

Natural Resource Grant Program

Opportunity Grant Guidelines

2023 Opportunity Grant application guidelines

Program Overview

Hennepin County Environment and Energy Department works to protect water, land, and air to conserve our natural resources for future generations. As the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) for the County, the department has a unique role working with residents and public agencies to address erosion and nutrient runoff and to protect and restore critical habitats. The Natural Resources Grant program was launched in 2014 to provide financial and technical support for partner-led projects that preserve and protect our natural resources.

Two grants are offered through the program: Opportunity Grants and Good Steward Grants. Opportunity Grants are ideal for larger projects seeking to leverage multiple funding sources to address significant water quality and natural resources concerns across one or more projects on individual or multiple properties. Grants awards may be up to \$50,000. (Good Steward Grants offer cost share for primarily smaller conservation projects, such as individual stormwater management and habitat restoration projects on one property. Grant awards are no more than \$25,000 and are typically between \$10,000-\$20,000.)

For a project to be eligible for either of these grants, they must support the planning and installation of one, or preferably more, of the following primary purposes:

- Reduce erosion and sedimentation
- Improve water quality
- Protect groundwater quality or reduce groundwater use
- Preserve, restore, or establish critical habitat

These include, but are not limited to, new installations of:

- Stormwater management projects such as rain gardens, stormwater ponds and benches, stormwater reuse systems, infiltration or filtration basins, permeable pavement, grass swales, or water and sediment control basins
- Habitat restoration projects such as woodland and prairie restorations or riverbank or lake shoreline restorations
- Water quality improvement projects like lake alum treatments

The grant funds will be used to implement projects that address an identified natural resource management issue and/or undertake assessments that directly lead to the siting of projects that meet common natural resource management goals. Applicants are encouraged to use these funds as match to leverage other local, state, or federal funds. Unlike Good Steward Grants, Opportunity Grants do not require cost-share between the county and grantee.

Examples of previous Opportunity Grants can be found on the [County's environmental grants StoryMap](#). Additional information on the grant program, project and applicant eligibility requirements, and funding availability can be found in the Program Guidelines and Requirements section below and on the [program website](#).

Funding for the Natural Resources grants is provided through the sale of electricity from the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC), the county-owned waste-to-energy facility located in downtown Minneapolis.

Application Process

Opportunity grants are non-competitive grants that are accepted year-round and awarded on a rolling basis as funding allows. Applications are available on the Natural Resources Grants [program website](#). Please see the program website to get an application. **For consideration in the next review round, applications must be received by July 20th, 2023.** Applications may be filled out and submitted to Ellen Sones (612-596-1173; ellen.sones@hennepin.us) via email. An application won't be considered submitted until the applicant receives a confirmation of receipt by county staff.

As projects are reviewed on a rolling-basis, the time between submission and funding decision may vary. Please work with county staff to understand what that timeline may mean for your project.

Questions and Technical Assistance

Prospective applicants are encouraged to contact Hennepin County with any questions about the program and their project's eligibility. Staff are available to answer questions and provide application and project development support, particularly for any technical questions as it relates to project benefit to achieve water quality or natural resource goals, as for example listed in local or statewide water resource and natural resource management plans. If you have a project you would like to discuss, please contact Ellen Sones (612-596-1173; ellen.sones@hennepin.us).

Selection Criteria

Submitted Opportunity Grants are reviewed on a rolling basis. As applications are submitted staff will ensure they meet minimum program requirements, as listed below. During a review period, the county will form an evaluation panel to determine an application's ability to meet the select considerations, as listed below, and the evaluation criteria as listed in the Opportunity Grant Application. The evaluation panel may reach out to applicants during their review for clarification or elaboration on submitted materials. Applicants should respond promptly to those requests, which will be provided via email along with a deadline to provide a response.

Minimum Requirements

- The primary purpose of the practice must be to accomplish one or more of the following:
 - Reduce erosion and sedimentation
 - Improve water quality
 - Protect groundwater quality or reduce groundwater use
 - Preserve, restore, or establish critical habitat
- All practices must be designed and maintained for a specified time period. The minimum effective life will vary with practice type but will be no less than 10 years from the final payment.
- Grant funds cannot be used for practices designed only to increase land productivity.
- All practices must be installed within the county's geographic boundary and must be consistent with industry design standards (e.g., Natural Resource Conservation Service Field Office Technical Guide or the MN Stormwater Manual). Novel and emerging conservation practices are welcomed, but the application should clearly explain why that practice choice is most appropriate for the project.

