Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund Community Grant Program

Approved by ENRTF Community Grant Program advisory council on 9/10/2026.

Advisory council meeting summary and discussion highlights

July 22, 2026 Inaugural Meeting

Meeting overview

The inaugural meeting of the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund Community Grant Program advisory council began a collaborative process to help shape Minnesota's new Community Grant Program and its first Small Grants funding opportunity.

The meeting brought together advisory council members with experience in community development, Tribal and local government, natural resources, environmental justice, philanthropy, nonprofit leadership, education, agriculture, research and grantmaking. Members participated both in person and through Microsoft Teams.

The meeting was primarily an orientation and discussion session. Members were not asked to approve the program or make final decisions about the first funding opportunity. The purposes were to:

- Build relationships among council members
- Develop a shared understanding of the program's history and legislative direction
- Clarify the roles of the advisory council and the DNR
- Explain the current stage of program development
- Introduce the co-creation process for the first funding opportunity
- Identify questions and issues requiring further discussion

Fourteen of the fifteen appointed advisory council members attended. Six participated in person, eight participated remotely and one member was absent. See detailed meeting attendance at the end of this document.

Beginning the council's work

Interim Chair Eartha Borer-Bell opened the formal meeting by describing it as an opportunity to build relationships and establish a common foundation. She recognized that members brought different perspectives and experience and framed those differences as an important resource for the council's work.

DNR Assistant Commissioner Katie Smith welcomed the council and described its community knowledge and experience as essential to the program's success. She explained that the Community Grant Program grew from recognition that traditional environmental and natural resource funding processes were not consistently reaching community-level needs or organizations that had historically been outside established funding systems.

The council was encouraged to help the DNR develop a grant program that broadens participation while producing meaningful environmental and natural resource benefits across Minnesota.

Members' introductions demonstrated the range of perspectives present. Participants described connections to community organizing, environmental justice, farming, Tribal and local government, nonprofit leadership, conservation, philanthropy, education and statewide and international natural resource organizations. These introductions helped establish that the council's value would come not from a single form of expertise, but from the interaction of community, technical, administrative and lived experience.

Seeking Dakota Tribal enrolled members

A member asked about the statutorily designated seats for Dakota Tribal members that were not yet filled. The DNR has an open, rolling application round seeking to fill these appointments. The application was scheduled to be open until filled.

Why a separate Community Grant Program was created

DNR staff reviewed the history of the program and explained that advocates and community organizations had identified a need for a more accessible pathway into Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund funding.

A member asked why the State had created a separate program rather than modifying an existing Trust Fund process. This prompted discussion of the structural constraints of the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. Participants discussed how long timelines, reimbursement-based payments, match requirements, organizational capacity, and complex application structures can limit participation by small organizations and communities with fewer financial and administrative resources.

A member involved in the early advocacy for the program explained that the Community Grant Program was envisioned as a different entry point into environmental funding. It could operate alongside existing programs while reducing barriers and helping organizations build the capacity to pursue larger or more complex opportunities over time.

The discussion reinforced that the Community Grant Program is intended to fill a distinct need rather than replace existing environmental funding programs.

Program purpose and eligible work

DNR staff reviewed the program's statutory purpose and the five broad categories of eligible activities:

- Helping adversely impacted communities respond to environmental degradation and related health concerns
- Education and awareness related to stewardship of natural resources

- Preserving or enhancing natural resources
- Maintenance and improvement of existing state, regional or local trails
- Aquatic invasive species management

Members asked questions about how these categories would be interpreted in practice.

One discussion focused on the relationship between environmental degradation and related health concerns. Members and staff recognized that the intersection of environmental health and public health may involve difficult eligibility questions. A project would still need to meet the constitutional purpose of protecting, conserving, preserving or enhancing Minnesota's natural resources. The discussion identified this intersection as an area where clear RFP language, examples and future council input will be important.

Members also asked how "regional" trail significance would be defined and whether the higher statutory funding limit applied only to trail projects. Staff explained that existing DNR practice would help inform trail definitions and that trail maintenance and improvement projects have a separate statutory cap. Other eligible project categories are subject to the general project cap established in statute.

The questions demonstrated that listing eligible activities will not, by itself, give prospective applicants enough information. Applicants will need plain-language explanations, practical examples and clear distinctions between eligible and ineligible work.

Funding structure and the first Small Grants round

DNR staff explained that the first funding opportunity is expected to focus on grants of up to approximately $50,000. The name "Small Grants" remains a working title, and the advisory council will have an opportunity to provide recommendations on final naming and framing.

