Greenspace Equity Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
February 19, 2026, 9:00 am

The fifth meeting of the Greenspace Equity Advisory Board (GEAB) was held via Google Meet on Thursday, February 19, 2026. 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 9:08 am.

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)
Keith Colston (Maryland Environmental Trust)

Absent:
Senator Karen Lewis Young (Senate)
Delegate Jackie Addison (House of Delegates)
Yuri Borovsky (Resident)
Mxali Davidson Roberts (Resident)
Savannah Winston (Resident)
Mandela Echefu (Resident)

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
Michael McQuarrie, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator

The meeting commenced with discussion of meeting minutes from 4/24/2025. Bob made a motion to approve the meeting minutes and Suzanne seconded the motion. Minutes were approved unanimously.

Stephanie then proceeded to present the agenda for the meeting which included updates on fiscal year (FY) 2025 projects, updates on FY 2026 earmarks, updates on the appraisal round, and an overview of the applications for FY 2027.

Stephanie summarized the following:
For FY25, there were 22 approved projects. Two playground projects in Garrett County have been completed. Twenty projects in progress – two are active, eleven will start in the spring and summer, while nine will start in the fall and winter.

For FY26, there were three earmarked projects. Hyattsville submitted a preliminary application for the $3.5 million acquisition. It needed additional information and revisions. The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) submitted a development application for the $3 million for an adventure sports park within the Rubini Sports Complex at Wheaton Regional Park. The application was reviewed and additional information needed to be submitted prior to it being scheduled for the Board of Public Works. For the $500,000 earmarked for Hillside Park in Baltimore City, we are still awaiting their application.

For the appraisal grant round, there were three awardees. Two of the three grant recipients submitted the requisite acquisition applications for the FY27 grant round. The remaining grant recipient did not obtain appraisals so their award was returned.

For the FY27 grant round, 31 applications were received totaling $11.9 million: 2 acquisitions and 29 development projects. The projects span 14 counties, including Baltimore City; 21 are in overburdened and underserved areas, 4 in overburdened areas, 4 in underserved areas, and 2 in adjacent areas. Proposed facilities include: 6 trails, 4 gathering open spaces, 5 community gardens, 1 urban farm, and 18 parks.

Projects were evaluated based on: clarity of objectives, itemized budgets, application completeness, evidence of community support, and eligibility. This resulted in 4 categories: minimal issues (13 projects totaling $3.8 million); some research/additional information needed (6 projects totaling $2.2 million); further details/clarification needed (3 projects totaling $1.5 million); or not eligible (9).

Stephanie then transitioned into the comments, questions, and discussion portion of the meeting. Suzanne had sent feedback prior to the meeting and discussion topics were categorized to try and cover all concerns. The discussion started with the concerns about the appraisals. Stephanie let the Board know that a third appraisal or a revised appraisal may be requested when the spread between the submitted appraisals is too wide. An additional appraisal may also be requested if the appraisals don't meet the USPAP (Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice) standards. If those requirements aren't met, the applicant is made aware of the necessary changes needed. The applicant requiring those changes has been made aware and the updates are pending.

The next topic included stormwater management exceeding greenspace and amenity costs. This discussion was also covered for the FY25 round. Suzanne mentioned that with her background in planning and management she knows that stormwater management is very expensive. While needed because there are streams and other natural areas of interest, she would like there to be a different fund to address stormwater management and have sympathy for the folks dealing with it. Margaret noted that when creating an amenity that stormwater management could be a component that affects its usability. Suzanne stated that it may be a question of how key the stormwater amelioration is to get the park right, as stormwater work for a big parking lot is different from stormwater needed for a natural field. Katie agreed with the sentiment of the stormwater management needed to create greenspace, though there should be more consideration for projects with less need for impervious surfaces.

Katie brought up the installation of infrastructure such as electrical and water lines and whether they were truly necessary, as there was no point of reference for understanding the costs behind the installation. Margaret stated that some of the associated amenities were considered in terms of what is being created. For instance, a community garden without an existing water source would need a water line to make the project more viable, or electrical installation for trail lighting to make it more accessible during the early or late hours.

A question was posed to see if there was opposition to installing a bathroom for a park. There is an understanding that the installation of a maintenance shed may not be in the spirit of the program, but the availability of a bathroom may be something that encourages people to use the outdoor space. Katie stated it is essential for a larger space to have a restroom. She gets a lot of requests at her organization's greenspace for helping sites figure out how to install restrooms.

