

Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund Community Grant Program

September 10, 2026 advisory council pre-meeting brief

Prepared September 8, 2026

Working meeting material

This brief is prepared for public advisory council discussion. The Community Grants RFP remains under active DNR review and is not final.

Purpose of this brief

This brief is intended to help advisory council members prepare for the September 10 meeting. It closes the loop on the council's written Request for Proposals (RFP) review, summarizes the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' current direction after additional internal grants review, identifies the issues where advisory council discussion can still add value, and provides context on applicant resources, outreach, future funding rounds, and what the DNR wants to learn from the first round.

No additional full written RFP review is requested before September 10. Members who cannot attend are encouraged to send individual comments they want the DNR to consider to enrtf.communitygrants.dnr@state.mn.us. Members who will attend may also send a point they want captured if they are concerned it may not arise during the meeting.

About the materials being shared

The advisory council conducts its work in a public setting. The DNR is therefore intentionally limiting this pre-meeting package to information suitable for public discussion while the RFP remains under active internal review. This brief summarizes current program direction rather than reproducing the full working RFP, internal Agency-Wide Grants deliberations, draft line edits or other internal review material.

The DNR is continuing to confirm the appropriate treatment and timing of additional working materials under applicable open meeting, data practices, records and DNR requirements. Additional RFP materials will be released through the appropriate public process when they are ready.

Section 1. What we heard through the written RFP review

Thirteen advisory council members provided written review across 23 source documents. The comments do not show broad rejection of the two-stage strategy. The strongest recurring concerns were about whether the process will be understandable, proportionate, transparent and workable for applicants with different levels of grant experience and organizational capacity.

The counts below show how often an issue appeared in individual written reviews. They are a measure of salience, not a vote or statement of council consensus.

Recurring theme	Written-review signal
Applicant burden, organizational capacity and cash flow	Raised by 12 of 13 reviewers
Applicant eligibility and statutory pathways	Raised by 12 of 13 reviewers
Priority framework and program purpose	Raised by 11 of 13 reviewers
Timeline, seasonality, permitting, and project period	Raised by 11 of 13 reviewers
RFP navigation, definitions and terminology	Raised by 11 of 13 reviewers
Scoring, evaluation, advancement and technical qualification	Raised by 10 of 13 reviewers
Stage 1 support, clarification, correction and feedback	Raised by 8 of 13 reviewers

Section 2. How the DNR is responding

Several important elements were already present in the August 20 review draft, including a short Stage 1 Concept Note, a fuller technical application only for applicants invited to Stage 2, applicant support and separate statutory activity guidance. The DNR is retaining that direction and making the competition rules, support model, and applicant expectations clearer.

Stage 1: keep the entry point short and make the competition clearer

Existing design. Stage 1 remains a short Concept Note rather than a full technical application. The Concept Note is being designed for completion in less than two hours by an applicant who understands the proposed project.

Current DNR direction. Eligible Concept Notes would be assessed on a 10-point structure: 3 points for connection to a community adversely affected by pollution or environmental degradation; 1 point for expanding access to Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) funding; 3 points for the identified need and expected community/public benefit; and 3 points for potential to develop into a workable Stage 2 project.

- No published passing percentage and no fixed score that automatically guarantees a Stage 2 invitation.
- The Stage 1 numeric score would not carry into the Stage 2 technical score.
- For the location priority, the DNR intends to use the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) Environmental Justice map and adapt the established MPCA location-determination approach. The RFP will link directly to the map.
- Where the DNR can verify priority information through public or State records, it should not shift that verification burden to applicants.
- The DNR's current direction is to preserve the program's access approach for federally recognized Tribal Nations, so previous ENRTF funding does not reduce that access priority, subject to final DNR confirmation before publication.