Members clarified that their immediate work would focus on the first, smaller funding round rather than attempting to design every future Community Grant Program opportunity at the same time. A member observed that narrowing the immediate assignment to the first funding round made the council's task more manageable.

The council also discussed the relationship between competitive grantmaking and co-design. One member asked whether the ultimate goal had to be a traditional RFP or whether other approaches could be used to move community funding toward environmental outcomes.

DNR staff clarified that state grants must be awarded through a competitive process consistent with applicable statutes and Office of Grants Management policy. At the same time, the design of the competitive process can vary. A process may begin with a shorter concept, reduce the burden placed on applicants before selection and allow additional project development after an applicant has advanced through a competitive stage.

Members recognized value in an approach that preserves fairness and competition while creating space to help promising community-led projects become ready for implementation.

The discussion did not establish a final application model. It identified an important design principle for future work:

The program should reduce unnecessary barriers without weakening transparency, fairness, or responsible stewardship of public funds.

Looking beyond the application form

A central theme of the meeting was that the applicant experience begins before an organization opens an application and continues after a grant is awarded.

Members and staff discussed the full applicant and grantee journey, including:

- Learning that the opportunity exists
- Understanding whether an organization and project are eligible
- Deciding whether to apply
- Preparing a project, work plan and budget
- Receiving language access or technical assistance
- Completing the application
- Understanding how applications will be evaluated
- Preparing for grant contracting and project implementation
- Meeting reporting and financial requirements
- Receiving support when plans or conditions change

Members emphasized that organizations with valuable community knowledge may not have staff dedicated to grant writing, financial management, evaluation or state reporting. A process that appears straightforward to an experienced grantee may still be inaccessible to a smaller or first-time applicant.

The discussion therefore treated plain language, applicant guidance, technical assistance and administrative burden as core program design issues rather than supplementary services.

Technical assistance and grantee capacity

A member asked whether applicants would be expected to arrive with established knowledge of performance measurement and outcome reporting.

This question led to a broader discussion of the DNR's proposed approach to technical assistance. Staff explained that the program should not assume every applicant already knows how to define outcomes, establish measures, document progress or meet state grant-management expectations.

Instead, the program may need to help selected organizations strengthen those skills through project development, onboarding, training and ongoing support.

The discussion distinguished between expecting an applicant to present a credible and feasible project and expecting a small organization to possess every administrative and evaluation skill before receiving assistance.

Participants discussed the potential for technical assistance to help grantees:

- Refine project outcomes

- Identify information they can realistically collect
- Understand financial and reporting requirements
- Track implementation progress
- Respond when a project does not proceed as expected
- Build organizational capacity that remains after the grant ends

Staff also described a longer-term vision in which grantees could learn from one another and advisory council members could potentially contribute as mentors or connectors as the program matures.

No final technical assistance model was adopted. The discussion established that grantee support should be intentionally designed into the funding process and calibrated to actual organizational needs.

Advisory council role and decision-making

DNR staff explained that the Legislature created the program, the DNR is responsible for administering it, and the advisory council provides recommendations to the DNR commissioner and the Legislature.

Members asked how recommendations would move from council discussion into program decisions. Staff described an iterative process in which council input would be considered alongside:

- Statutory and constitutional requirements
- Statewide grant policies
- Fiscal and legal requirements
- Technical expertise
- Operational capacity
- Systems and timelines
- Community and applicant needs

A member asked whether the council would simply provide multiple viewpoints or whether it should sometimes seek consensus before making recommendations. Participants recognized that this was an important governance question for the council itself. Different viewpoints may be useful when an issue remains unresolved, while some recommendations may be stronger when the council has developed a clear collective position.

No decision-making method was adopted at the meeting. The issue was identified for future discussion as the council develops its operating practices.

Collaborative and public deliberation

The meeting introduced proposed working agreements intended to support respectful participation and ensure that both in-person and remote members could contribute. These included speaking one at a time, listening to understand, stepping forward or making room for others, recognizing both intent and impact, and allowing members the right to pass.

The interim chair periodically paused the in-room discussion to invite questions and comments from members participating online. This was particularly important because the meeting moved quickly and included substantial program information.

Members were reminded that advisory council deliberations occur through open public meetings. Meeting materials, recommendations and other council records must be appropriately documented. These requirements are intended to support transparency, accountability and public trust.

Participants also discussed a possible future co-chair or council leadership role. The proposed role could help with meeting preparation, facilitation, member participation and continuity between meetings. Members were invited to consider whether they might be interested.

