional Parks System Competitive Equity Grant Program in 2021. Specifically, this notice:

- Establishes the amount and type of funding available for the 2021 award year and the limits that apply to individual awards.
- Sets the schedule for application submittal, review and award.
- Describes the criteria the Metropolitan Council will use in project selection.
- Defines who is eligible to apply.

### *Background and History*

Under [Minn. Stat. § 473.145](#), the Metropolitan Council is responsible for preparing a comprehensive development guide for the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Council's [Thrive MSP 2040 \(Thrive\)](#), adopted in May 2014, provides the framework, shared vision, and policy foundation for the future of the region. The Council uses Thrive to develop its regional system and policy plans, as well as development policies and implementation strategies. Taken together, these plans constitute the comprehensive development guide that shapes the orderly and economical development of the region. Minn. Stat. § 473.145 specifies three metropolitan systems plans, one of which is the [Regional Parks Policy Plan](#).

Thrive specifies that the Council will collaborate with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission (MPOSC), regional park implementing agencies (agencies), and state partners to “strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents, such as across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability.” To address those goals, through the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, the Council committed to creating a set-aside competitive grant program for capital projects explicitly intended to strengthen equitable usage of the Regional Parks System.

In 2019, Council staff built on earlier engagement with community members and worked with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, the Council's Equity Advisory Committee, regional parks implementing agency staff, and the Council's Community Development Committee in a collaborative process to establish the 2019 pilot year program. The pilot program received 15 applications and three grants were awarded, demonstrating demand for future funding of the Competitive Equity Grant Program.

For more information about Regional Park System use, visitor demographic information, or past engagement processes, refer to [Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color \(2014\)](#), [2016 Regional Parks System Visitor Study Report](#), or the [Regional Parks Policy Plan Update Community Engagement Summary 2018](#).

### *Program Purpose*

The Council has designated a portion of its regional parks bonds and park interest earnings to provide financial support to regional park implementing agencies for projects that will strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents, such as across age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin, and ability. Partnerships and engagement are necessary to shape the proposed projects, and as a result of this collaboration the Competitive Equity Grant Program will enhance institutional capacity around equity work across the Regional Parks System and with the Council and individual implementing agencies.

All proposals must address one or more of the following equity focus areas:

- Age
- Race
- Ethnicity

- Income
- National Origin
- Ability

### *Eligible Applicants*

By state statute<sup>1</sup>, applicants must be a regional park implementing agency, defined as the counties of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Ramsey, Scott and Washington, the cities of Saint Paul and Bloomington, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the Three Rivers Park District.<sup>2</sup> Regional park implementing agencies are welcome to collaborate on proposals. Individuals and/or other governmental, private, or nonprofit entities are not eligible to apply, but are encouraged to be included as project partners with regional park implementing agencies.

As a condition for participating in this grant program, applicants must either have, or be substantially working towards, completing a current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) self-evaluation or transition plan that covers accessibility to the Regional Parks System as required under Title II of the ADA. If an Agency's plan is more than ten years old, the Agency is encouraged to apply for a grant through the Competitive Equity Grant Program to update its plan. Agencies with plans more than ten years old must demonstrate that they are working towards updating their plan, and a grant application would satisfy that demonstration requirement and allow them to apply for additional grants through the same 2021 program.

### *Available Funds and Award Limits*

- \$664,000 in Council capital bonds is available for competitive capital projects.
  - Agencies may apply for multiple capital projects, but no Agency may receive more than \$200,000 in capital funds.
- \$1,400,000 in Parks Interest Earnings is available for competitive projects. The Council prioritizes using these interest earnings for non-capital programming projects.
  - Non-capital projects will be reviewed first and recommended for funding. At the review committee's discretion, remaining funds may be recommended for capital projects.
  - Parks interest earnings may be used to pay for engagement and outreach activities included in a capital project.
  - Agencies with an ADA Transition Plan greater than ten years old may apply for \$20,000 grants to update their plan or create a new plan.
  - Agencies may apply for multiple non-capital projects, but no Agency may receive more than \$200,000 in total non-capital funds.
- The Council will only consider funding proposals that meet all the required eligibility criteria and receive at least 50 of the 100 potential points.
- No individual grant shall be less than \$20,000 or more than \$200,000.

### *Additional Parameters*

- If an Agency receives multiple grants, Council staff reserve the right to combine them as appropriate into one grant agreement.
- The Council reserves the right to award less than the available funding.
- The Council reserves the right to award less than the amount requested and will negotiate any necessary revisions in project scope prior to finalizing a grant agreement.
- Grants are reimbursement-based.

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<sup>1</sup> Minn. Stat. § 473.315: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=473.315>

<sup>2</sup> Minn. Stat. § 473.351: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=473.351>

## Eligible Uses of Funds

Consistent with authorizing state statutes and the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, grant proposals must meet all of the below criteria to be considered for funding:

- Address one or more of the equity focus areas outlined above (age, race, ethnicity, income, national origin or ability);
- Be within the boundaries of the Regional Parks System or clearly connect visitors to the regional parks and trails within the Regional Parks System (projects located in local and state parks or trails are not eligible for funding);
- Be consistent with the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*;<sup>3</sup>
- Be broadly consistent with a Council-approved master plan;
- Be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Be approved by the Agency's locally elected board either individually or as part of a local capital improvement plan prior to the Council executing a grant agreement.
- For capital funds only, be capital in nature, including real property, personal property, or equipment used in Regional Parks System operations with an estimated useful life of more than one year and with an initial cost of \$5,000 or more:
  - Capital assets may be either intangible (e.g. easements, water rights) or tangible (e.g. land, buildings, building improvements, vehicles, machinery, equipment, and infrastructure).
  - Private use of the capital asset is not allowed as any private use can jeopardize the tax-exempt status of the bonds.

