

Greenspace Equity Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
April 24, 2025, 2:00 pm

The fourth meeting of the Greenspace Equity Advisory Board (GEAB) was held via Google Meet on Thursday, April 24, 2025. Carolyn Muller, the Director of Parks, Recreation and Culture for the city of Gaithersburg and Chair of the Greenspace Equity Advisory Board, called the meeting to order at 2:03 pm.

Attendees were advised that the meeting would be recorded and was open to the public. Public viewers advised their comments would be received if anybody wished to speak. Those joining on the phone would be given a chance to speak as well. Board Members invited to enter questions in the chat until the floor was open for discussion.

Greenspace Equity Advisory Board Members:

Present:

Robert Branham, Calvert County (County Park and Recreation)
Carolyn Muller, City of Gaithersburg (Municipal Park and Recreation)
Katie Lautar, Baltimore Greenspace (Land Trust)
Suzanne Ludlow (Resident)
Yuri Borovsky (Resident)
Mxali Davidson Roberts (Resident) - Late
Savannah Winston (Resident)

Absent:

Keith Colston (Maryland Environmental Trust)
Mandela Echefu (Resident)
Senator Karen Lewis Young (Senate)
Delegate Jackie Addison (House of Delegates)

Staff:

Hilary Bell, DNR, LAP Director
Carrie Lhotsky, DNR, LAP Associate Director of Grants, Easements, and Stewardship
Margaret Lashar, DNR, LAP Local Grants Supervisor
Stephanie Benavides, DNR, LAP Greenspace Equity Program Administrator
Kate Mayberry, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator
Michael McQuarrie, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator

The meeting commenced with discussion of meeting minutes from 12/20/2024. Suzanne mentioned there were some typos however, none were significant enough to change the content. Therefore, Suzanne moved to approve the minutes and Savannah seconded the motion. Minutes were approved unanimously.

Stephanie presented and gave a summary of the projects approved for 2025. There are 22 projects selected out of 40 applicants. The projects are in 10 underserved communities and 12 overburdened AND underserved communities. They are currently going through the State

Clearinghouse, and the goal is to have them presented to the Board of Public Works by June. The projects include 8 trails, 4 community woodlands, five gathering open spaces, 1 community garden, 2 urban farms, 5 parks, and 1 green network. Of note, 1 of the projects is an acquisition.

The application was also reviewed given there were suggested changes. At the previous meeting there was a discussion of itemization of costs and a 1-page summary of the project. A budget sheet was added and moved to Section B to cover all costs for an acquisition and/or stewardship project. The budget sheet is broken into 4 sections:

1. Acquisition Costs
2. Development Costs
3. Administrative Costs
4. Total

The budget sheet also includes a match type section and narrative section to further explain costs. Section C of the application includes project detail questions which are going to be pared down even further.

Before discussing the changes for FY26 Stephanie discussed her plan of action moving forward. Once projects are approved, she will meet with each applicant to discuss reimbursement expectations, and she will conduct site visits. Continuous work with prospective applicants will be done to ensure they have the most up-to-date information.

Questions were taken from the Board before proceeding to discussion about FY26. Katie asked for insight into how the staff chose which sites were rejected. Stephanie stated that the biggest barrier was lack of control of the spaces where the projects would be developed. The second was the lack of community involvement, while there were projects that seemed viable the applicants did not engage the community, and the purpose of this grant is to serve the overburdened and underserved communities. All the applicants who were not selected were given the opportunity to meet with Stephanie to discuss their application.

Margaret also stated that the staff received 40 applications at a total request of over \$11 million whereas the budget was \$5 million. Therefore, not everyone who qualifies would receive funding based on sheer numbers. There were also various applicants who were using Baltimore City's Adopt A Lot program. However, when Margaret reached out to the City to discuss the parameters of the program and whether they can accommodate the 15-year Greenspace Equity Program requirement they were reluctant. The Adopt A Lot program's goal is to dispose of and sell the properties so they don't want organizations to invest a lot of money in the lot, which is inconsistent with the goals of the Greenspace Equity grant.

Katie stated she wanted to know more about the review process saying it was great to read all 40 applications and one team member submitted rubrics. However, next round perhaps each member could be assigned a few to review in depth.

Margaret shared that while all applications were shared this year given it was the program's first year perhaps parsing the applications out next time may be helpful.

Suzanne expressed that she also came up with a spreadsheet to do her evaluations using the rubric and she tried to share it with others. However, she felt that the Administrators did not care about how they rated them. Her understanding from the previous meeting was that the Administrators had already done the work of scoring them and were more interested if the Board had generic takeaways and questions about the project.

Katie expressed that while some may have felt they were supposed to use the rubric, she doesn't think everybody felt that way because not everybody submitted one.

Margaret stated that we can be clearer. The rubric was shared just to let the Board know we were using it because we are supposed to share that with the Advisory Board. The legislation also stated that the Board should have an opportunity to review the applications and then provide feedback.

Hilary added that DNR as the Administrator of the program does care about the Board's review and feedback, and the feedback was considered as the projects were being selected. Given it is the first year, some people made comments while others did not. A discussion will be held with the Chair to better collect the feedback for the next round. Most importantly, Hilary did not want anybody on the Board to think the Administrators did not care about the Board's feedback. Hilary clarified that we could go over how we want the review process to go for the next time. Given it was the first time the process needed to be expedited going into the legislative session to show the need for funds.

Yuri expressed he was also unclear with how their feedback was being incorporated but it was clear that we welcomed their questions. He suggested including a 1 paragraph explanation behind the reasoning for each selected project to see the logic behind the selection from the perspective of the Administrators. Then as a second step there could be some discussion or some kind of feedback in case the Board doesn't agree or does agree with a project.

Margaret stated the Administrators would take that into consideration for the next round.