Suzanne mentioned that in terms of stormwater and access to utilities may be something that needs to be considered in a bigger picture of accessibility. For instance, perhaps there should be consideration of the surroundings of the proposed project and how close is the nearest greenspace. Perhaps extra points could be awarded for something truly filling the gap of accessibility.

Katie stated that it may be worthwhile to add in the application, something along the lines of: "What's the greenspace landscape in your community?" or "How far is the nearest greenspace?" This was something she considered when looking at the dog park and wondering if there isn't truly an accessible area to walk their dog.

Suzanne stated her comments included questioning whether or not dog parks are in alignment with the program's vision. It is worth asking what is in the surrounding area that makes the dog park a different thing. In terms of attracting people to the greenspace Suzanne stated that as an older lady she has learned not to go to a place that does not have bathrooms. Therefore, it was suggested that a question be added to the application along the lines of, "How does this project fill a gap in the community?"

Margaret let the Board know that all projects were mapped out and there was a consideration of proximity to the closest park. However, detailed consideration of other available amenities were not all considered at the level Suzanne suggested. There were some segments that were difficult to weigh, such as the need to add an art component to a park, adding additional amenities to an existing park, and adding more passive amenities to a more active park. The question was posed of funding elements that are more in tune with the mission of the Greenspace Equity Program and leaving elements like parking lots to public works or other grants. Katie agreed with the idea of not funding parking lots and funding greener elements.

Carolyn stated perhaps including a space asking for the applicant to sell us on the description of the project based on the requirements of the program would help. She also pointed out she believes the questions are very well written right now but not all applicants answer the questions the way they are written. The applicants seem to put in what they want and are vague. There was a suggestion of a mandatory pre-submission meeting to ensure the applications are complete. However, that requires more time and effort on staff, too. Stephanie agreed. A workshop was held to review the application and some people did reach out with questions afterward. There was a noticeable difference in the applications from those who did reach out for feedback. Stephanie was able to remind them to include all their evidence and documents from the attached document checklist. Stephanie had asked if a sample application might help ensure clearer answers.

Suzanne mentioned that given this is a new program and the special use of the funds last year, there isn't history to show examples of successful projects. As a person who has filled out these forms, she mentioned knowing the point of view of the applicant may be filling in the blanks as opposed to making a case for the project. Perhaps by defining a vision for the program then there will be better applications. Katie stated she would be happy to take a look at the application, since sometimes the word limitations may be a contributing factor to not getting the information we are looking for. Stephanie reminded the

Board that the limitations were put in place to get a balance between a summary of the project on the application and the narratives. This was a concern raised by the Board during the first round of applicants.

Margaret stated that often the narratives do not match the title on the application of the project. Therefore, the word limits are meant to also verify what the funds are being focused on. The hope is to get an elevator pitch. What is needed is the reasoning behind why the project is a good Greenspace project. Suzanne stated perhaps that the wording of an “elevator pitch” should be used when holding the next workshop. Letting the applicants know this is where they sell us on the project may get us the result we are looking for. The other thing Suzanne pointed out was the difficulty to identify who was doing the project and who owned the land the project would be on. Katie stated she was leaning on the budget descriptions to figure out what people were trying to do.

Hilary Bell shared thoughts on the application process, noting that Stephanie is actively reaching out to applicants to gather more information. The program received $11.9 million in applications but is aiming for a requested $7 million in next year's budget. Hilary stated that because the program is new and still trying to build demand, staff is being flexible, but for such a competitive program, leaving information off the application may require applicants to reapply. Stephanie is working to collect sufficient details to provide solid recommendations for next year's funding. Hillary also mentioned the application timeline for the program will change one more time. The goal is to have a project list that can go in with the Governor’s budget. That schedule should remain henceforth. The Department remains flexible in working with the applicants, providing assistance, and as some projects are reaching completion from the first round they can be used as examples in future workshops.

Stephanie introduced the next topic of incorporating art, murals, and interpretive signage as standalone projects. Katie questioned the focus of beautification efforts, particularly signage, wanting to ensure a clear connection to equity rather than simply funding items that could be sourced elsewhere. She emphasized that the projects should increase access to greenspaces for underserved communities and meet a specific equity marker. Katie also expressed difficulty determining whether project requests were community-driven. She suggested knowing if neighbors requested the project and if it included accessible features, such as being bilingual or including braille. Stephanie replied to Katie’s point stating that is why she has been reaching out to applicants to ensure the evidence of community support is sent to add to their application.