Stage 2: focus the full application on technical and implementation quality

The August review draft contained seven overlapping technical criteria and a 70-point technical qualification threshold. The DNR is proposing a simpler four-criterion model with no predetermined passing percentage:

Stage 2 criterion	Weight	Core question
Project Design and Technical Approach	35%	Is the proposed approach technically appropriate for the identified need and project type?
Work Plan, Feasibility, and Implementation Readiness	30%	Can the project reasonably be carried out as proposed?
Results and Performance	20%	Are the expected results clear, realistic, measurable, and connected to the work?
Budget and Value	15%	Are costs reasonable, necessary, proportionate, and aligned with the project?

Stage 1 determines which concepts should receive the opportunity for further development. Stage 2 determines whether the developed project is technically sound, feasible, measurable, and a responsible use of public funds.

Final selection: technical ranking followed by a statutory portfolio check

The DNR is moving away from the August draft's final A/B/C priority ordering. Under the current direction, final Stage 2 technical scores would establish the initial competitive funding order. The DNR would then review the proposed award slate for applicable statutory requirements and funding feasibility. Stage 1 priority points would not be added to the Stage 2 score or used to create a second final ranking.

If a portfolio adjustment is necessary to meet an applicable published requirement, the reason for that adjustment would be documented. A technical score would not guarantee funding.

Applicant burden and support: ask for information when it is needed

The DNR is using a staged documentation and support model so applicants are not asked to produce a preaward package before it is needed.

Point in the process	Applicant information and support
Stage 1	Minimum concept information needed to understand eligibility, project idea, location, expected benefit, funding request, timing and basic developability. No full preaward package.
Stage 2	Information needed for the four technical criteria and applicable project requirements, supported by orientation, written guidance, group support, direct Community Grants assistance and relevant technical resources.
Finalists/preaward	Applicable State and statutory due diligence, financial or internal-control review and risk-management requirements.

Stage 1 support will be primarily broad and scalable. Stage 2 will provide a higher level of project development and technical assistance for the smaller invited cohort. Applicants remain responsible for their projects and applications. The detailed Stage 2 delivery model can be finalized before Stage 2 begins as the DNR learns more about applicant volume, project mix, grant management system functionality, and available staff and technical capacity.

Fiscal agents: permitted as an access mechanism

Fiscal agents will be allowed in this funding round. The community organization remains the substantive project lead. A fiscal agent is expected to provide real financial and administrative capacity, not simply receive and pass through funds. The DNR plans to develop clearer Stage 2 guidance on shared responsibilities, financial administration, reporting, communication and grant management expectations. A complete fiscal agent agreement would not be required at Stage 1.

Project timeframe: separate substantive implementation from the full grant agreement period

The DNR is distinguishing the project implementation period from the full grant agreement period. Applicants should design projects around approximately 12 months of substantive implementation. The grant agreement may provide additional administrative time for appropriate startup and closeout so routine grant-administration steps do not unnecessarily consume project implementation time.

The additional administrative window would not expand the expected project scope, award amount or substantive implementation effort. Project schedules may reflect seasonality, permitting, procurement, site

access, partner coordination and other reasonable dependencies. The exact agreement and eligible-cost mechanics remain subject to final grants management confirmation.

Grant administration: fixed controls, proportionate implementation

Required State and Community Grant Program controls will still apply. Where State policy allows flexibility, the DNR intends to administer each grant proportionately based on project scope, risk, activities and grantee capacity. The first funding round will help identify which administrative requirements create the most burden and where clearer guidance or support is needed.

Section 3: Other feedback being carried forward

The written review raised additional issues that do not require separate advisory council decisions on September 10. The DNR is carrying this feedback into the final RFP, applicant resources, internal implementation, required specialist review, or future-round learning, depending on where each issue is best resolved.