No leadership or governance decision was made. council organization will return for discussion at a future meeting.

Co-creation process

The DNR introduced co-creation as a structured, iterative process for combining different types of knowledge rather than asking the council to react to a nearly finished product.

The process presented at the meeting includes:

1. Individual member reflection
2. Completion of the co-creation survey
3. Staff synthesis and technical review
4. Development of a draft funding opportunity
5. Advisory council review and discussion
6. Revision and refinement
7. Public release and implementation
8. Continued learning to improve future funding rounds

Members were told that not every recommendation could automatically be incorporated. Some recommendations may conflict with statutory requirements, statewide policy, technical feasibility, available resources, timing or other recommendations. Staff will need to evaluate the input, explain significant decisions and return unresolved issues to the council where further discussion would be useful.

The council recognized that meaningful co-creation requires more than one meeting. Some members may form ideas during group discussion, while others may provide more detailed input after having time to reflect.

The post-meeting survey was therefore established as the primary next step for gathering detailed recommendations on the first funding round.

Issues identified for continued work

The meeting did not produce final recommendations, but it identified several subjects that require additional analysis or council discussion:

- The final name and framing of the first funding opportunity
- The appropriate application length and structure
- Applicant and project eligibility guidance
- Interpretation of statutory activity areas
- The relationship between environmental and health-related projects
- Funding limits and cost guidance
- Evaluation criteria and reviewer practices
- Reporting expectations proportionate to a small grant
- Technical assistance before and after award
- Treatment of community knowledge and organizational experience
- Approaches to council consensus and recommendations
- Conflict-of-interest procedures
- council leadership and meeting facilitation
- The format and timing of future meetings

These issues will not all require decisions before the first RFP is released. Staff and the council will need to distinguish matters that are necessary for the inaugural round from topics that can be refined through later funding cycles.

Meeting scheduling and participation

Members discussed the timing and format of the next meeting. One member recommended considering whether members preferred to participate in person or remotely before selecting a location or format.

Another member raised the importance of avoiding scheduling conflicts with religious observances. This prompted recognition that meeting accessibility includes more than technology and physical location. Scheduling practices can also affect who is able to participate.

The possibility of supporting in-person participation from more than one location while retaining a hybrid option was also discussed.

No meeting date was selected during the session. Staff will gather availability and prepare options.

Next steps

Following the meeting, advisory council members received the Small Grants RFP Co-Creation Survey. The survey is advisory and is not a vote. It asks members to provide recommendations concerning:

- Funding-round principles and indicators of success
- Applicant circumstances and barriers
- Application design and applicant resources
- Funding and application limits
- Common applicant and project eligibility
- The five statutory activity areas
- Application review and evaluation

- Reporting and grant administration
- Technical assistance and grantee support
- Topics requiring additional council discussion

The survey will remain open through August 3, 2026.

DNR staff will review and synthesize the responses, identify common themes and differing perspectives, determine which issues need further technical, legal, fiscal, policy, or operational analysis and use the findings to prepare the first draft of the Small Grants RFP.

The next advisory council meeting is expected to focus primarily on the draft RFP and unresolved design questions. Governance topics, including council leadership, facilitation and conflict-of-interest procedures, may also return for discussion.

Closing perspective

The inaugural meeting established a shared understanding that the Community Grant Program must do more than distribute funds. It must create a clear and credible pathway through which organizations and communities that have not historically participated in Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund funding can propose, implement and learn from meaningful environmental projects.

Members did not attempt to resolve all of the program's design questions in one meeting. Instead, they began identifying the practical tensions that will shape the program:

- Access and accountability
- Simplicity and sufficient information
- Community knowledge and technical requirements
- Flexibility and consistent treatment
- Capacity building and administrative feasibility
- Immediate launch needs and long-term program development

The discussion demonstrated that the advisory council's contribution will come from bringing these different considerations into public deliberation and helping the DNR develop a funding opportunity that is understandable, practical, transparent and responsive to Minnesota communities.

Meeting attendance

Advisory council members present: Karl Anderson, Eartha Borer-Bell, Ameliana Duran, Alyssa Fabia, Jeff Forester, Robert Garcia-Gradoville Jr., Don Hickman, Connor Horton, Jai Kim, Gladys Mejia, J. DeVon Nolen, Roopali Phadke, Robert Tibbetts, Raining White

Members absent: Donna Dalton

DNR staff present: Gwendolyn Tweed, Katherine Sherman-Hoehn, Assistant Commissioner Katie Smith, Mary Robison, Wendy Thompson, Sarah Sinderbrand, Jessica Xiong