Applicants are encouraged to think broadly about their project proposals and are invited to contact Council staff with any and all questions about potential eligible uses of funds.

## Example Proposals

The following examples are meant to spark imaginations rather than limit thinking. Applicants are encouraged to examine and understand their community needs to develop project proposals that meet the spirit of this funding.

1. Collaborative efforts among multiple regional park implementing agencies to develop shared knowledge and approaches to identified capital projects or programming efforts to advance equitable usage.
  - Examples could include a system-wide marketing plan, system-wide signage, purchasing a shared bike fleet for outreach or education programming, or purchasing a mobile classroom to share across the agencies.
2. Partnerships between a regional park implementing agency and a community-led effort to identify and produce a capital project or non-capital programming effort.
  - May include contracting with a non-profit organization or private consultant to develop and initiate equity programming efforts.
3. New equity programming efforts including outreach, education, marketing, external communications, special events, translation and interpretation services, staff training, and hiring new staff to develop and implement equity efforts
  - Programming proposals may include budgeting for equipment such as basic essential outdoor equipment (winter boots, mittens, fishing poles, bike helmets, bike locks, etc.)

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<sup>3</sup> The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* is available at: <https://metro council.org/Parks/Planning/Parks-Policy-Plan.aspx>

4. Innovative or new capital projects, built on existing partnerships, that will advance accessibility and provide a meaningful experience to users with disabilities such as cognitive, physical, visionary, or auditory.

### *Funding Schedule*

The following is a preliminary schedule. Identified dates are subject to change. Finalized dates will be posted on the Council's website at <https://metro council.org/Parks/Grants-Funding/Equity-Grant-Program.aspx>.

February 2021	Notice of funding availability posted and WebGrants open for applications
March 2021	Applications due by 4:00 P.M. on March 15, 2021
April 2021	Review committee meets to score and recommend projects
June 2021	Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission recommends project selections
June 2021	Community Development Committee recommends project selections
June 2021	Council approves project selections

### *Proposal Review Process*

Council staff will review all proposals to ensure completeness and eligibility. Council staff are available to answer agency questions throughout the application process.

A review team will score the proposals and make recommendations for funding awards to the Council. The review team will be comprised of up to four members of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, up to two members of the Council's Equity Advisory Committee, up to three Council members who serve on the Community Development Committee, and up to three representatives from the implementing agencies. Chairs/co-chairs from each commission/committee will appoint review team members. Implementing Agency directors may nominate themselves or someone from their staff to serve on the review committee. Council staff will consult with the MPOSC chair to select up to three agency representatives.

Members of the review team shall recuse themselves from scoring or commenting on any applications for which they have a real or perceived conflict of interest. Council staff will support the work of the review team, which will be responsible for determining its own leadership and meeting structures.

Capital projects will be reviewed, scored, and ranked separately from programming/non-capital projects. The review committee will prioritize using the parks interest earnings funding for non-capital projects. If funds remain after non-capital project recommendations, those funds may be recommended for capital projects at the discretion of the review committee.

### *Grant Terms*

Grants will have a three-year term with a one-year extension possible at the discretion of Council staff. In rare circumstances, a second one-year extension may be possible. Grant extensions will be processed administratively and will not require Council action in most cases. All costs eligible for reimbursement must be incurred during the grant term, as amended, and all costs must be submitted within 90 days after the end of the grant term. Unspent grant funds will revert to the Council.

### *Project and Program Evaluation*

The Council will review the impact of funded projects and the efficacy of the Council's program application processes regularly with a desire to continually improve both. Evaluation results will be public and will inform future funding rounds.



Table 1. Competitive Scoring Criteria

Evaluation Criteria	Points
<p><b>Impact on equitable use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposal clearly identifies one or more underserved populations that the project will benefit and why they were chosen</li> <li>• The proposal identifies measurable equity outcomes for intended populations</li> </ul>	20
<p><b>Community partnerships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposal demonstrates community involvement throughout the project by both developing new relationships and strengthening existing partnerships</li> <li>• The proposal demonstrates how partnerships will continue after the grant period</li> </ul>	20
<p><b>Community engagement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposal demonstrates how partners and underserved populations will be engaged throughout the project and after the grant period</li> <li>• If the proposal includes community engagement, it clearly demonstrates how the engagement will focus on underserved populations in future planning and projects</li> </ul>	20
<p><b>Capacity building:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposal will increase the ability of the regional park implementing agencies and their partners to grow their skills in working with underrepresented communities</li> <li>• The proposal demonstrates the agency’s capacity to leverage the Council’s funds through non-state funds, grants, or in-kind contributions and/or the ability to continue the work after the grant period is complete</li> </ul>	20
<p><b>Programming initiatives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposal was developed with the agency’s outreach/education staff</li> <li>• The proposal clearly demonstrates how new programming efforts will affect underserved populations</li> </ul>	20
<p><b>Total Possible Points</b></p>	<b>100</b>



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