Other feedback area	How the DNR is carrying it forward
RFP clarity and terminology	Simplify navigation, define decision terms, clarify public/community benefit and reduce vague evaluation language
Activity-specific eligibility and technical questions	Refine the annexes and develop applicant examples for issues such as scientific research, monitoring, trails, aquatic invasive species, permits and statutory-pathway selection
Financial and administrative accessibility	Clarify fiscal agent roles, allowable administrative costs, payment and cash-flow expectations, monitoring and reporting while maintaining required State controls
Language, accessibility and applicant resources	Provide translated and accessible core resources and explain how applicants can access assistance during the funding round
Implementation details that depend on the first applicant cohort	Finalize some Stage 2 support, technical-review and grant-management-system procedures after the DNR understands applicant volume, project mix and available capacity. These implementation details will not change the published competitive rules.

Not every written comment results in a change to the RFP itself. Some issues are better addressed through applicant guidance, technical resources, internal procedures, required DNR review or learning applied to future funding rounds.

Section 4: Applicant resources being built alongside the RFP

The formal RFP establishes the controlling requirements, but applicants will not be expected to navigate the opportunity through the RFP alone. The DNR is building a layered resource system so applicants can first determine whether the opportunity fits, then understand the five eligible activity areas, prepare Stage 1 and access more detailed help only when it is needed.

Resource	Purpose / current direction
Applicant Pathway	Shows the overall process from considering the opportunity through application, review, award and grant administration
Five Eligible Activity Areas	Explains the five statutory activity areas in a more accessible format and provides a consistent visual system
Should I Apply?	Helps organizations determine whether the funding opportunity appears to fit before investing substantial time
Funding Opportunity Overview	Provides a concise plain language introduction to the first funding opportunity
Stage 1 guidance and checklist	Will translate final RFP requirements into a practical Concept Note preparation aid once requirements are locked
FAQs, webinars, office hours and submission guidance	Provide scalable support during the open application period
Stage 2 applicant and technical assistance resources	Will support invited applicants with project design, work plans, budgets, results, technical requirements and fiscal agent responsibilities.

The first wave of applicant resources is being finalized in English, with Spanish, Hmong, and Somali versions prepared for the same core products. Accessibility review remains part of the production process. The DNR expects to determine on September 9 which resource examples are mature and appropriate to preview publicly at the September 10 meeting.

Section 5. Statewide outreach and launch preparation

Applicant resources are only useful if potential applicants know the program exists and encounter the information through channels they trust. The DNR is therefore developing a statewide outreach strategy alongside the RFP and applicant resource work.

Current outreach planning includes:

- Stakeholder and influence mapping across regions, communities, sectors, and networks
- Trusted messengers and partner organizations that can extend the DNR's reach
- Audience-specific communications for organizations that may be new to ENRTF or State grants
- Language access, accessibility, website, social, and other digital channels
- Continued learning about geographic, cultural, technology, information and relationship barriers that may affect participation

The September 10 agenda includes a dedicated outreach discussion. The DNR is not asking the advisory council to approve a finished outreach strategy. Council input is most useful for identifying audiences or places the DNR may be missing, trusted networks and messengers, barriers to participation, and outreach approaches that should be tested or strengthened.

Section 6. What the DNR wants to learn from the first funding round

This is the first implementation round of a new statewide grant program. The DNR has established the competitive rules before launch, but some effects of the design can only be understood once applicants actually use it. The goal is to keep the rules stable during the active competition, collect evidence about how the program works, and use that evidence to improve future rounds.

Learning horizon	Examples of questions
Early learning that may inform the January 2027 RFP	Who applies and from where? Which applicant types participate? Does the Concept Note remain low burden? What questions cause confusion? Which resources and support are used? Where does the grant management system create barriers? How does Stage 1 scoring work in practice? What fiscal agent or project-type issues emerge?
Later learning for subsequent rounds	How well does Stage 2 technical assistance work? Are the Stage 2 criteria effective across project types? Are preaward and cash-flow requirements manageable? Is approximately 12 months of substantive implementation appropriate? What monitoring and implementation barriers emerge? What changes improve grantee success without weakening required controls?

