

ENRTF Community Grant Program advisory council technical design and council input overview

Purpose of this overview

This overview explains the technical design and co-design process the DNR is using to develop the first ENRTF Community Grant Program funding opportunity.

The purpose is to help advisory council members understand:

- What DNR is working on now
- Why technical design is needed
- Who DNR is consulting
- How council input will be gathered
- How advisory council input will help shape the first draft and supporting resources

The council is not being asked to approve a finished product at the first meeting. Instead, the meeting will introduce the design process and prepare members to provide input before the first draft is written.

What technical design means

For the Community Grant Program, technical design means translating the law and program purpose into practical grant materials that applicants, reviewers, grantees and DNR staff can understand and use.

This includes developing:

- Practical eligibility criteria
- Project categories
- Eligible project examples
- Application guidance
- Review considerations
- Performance measures
- Reporting expectations
- Technical assistance resources
- Closeout expectations
- Logic models or similar planning tools
- Outcome concepts that are understandable and realistic

The immediate focus is the first Small Grants funding opportunity. It is intended to support clear, feasible projects of less than \$50,000 that can be completed within about one year.

The long-term goal is to build a technical framework that can support all five statutory eligible uses.

Why this process is needed

The Community Grant Program must be accessible to applicants while also supporting fair review, measurable results and responsible grant administration across the five different statutory eligible uses.

The DNR is working to design a funding opportunity that:

- Uses plain language
- Is understandable to smaller or first-time applicants
- Supports the statutory purpose of expanding the number and diversity of ENRTF recipients
- Keeps small grants simple and achievable
- Scales expectations based on grant size and project complexity
- Avoids unnecessary reporting burden
- Supports meaningful environmental, natural-resource and community benefits
- Gives reviewers enough information to evaluate applications fairly
- Gives grantees clear expectations
- Creates a record of input, decisions and rationale

This design work must occur before the DNR finalizes the RFP, application questions, evaluation criteria, reviewer guidance, reporting expectations and technical assistance materials.

Who the Community Grant Program is consulting

Performance management support

Input from the DNR's Performance Management Unit will help with program design elements such as:

- Outputs and outcomes
- Logic models or similar planning tools
- Practical performance measures
- Reporting expectations
- Scalable expectations for small grants and larger future grants

The program will use plain language to explain how proposed activities are expected to lead to useful results.

DNR and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency technical subject matter experts

Input from DNR and MPCA technical experts will help determine:

- What types of projects clearly fit eligible uses
- What types of projects may need caution or additional review

- What types of projects may not be appropriate for small grants
- What applicants need to know before applying
- What permits, approvals or partner commitments could affect project timelines
- What would show that a project was completed successfully
- What applicants can reasonably measure within about one year
- What technical assistance would help applicants submit stronger and more realistic proposals

DNR Tribal Relations Office

Community Grant Program staff will consult the agency's internal Tribal Relations Office separately because that consultation has a different purpose than the technical subject matter expert meetings.

The purpose is to seek guidance on process and design considerations, including:

- Tribal engagement considerations
- Government-to-government awareness
- Tribal sovereignty considerations
- Cultural resource and relationship considerations
- Potential barriers for Tribal Nations, Tribal organizations or projects involving Tribal partners
- Appropriate ways to discuss community benefit and project success
- Ways to avoid burdensome, extractive or inappropriate data requests

The DNR is not asking Tribal Relations staff to speak for Tribal Nations. The purpose is to receive guidance on process, relationships and potential design issues that should be considered as RFP and guidance materials are developed.

Advisory council members

The advisory council brings public, community, technical and practical perspective to the design process.

Council input will help the DNR understand whether the program is accessible, clear, realistic and aligned with the statutory purpose.

How technical input will be gathered

The DNR will use meetings and structured follow-up tools so participants have both shared context and time for individual reflection.

