

Business Item

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission



Community Development Committee Meeting: Oct. 16, 2023

For the Metropolitan Council: Oct. 25, 2023

Business Item: 2023-238

Regional Parks and Trails System Competitive Equity Grant Program 2024 Notice of Funding Availability

District(s), Member(s):	All
Policy/Legal Reference:	Minn. Const. art. XI, sec. 15; Minn. Stat. § 473.315; <i>2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan</i> , Chapter 8, Strategy 4; Chapter 8, Finance Policy- Strategy 7. FM 15-2 Grant/Loan Approval Policy, FM 14-2 Expenditures for the Procurement of Goods and Services Policy.
Staff Prepared/Presented:	Jessica Lee, Senior Planner, 651-602-1621
Division/Department:	Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the 2024 Regional Parks and Trails 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 and Trails System. The Equity Grant Program was formally established in 2019 through a pilot program with capital funding that resulted in the awards for three Regional Park System equity projects. In 2021 the Council dedicated \$664,000 in Council bonds for capital projects and \$1,400,000 in parks interest earnings for programming or a mix of non-capital/capital projects. The competitive grant round resulted in the funding of 23 capital and non-capital projects.

Similar levels of funding have been set aside for the 2024 Competitive Equity Grant Program. \$658,000 is available in Council bonds for capital projects and \$1,410,000 in parks interest earnings is available for programming/non-capital. The interest earnings may be used for capital projects if funds remain after awarding programming projects, or for programming projects that have small capital components.

Staff shared the draft Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) at the August Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission meeting and the September Committee Development Committee meeting. The draft NOFA was also shared with the Regional Park Implementing Agencies. All feedback has been considered and incorporated into the final NOFA (attached).

Rationale

The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, Finance Chapter 8, Strategy 4 states that equity is a consideration in the Regional Parks and Trails System funding and investment. The equity grant program is one key 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 and Trails System by all residents of the region.



REGIONAL PARKS SYSTEM COMPETITIVE EQUITY GRANT PROGRAM

2024 Notice of Funding Availability

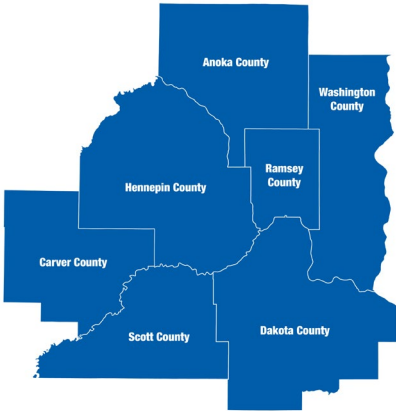


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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund 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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2024 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA)

This 2024 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) describes the Metropolitan Council's intentions for the Regional Parks System Competitive Equity Grant Program in 2024. Specifically, this notice:

- Establishes the amount and type of funding available for the 2024 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 *Minnesota Statute 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. Minnesota Statute 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, the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* committed the Council 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. The pilot program had funding only for capital projects.

In 2021, more funding was dedicated to the grant program. The Council directed staff to use Parks Interest Earnings in addition to the Council bonds that were already set aside. The interest earnings allowed for non-capital and programming projects. The agencies submitted 37 projects totaling over \$3.8 million. The final recommendation awarded 23 projects for a mix of capital and non-capital/programming efforts totaling \$2 million.

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 \(2014\)](#), [2021 Regional Parks and Trails System Visitor Study Report](#), the [Regional Parks Policy Plan Update Community Engagement Summary 2018](#) and the [Youth and Parks Research Study](#).

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 statute¹, 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.² 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.

Available Funds and Award Limits for 2024

- \$658,000 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.
- \$1,410,000 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 included in a capital project.
 - Agencies may apply for multiple non-capital projects, but no Agency may receive more than \$200,000 in total non-capital funds.
- 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.
- 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.

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

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

- If an Agency receives multiple grants, Council staff reserve the right to combine them as appropriate into one grant agreement.
- Grants are reimbursement-based.

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*;³
- Be broadly consistent with a Council-approved long-range plan prior to the Council executing a grant agreement;
- 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.

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

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 nonprofit 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 valued up to \$5,000, such as basic essential outdoor equipment (winter boots, mittens, fishing poles, bike helmets, bike locks, etc.)
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

November 2023	Notice of funding availability posted and WebGrants open for applications
December 2023	Applications due by 4:00 P.M. on December 15, 2023
February 2024	Review committee meets to score and recommend projects
April 2024	Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission recommends project selections
April 2024	Community Development Committee recommends project selections
April 2024	Council approves project selections

These dates are subject to change.

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 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 be asked to 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, an additional extension may be possible. 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 inform future funding rounds.

Competitive Scoring Criteria

Evaluation Criteria	Points
<p>Impact on equitable use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal clearly identifies one or more underserved populations that the project will benefit and why they were chosen • The proposal identifies measurable equity outcomes for intended populations 	20
<p>Community partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal demonstrates community involvement throughout the project by both developing new relationships and strengthening existing partnerships • The proposal demonstrates how partnerships will continue after the grant period 	20
<p>Community engagement and awareness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal demonstrates how partners and underserved populations will be engaged throughout the project and after the grant period • The proposal includes regional parks and trails system awareness building among underserved communities 	20
<p>Capacity building:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal will increase the ability of the regional park implementing agencies and their partners to grow their skills in working with underrepresented communities • 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 	20
<p>Programming initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal describes the internal process used to identify and develop the project and it describes the agency's outreach/education staff involvement when applicable • The proposal clearly demonstrates how new programming efforts will affect underserved populations 	20
<p>Total Possible Points</p>	100



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