

ENRTF Community Grant Program advisory council roles and boundaries summary

Purpose of this summary

This summary explains the role of the ENRTF Community Grant Program Advisory Council and how the council works with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

The goal is to provide a clear starting point before the council begins reviewing program materials, discussing the first funding opportunity and developing recommendations.

This document does not establish the advisory council's full operating procedures. The DNR will develop additional operating materials with council input after the first meeting.

Why the advisory council exists

The ENRTF Community Grant Program was created to expand the number and diversity of recipients who benefit from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, especially in communities adversely affected by pollution and environmental degradation.

The advisory council helps the DNR design, review and improve the program. Council members bring community, environmental, technical, Tribal, local government, nonprofit, education, outreach, and lived experience perspectives that can help the DNR make the program more accessible, understandable, accountable and useful.

The council's core role

The advisory council provides:

- Advice
- Review
- Feedback
- Recommendations
- Practical perspective
- Community and stakeholder insight
- Program improvement ideas

The council's role is advisory. The council helps the DNR understand what should be considered before the DNR finalizes program materials, policies, outreach, funding opportunities and program improvements.

Areas where the council may provide input

The council may provide input on program topics such as:

- Application forms
- Reporting expectations
- Draft program policies
- Budget considerations
- Applicant and recipient eligibility considerations
- Outreach and communication needs
- Applicant barriers
- Grantee capacity and technical assistance needs
- Plain-language program materials
- Program accessibility and usability
- Eligible project examples
- Outcome and logic model concepts
- Advance payment considerations
- Fiscal agents and partnership models
- Bonding requirements and applicant barriers
- Monitoring and reporting burden
- Program learning and improvement
- Recommendations to the DNR
- Recommendations to the legislature

The council may also help the DNR identify where program materials are unclear, where applicants may need more support, and where grant requirements could unintentionally discourage eligible community-based applicants.

The DNR Community Grant Program's role

The DNR is responsible for administering the Community Grant Program.

The DNR Community Grant staff responsibilities include:

- Developing and releasing funding opportunities
- Administering applications
- Managing review processes
- Ensuring compliance with state grant requirements
- Managing fiscal controls
- Issuing award notifications and executing grant agreements
- Supporting grantees

- Monitoring grant performance
- Managing payments
- Maintaining program records
- Responding to formal recommendations
- Communicating with the public
- Making final administrative and grant management decisions

The DNR will consider council input and recommendations, document how input is addressed, and explain when a recommendation requires additional review.

The DNR Grants Unit's role

The Community Grant Program sits within the DNR's Grants Unit. The Grants Unit provides internal grant management training, consultation and process guidance. This agencywide support focuses on grant policies, application and review processes, risk assessment, agreements, monitoring, reporting, records and alignment with state grant requirements.

In short, the Grants Unit supports the DNR's internal grant management responsibilities, while the advisory council provides public, community and subject-matter perspective to improve the Community Grant Program.

DNR technical team role

DNR's subject matter experts help the Community Grant Program understand technical issues related to the five statutory program activity areas.

Different DNR department inputs may help identify:

- Eligible project examples
- Technical risks
- Common applicant questions
- Reasonable outcomes
- Reporting measures
- Monitoring considerations
- Technical assistance needs
- Implementation concerns
- Useful guidance for applicants and grantees

Technical teams help the DNR design a technically sound and workable grant program. Their role is distinct from the council's role in advising on accessibility, community needs, applicant barriers, outreach, grantee support and program improvement.

What the council does not do

The advisory council does not:

- Administer the grant program
- Supervise DNR staff
- Approve the final funding opportunity
- Approve final application forms or requirements
- Make final eligibility determinations or resolve eligibility disputes
- Score individual applications
- Assign reviewers
- Select grantees
- Make final grant awards
- Approve grant agreements
- Approve payments
- Approve payment holds
- Approve grant amendments
- Manage grantee performance
- Conduct grant monitoring
- Conduct investigations of suspected fraud or misuse of funds
- Speak for the DNR
- Issue final DNR policy
- Use council service to provide a potential applicant, partner, consultant, fiscal agent or project with an unfair competitive advantage
- Direct DNR fiscal, legal, communications, accessibility, data practices, records, or grants management decisions

These boundaries protect the council, the DNR, applicants, grantees and the integrity of the competitive grant process.

Topics requiring additional DNR review or approval

Some program and advisory council matters require additional review or approval by the DNR before they can be finalized. Depending on the topic, this may include review by DNR leadership, legal counsel, grants management, finance, accessibility, records management or other subject matter experts.

Examples include:

- Final funding opportunity (RFP) approval
- Annual program budget and funding allocations
- Administrative policies and grant management procedures
- Final grant award decisions
- Major program or policy changes
- Permanent advisory council governance documents, including the charter and operating procedures

- Advisory council leadership structure and operating practices, once developed
- Other matters requiring formal DNR approval under applicable law, policy or delegated authority

The advisory council may discuss these topics and provide recommendations. The DNR will consider that input alongside statutory requirements, grant management requirements, legal and fiscal review, and other program considerations before making final decisions.