The advisory council has an ongoing role in this learning cycle. The DNR expects to bring implementation evidence, lessons and potential adjustments back to the council as future funding rounds are developed.

Section 7. Tentative funding-cycle outlook

The first funding opportunity is one part of a broader Community Grant Program. Current planning assumptions are shown below so the advisory council can see how the first round fits into the larger program. Future dates and designs remain tentative and may change based on required approvals, available funding, program capacity and what the DNR learns.

Planning horizon	Current direction
Fall 2026: first funding round	Approximately \$2 million; approximately \$20,000–\$75,000 awards; two-stage application; Stage 1 Concept Note deadline currently planned for November 16, 2026; approximately 12 months of substantive project implementation.
January 2027: next funding opportunity, tentative	The DNR is planning a larger future funding opportunity. Design, award ranges, timing and application requirements are still being developed. Early Stage 1 lessons from the first round may be used where feasible.
Later Community Grants rounds	Future rounds can incorporate evidence from Stage 2, preaward, grant implementation, monitoring, grantee experience, advisory council recommendations and stakeholder feedback.

Section 8. Advisory recommendation: name of the first funding round

The co-creation survey asked members which name best communicated the scope and purpose of the inaugural funding opportunity. Ten members responded. The survey was advisory and did not establish the final name. The DNR plans to return the naming question to the advisory council on September 10 for a vote on a recommended name.

Name selected in co-creation survey	Initial selections
Community Impact Grants	3
Another name	2
Small Grants	1
Community Action Grants	1
Inaugural Community Grants Round	1
Community Initiative Grants	1
Community Stewardship Grants	1

The two “Another name” responses proposed:

- Community Environmental Initiative Grants
- Community & Environment Action Grants

The September 10 meeting materials will present the naming options for council recommendation. The final public name will also need to work consistently with future Community Grant Program funding rounds and DNR publication requirements.

Section 9. Questions for advisory council discussion on September 10

The meeting is not intended to reopen the RFP line by line. The DNR is asking members to focus on the following three program-design and learning questions:

1. **Stage 1 access and scoring.** Does the proposed balance reflect the Community Grant Program's access purpose while preserving a real pathway for strong eligible projects across Minnesota? What unintended effects should the DNR monitor during the first funding round?
2. **Stage 2 technical application.** Do the four Stage 2 questions focus the full application on the right information after access and priority have been addressed in Stage 1? What unintended burden or technical blind spot should the DNR watch for?
3. **First-round learning.** As the DNR implements the first funding round, what outcomes or unintended effects should we watch most closely so we can improve the next round?

The meeting will also include two additional council actions:

- An advisory recommendation on the name of the first funding round
- A dedicated statewide outreach discussion focused on audiences, trusted messengers, networks, barriers and opportunities the DNR should consider

Section 10. What is not being reopened on September 10

- The overall two-stage application strategy
- A line-by-line review of the full RFP and annexes
- Requirements fixed by law, statewide grant policy or controlling DNR requirements
- Internal DNR legal, fiscal, grants management, technical, data or systems deliberations
- Detailed grant management system configuration, reviewer work instructions, or the exact Stage 2 support schedule, which will be developed through the appropriate implementation process

Section 11. What happens after September 10

Timing	Next step
September 10	Document advisory council recommendations, caveats, differing perspectives, naming recommendation, outreach input and learning priorities.
September 11	Close remaining grants management and internal confirmation items needed for the RFP

Timing	Next step
September 12–15	Integrate decisions; reconcile the main RFP and annexes; remove internal review material; complete consistency, accessibility and applicant-usability quality assurance
Later September	Move the public-ready RFP through any remaining DNR review and launch-readiness steps, including the applicant submission system and public resource package
November 16, 2026	Current planned Stage 1 Concept Note deadline
January 2027, tentative	Use available early learning from the first round in planning the next funding opportunity where feasible

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