Selection Considerations

- Ability of the practice to directly address a severe erosion, water quality, and/or habitat loss concern
- The number of partners and local commitment to the project, either financial or in-kind
- Educational and community engagement components associated with the project
- Funds leveraged for the project
- Direct relationship to a TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) impairment reduction
- Identification of the project as a priority by a local, state, or federal unit of government that manages water resources
- Capacity and commitment of the applicant to implement project and meet program obligations

Hennepin County is interested in supporting projects throughout the county. Geographic location of projects may be considered to maximize the reach of the natural resources Opportunity Grant program.

General Rules

An application is an invitation for applicants to submit a request to the county to receive an Opportunity Grant and not a confirmed grant award. Submission of an application shall neither obligate nor entitle an applicant to enter a contract with the county. The county will consider all the material submitted by the applicant to determine whether the applicant's offer follows the terms and conditions set forth in this application. Applications that do not comply with the provisions in this guidelines document or in the application itself may be considered nonresponsive and may be rejected.

The county reserves the right to determine, in its sole and absolute discretion, whether any aspect of the proposed work satisfactorily meets the criteria established in the application, the right to seek clarification from any applicants, the right to request additional information during the evaluation period, the right to negotiate with any applicants whether or not they submitted an application, the right to reject any or all applications with or without cause, the right to waive any irregularities or informalities in an application, the right to award multiple contracts to applicants, and/or the right to award a contract to an entity that did not submit an application.

The county reserves the right to withdraw, cancel, suspend, and/or modify the application and submittal process for any reason and at any time with no liability to any prospective applicant for any costs or expenses incurred in connection with the application submission.

All contracts recommended by Hennepin County Environment and Energy Department are advisory only, subject to approval by the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners.

Program Guidelines and Requirements

<p>Eligibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project must be located in Hennepin County • Eligible entities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Local, state, or regional government agencies ○ Nonprofit organizations ○ Landowners: citizens or business owners <p>Property renters and other users may apply if project permission is provided by the landowner(s).</p>
<p>Funding</p>	<p>Funding is available to share the costs with eligible applicants to implement water quality projects to preserve, establish and restore urban, suburban, and rural natural resources and to meet common natural resource management goals. Special consideration is given to applications that are able to leverage resources (e.g., Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment funds).</p>
<p>Award amount</p>	<p>Up to \$50,000, per the discretion of the Natural Resources Opportunity Grant evaluation panel and Hennepin County Administration.</p>
<p>Application Submission and Review</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity Grant requests are noncompetitive, and applications can be submitted year-round, with funds being allocated to projects substantially meeting one or more selection criteria as funds are available. • For consideration in the next review round, applications must be received by July 20, 2023. An application is considered received when a confirmation of receipt is provided by a Hennepin County staff member listed in this guideline document. • An evaluation review panel will be convened, and each application submitted by that time, which was not reviewed previously, will be reviewed and rated based on the application’s ability to meet criteria in this guidelines document and the application. • Within two months of the evaluation panel being convened, the panel will provide a recommendation for grant funding to the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners. Final decision to support any given grant is provided by the board of commissioners. • Funding reimbursement cannot occur before contract approval by the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners, anticipated to occur in Fall 2023.
<p>Grant agreement and project completion and reporting timelines</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a grant is board approved, grantee must enter into an agreement with the county to implement activities as specified in the application. There is no deadline to enter into the agreement, but it is recommended to occur within 1-2 months of board approval. • Opportunity Grant agreement period extends up to three years from board approval, with a one-year, no-cost extension allowed if the grantee is unable to complete all grant requirements within the contract period. • Semi-annual project progress/summary reports must be provided as determined through contract agreement. • Final report must be provided within two months after project completion.
<p>Reporting requirements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work plan and budget • Approval of project design and specifications prior to work • All invoices for consultant and/or contractor work • Approval of in-kind contributions prior to work • Certification that the project was installed according to the approved plans and specifications • Operation and maintenance plans covering the life of the practice

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final project report (template provided)
Acceptable expenses	Grant funds may be used for environmental or engineering consulting fees, materials, supplies, labor, and inspection fees
Project agreement	Each project recipient must formally enter into a project agreement with the county. The agreement will address the conditions of the award, including implementation of the project and a final report. The agreement is a legal, binding document. Project recipients are expected to keep accurate financial records of the project, including documentation of all expenses. Grantee is also expected to draft and implement an operations and maintenance agreement covering the design lifetime of any projects installed.
Payments	Final payment will be provided after the final report is approved by the county project manager. Interim payments can be made on a project-by-project basis. Interim payments will be based on documentation of expenditures and project stage of completion.