For MPCA and DNR staff technical consultations, the Community Grant Program will use a Microsoft Forms survey after meetings to collect detailed input in a consistent format. The meetings will provide context, and the survey will allow participants to think through project types, risks, measures and guidance needs.

The DNR Tribal Relations Office consultation will include an initial meeting, then Tribal Relations staff will advise on next steps for gathering input. Options may include a meeting summary for review, a short follow-up questionnaire, additional conversations or another approach recommended by Tribal Relations staff.

For the advisory council, the DNR will use a co-design survey after the first meeting to gather member input before the first draft RFP package and supporting resources are written.

How advisory council input will fit

After the first meeting, the DNR expects to send council members a co-design survey. The survey should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete, with responses requested **by July 31, 2026**.

Everyone will answer a common set of questions. The survey will then use branching, allowing each member to select one or two of the five statutory eligible uses where they believe they can provide the most useful input. The survey will cover topics such as:

- Applicant eligibility and access barriers
- Application clarity and burden
- Evaluation criteria and reviewer guidance
- Grantee support and technical assistance needs
- Advance payment, fiscal-agent and partnership considerations
- Bonding, insurance and other implementation barriers
- Outreach channels and language access
- Reporting burden and realistic outcomes
- Plain-language RFP and applicant guidance
- Eligible project examples within selected statutory activity areas
- Resources, organizations or examples the DNR should consider
- What members need in order to review the first draft effectively

The survey is intended to gather individual recommendations. It is not a vote and will not be treated as advisory council consensus. It is also not intended for members to advocate for a specific applicant, project, consultant, fiscal agent or partner.

If a member's employer, organization, partner, client or project may be affected by a survey topic, the member should disclose that relationship to the DNR and avoid including sensitive or applicant-specific information in the survey.

How input will be used

Community Grant Program staff and DNR Performance Management staff will synthesize the advisory council survey results with technical input from MPCA, DNR Tribal Relations Office, DNR technical staff and other program partners. That synthesis will inform the first draft RFP package and supporting resources.

The synthesis may identify:

- Common themes
- Areas of agreement
- Differing perspectives
- Open questions
- Unmet needs

- Technical risks
- Recommended eligibility criteria
- Recommended measures
- Technical assistance needs
- Items requiring DNR Grants Unit, legal, leadership or additional advisory council review

Not all input will automatically be incorporated. The DNR will document what was heard, what changed, what remains under review and what could not be incorporated, with an explanation when appropriate.

What will come back to the council

Before the next meeting, the DNR expects to provide the advisory council with:

- A summary of what was heard through the co-design and technical design process
- Areas of agreement and differing perspectives
- Open questions and matters requiring further review
- The first draft Small Grants RFP package and supporting resources
- An explanation of how draft concepts were translated into RFP language, application questions, evaluation criteria, reporting expectations and technical assistance resources
- Topics for advisory council discussion and recommendations at the next public meeting

The advisory council will review the draft together at a future public meeting and discuss any remaining issues before the DNR finalizes the inaugural Small Grants RFP.

Records and audit trail

The DNR will maintain records of the technical design and co-design process so future staff, the DNR Grants Unit, leadership, auditors and the advisory council can understand how recommendations were developed and addressed.

Records may include:

- Meeting dates and participants
- Meeting agendas
- Meeting summaries
- Survey responses
- Summary of themes
- Decision log
- Comment tracking table
- Draft and final versions of technical design materials

The DNR will use SharePoint to maintain final working records. Microsoft Teams may be used for collaboration, but final records will be saved in the appropriate SharePoint location.

What members should take away

- The DNR is using technical design and advisory council co-design to make the first funding opportunity clearer, more practical and more defensible.
- The council will not be asked to approve a finished product at the first meeting.
- Council input will be gathered after the first meeting through a co-design survey and later review of the first draft RFP package.
- Individual survey responses will inform the draft but will not be treated as advisory council consensus.
- The goal is to prepare a funding opportunity that is accessible to intended applicants and strong enough to support accountability, useful outcomes and responsible grant administration.