Formal recommendations

The council may make formal recommendations to the DNR. Once the recommendation process is established, each formal recommendation should clearly identify:

- What the council is recommending
- What issue the recommendation is intended to address
- Why the council believes the recommendation is important
- Whether there were different views among members
- Whether the recommendation relates to the RFP, program policy, outreach, grantee support, reporting, budget, eligibility or another topic

The DNR will route formal recommendations through the applicable internal review and response process. Some recommendations may require additional legal, fiscal, accessibility, data, grants management or leadership review before the DNR can respond or act.

If a formal recommendation relates to an organization, fiscal-agent model, partnership model, payment model, outreach role, or other matter that may affect a member's outside interests, the DNR may need to document a disclosure or determine whether participation limits are needed before the member participates further in the matter or before the recommendation is finalized.

Public body responsibilities

The advisory council is a public body. By statute, council meetings must be open to the public. The DNR will support public notice, meeting access, accessibility, agendas, meeting materials and meeting records.

Members should avoid discussing, deliberating, polling or attempting to reach agreement on council business outside a properly noticed meeting. This includes continuous conversations by email, phone, text, shared documents or other channels.

Members may contact DNR staff with individual questions, logistical needs, accessibility requests or requests for information. Advisory Council discussion or deliberation should occur during properly noticed public meetings.

Conflicts of interest

Council members completed disclosure information during the advisory council application process. The DNR will retain those disclosures as each member's baseline appointment disclosure record.

Members should promptly disclose actual, potential, or perceived conflicts that arise during advisory council service. Members should notify the DNR if their employment, board service, consulting relationships, partnerships, fiscal-agent relationships, grant application plans, project-development involvement or other relevant interests change. Members should also disclose when a specific agenda topic may affect an organization, project, partner or financial interest with which they are connected.

Disclosure does not automatically determine whether a member may participate. The DNR will review the circumstances and determine whether documentation, participation limits, recusal, restricted access, or another mitigation measure is appropriate.

The council service disclosure process is separate from any competitive grant review COI process. If a council member later participates in application review, the DNR will require any review-specific COI documentation required for that review cycle.

Data, records and confidentiality

Council work is connected to public records, public meetings and state data practices requirements. Members should understand that advisory council materials, comments, recommendations, and meeting records may be public under applicable law. The DNR will provide direction when information is not public or requires restricted handling.

Members should not send, upload or request sensitive information unless the DNR has confirmed the appropriate process and system.

Examples of information that should not be shared through informal email or the external council SharePoint site include:

- Social Security numbers
- Tax identification numbers
- Bank information
- Signatures
- Applicant financial statements
- Tax returns
- Reviewer notes
- Legal advice
- Security information
- Not-public or private contact information
- Personnel information
- Trade secret or other protected business information
- Application materials not approved for council access

The DNR will provide instructions if council members need access to materials with specific data or records requirements.

Advance payments, fiscal agents, bonding, and grantee access

The council is expected to provide important perspective on access barriers for applicants and grantees.

Topics such as advance payments, fiscal agents, bonding, reimbursement timing, and partnership models may affect whether smaller, emerging, or community-based organizations can successfully apply for and manage grants.

These topics are appropriate for council input and discussion.

The DNR must also evaluate applicable fiscal, legal, grants management, and risk-control requirements before finalizing any payment model, fiscal-agent approach, bonding requirement or related standard.

Former working group and outreach partners

The DNR recognizes the value of the former working group and other partners who helped inform early program development. Now that the statutory advisory council has been appointed, the advisory council is the formal advisory body for the program. The DNR may explore ways for former working group members and other partners to support public outreach, awareness, road shows, and applicant engagement this fall.

Any future outreach role must be clearly distinguished from the advisory council's formal role and structured to maintain fairness, transparency, and the integrity of the competitive grant process.

Internal approval pathways

This includes certain decisions related to:

- Final RFP approval
- Annual program budget
- Funding-round allocation
- Administrative cost standards
- Supplement versus supplant guidance
- Final grant award approval
- Major program model changes
- Larger precedent-setting decisions
- Future charter updates
- Annual council work plan approval
- Permanent chair or facilitation model

The DNR will not treat these pending items as final until they are confirmed. The council may discuss these topics and provide input, but the DNR must follow confirmed authority, fiscal controls, legal requirements and grant management requirements before finalizing program decisions.

Practical role summary

The advisory council helps the DNR consider questions such as:

- Is the program understandable and accessible to the applicants and communities it is intended to reach?
- Are the funding opportunity, application materials, eligibility examples and reporting expectations clear?
- Are there barriers that could prevent eligible organizations from applying for or successfully managing a grant?
- Are the proposed grant models, technical assistance, outreach and grantee support approaches practical?
- Are the expected outcomes and reporting requirements realistic for different types and sizes of projects?
- Are there risks, gaps, or unintended effects that the DNR should consider before finalizing program materials or policies?
- What can the DNR learn from applicants, grantees and completed funding rounds to improve future rounds?

The DNR uses advisory council input to improve the program, support transparent and well-documented decisions, and strengthen the program over time.

What members should remember

- The advisory council advises, reviews and makes recommendations.
- The DNR administers the program, makes final agency decisions, documents its actions and implements the program.
- Advisory council input is important to program design and improvement, especially because the program is intended to reach applicants and communities that may not have historically received ENRTF funding.
- The first meeting is a starting point. Additional operating procedures, recommendation tools, and governance materials will be developed with advisory council input as members become more familiar with the program.