Stephanie echoed the statement and reiterated that the Administrators do care about the Board's feedback and clarified that the finer details of some selected projects consisted of the Board's comments from the previous meeting, particularly the issue of storm water and drainage and parking lot costs outweighing investments into the actual greenspace. While it was recognized that those items can be costly, they should not outweigh the green, enhancing the public health and livability, and serving the overburdened and underserved community.

Margaret asked if there were any questions about the updated application.

Katie replied that while she did not go into detail looking at them, she did scan them and remained concerned about the lack of funding that folks have for the appraisal process given the application requires 2 appraisals. She was excited about some of the ideas brought forward last time to correct for that.

Hilary explained that prior to the actions taken for FY26 there were more ideas to present. At the last meeting the idea came up about a mini grant round in advance of a larger grant round for potential applicants who needed funds for appraisals. The hope is to enact that idea for FY27. There will be a chance to further discuss that idea in advance, however, it is suspended for now given the circumstances.

Margaret then discussed the happenings of the latest legislative session. The governor's budget did include the \$7 million for green space equity and the plan was to fully fund the program. However, during the session, the House put in language to allocate \$3.5 million of the funds to the City of Hyattsville to purchase property for a park. And then subsequently, the Senate added language to allocate the other \$3.5 million to two other projects: \$500,000 was to go to the Roland Park Community Association for Hillside Park in Baltimore City and \$3 million was to go to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission for a new adventure sports park within the Rubini Sports Complex at Wheaten Regional Park. Therefore, there won't be a competitive round for FY26. The assumption is the program will return to normal moving forward in fiscal 27 and the application, frequently asked questions, and guidelines will be shared with the Board prior to FY27. The legislation allows for an increase of the budget for up to \$10M in fiscal 2027 and beyond.

Suzanne stated she knows how politics works and understand it was a tight budget year, however, it would be nice to be able to sell this program right to the Legislators in the future. She also suggested praising and celebrating the selected projects.

Katie stated that this was the only conservation program fully cut despite there being \$25 million in Program Open Space funding. The earmarks could have been taken and been applied elsewhere. They seemed to have chosen to kill this program, however, she found out who requested the earmark for Hyattsville and what Delegate it was. Katie was also trying to find out which Senators earmarked the other funding. She believes it would be important to raise advocacy awareness with those Legislators for those who can.

Hilary shared that DNR will be doing a press release for when the projects go to the Board of Public Works. Typically, it is posted minutes if not hours after the Board of Public Works meets and hopefully approves the grants. That will be shared with the Advisory Board. The Board was encouraged to share it with their networks and do their own press releases as well should they want to. Given that the Administrators are a part of the Department they must work through the Department process, however, the Advisory Board or individuals can share their messages of support or talk to Legislators from their areas on their own.

Suzanne expressed one of the issues is simply that this program is new and doesn't have the history that Program Open Space does that the Legislators are familiar with. She suggested involving the Legislators that created the legislation for this program in the press release so they can continue building support for the program.

Margaret mentioned that one of the challenges was this was the first year and the program doesn't have that press yet. However, this is a momentous occasion with so many of the projects going to the Board of Public Works. There have been ribbon cutting events. Katie Lautar had

hers and one of the Montgomery County projects invited many people including the Department Secretary. Having outreach and public support through these events will help the public know about the projects and where the money comes from. The support for the Advisory Board in terms of their outreach, networking, and advocacy helps as well since the Department cannot do that from a lobbying standpoint.

Katie mentioned she finds it shocking the Legislators were able to take all the money from this program to serve specialty projects without any consultation of the Advisory Board or without reference to the legislation. Katie has also received questions from the League of Conservation Voters about the legality of that given, that the legislation says it will be a program if the governor assigns it. While Katie understands amending the governor's budget, it seems questionable that the Board was not consulted.

Hilary stated the Department was not consulted either. She stated sometimes these things come up at the end, but she read the bill and how DLS is showing the actions it shows that Greenspace Equity got \$7M and it is earmarked for these projects.

Katie states that it should not be legal without consulting the Board.

Hilary stated she understood and DNR was not a part of this process, however, her proposed plan is that the three projects are still going to have to fill out applications and they will be reviewed to ensure they meet the requirements of the program. The Department does not have all the details on exactly what is planned at these sites, so they are trying to gather that information.

Margaret asked if there were further questions from the Board and stated that comments are still being accepted on the new application. The new application will need to be used by the 3 potential projects plus any future applicants. She also stated the minutes from last meeting would be corrected.

Carolyn stated there was good feedback on the process to be implemented moving forward. She thanked Hilary, Margaret, and Stephanie for their explanations given they were kept in the dark as much as the Board was so it must be equally as frustrating. Carolyn mentioned it would be good to highlight the Legislators who were in support of forming the Advisory Board in the first place.

Katie mentioned she reached out to them both and did not receive a reply.

Carolyn mentioned that she was working with their Mayor and Council to get letters of support since there was a lot going on at the end. They thought they were going to lose open space funding.

Hilary stated that there tends to be a lot going on at the end of the legislative session so it may be good to circle back and reach out to Legislators in the interim.

Katie stated she would be happy to do that. She also mentioned she attended both public sessions to speak in favor of the Greenspace Equity Program and against the Open Space cuts and at that

point the Greenspace Equity Program was fully funded. So, it made it extra weird for everything to shift at the last minute.

Yuri stated that he wanted to ask the elected officials on the Board about their insight however, per the roll call they are not present.

Margaret and Carolyn confirmed they were not in attendance.

Therefore, Yuri made note that given their absence there was not a chance to ask the elected officials who are a part of the Board.

Carolyn then proposed to adjourn the meeting. Yuri seconded the motion. All were in favor and the meeting ended after 43 minutes and 53 seconds.