Suzanne noted that some projects, such as those involving interpretive signage or other features, seemed primarily focused on involving young people in conservation efforts, which could introduce equity by allowing investment and nature learning in neighborhoods that might not otherwise have access. However, she expressed a preference for the fund to be project-oriented (focused on park development) rather than program-oriented (focused on a program using the park). Suzanne felt that several applications felt like "add-ons" rather than initiatives that truly enhanced greenspace usage. She specifically felt this way about art requests, suggesting that public art projects seemed more suited for an art fund rather than a greenspace fund.

Stephanie reminded the Board that there were some art elements in the first round of projects. What was pointed out then was the ratio of funding towards the art versus the greenspace just like the stormwater conversation. Katie stated she feels that art/visual elements should be a garland to the big project. However, she did express mixed feelings on the art and its incorporation.

Next, Suzanne addressed playground replacement and pointed out the funding available through Program Open Space for such projects. These projects are on a 20 year schedule for Program Open Space and would prefer such projects be funded through the appropriate program. However, if the playground is the only thing available in that neighborhood then it should be fixed. Therefore, she has mixed feelings on projects focusing solely on playground replacement.

Margaret replied and let the Board know while the Community Parks and Playgrounds program does exist for playgrounds it is only available to municipalities whereas Greenspace opens that portal toward non-profit organizations. Therefore, other groups may want to refurbish playground spaces that do not meet the requirements of other programs. Suzanne stated that information helped.

Stephanie revisited discussion on impervious surfaces, parking lots, and the repurposing of existing impervious areas for elements like play space in grant applications. Katie strongly recommended that applicants minimize the use of impervious surfaces and seek sustainable alternatives to concrete pads. She emphasized that if an impervious surface is essential - such as for creating accessible trails for elders, children, and differently-abled people - the applicant must clearly explain why it is necessary. Margaret noted that avoiding impervious surfaces was a key reason for preventing the Greenspace program from becoming an extension of other programs that fund facilities like sports courts. All acknowledged that impervious surfaces are often required for features like accessible trails, and this necessity must be balanced against the general preference to minimize them.

Stephanie opened a discussion about dog parks, noting that they maintain open greenspace and sometimes include added amenities like shade structures and pavilions. She suggested that the need for a dog park might depend on the surrounding environment, particularly if no other open area is available.

Suzanne acknowledged that dog parks vary in design, and that they should include shade. She viewed them positively as places for communing outdoors, which draws people into greenspace. Ultimately, she concluded that deciding to fund them depends on the quality of the proposal and what is available nearby.

Katie shared an example of a Baltimore Greenspace-protected dog park/kids' space in an urban area that is heavily used by local dog owners who otherwise have no place for their pets to run. She stressed the importance of confirming that a project addresses a real need and hits an equity marker, rather than simply being an amenity to benefit nearby housing projects. Although she preferred funding a large park, forest, or community garden, she recognized that people have dogs, and their inability to take them running is a genuine hardship. Margaret concluded the dog park discussion by agreeing that dog parks, like playgrounds, are communal spaces because dogs (and children) always come with people.

Stephanie introduced a new discussion point concerning a few grant applications received from nonprofits for projects located on state-owned property, a situation requiring further review with the Office of the Attorney General and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) leadership. Hilary sought input from the advisory board, noting that any funded project must still meet program requirements, including the applicant having control of the property.

The board members expressed differing opinions on the matter:

- Suzanne Ludlow stated a personal preference not to approve these projects, suggesting that using state funds to improve state property via a nonprofit in a competitive process felt "weird." She questioned whether it was fair for certain state properties to benefit from "extra points" simply because a nonprofit was available to help pay for the improvements.

- Katie Lautar found the applications interesting, suggesting that a nonprofit might have a better vision, track record, or local relationships to successfully complete a needed project when the state or city lacks the time or capacity. However, she also understood Suzanne's point that using state funds in this manner felt unusual.

Hillary clarified that the two areas in question already have existing relationships with DNR, such as a lease agreement for Fair Hill and a separate agreement for the other project, confirming that DNR statewide leases land for various purposes, including to nonprofits and county governments for park operation. Margaret added that staff heavily scrutinized these projects due to them being on state land, verifying if they were compatible with the parks, supported by the park managers, and if they addressed the ownership/control requirements. Hilary concluded that DNR may not have a blanket policy and might need to address these situations case-by-case based on the competitive nature of the grants, the specifics of the project, and the formal relationship between the organization and the department.

Suzanne opened the discussion about other topics by raising a concern that several grant applications seemed to feature economic development projects, such as trails in tourist areas or the adventure park concept, which she disliked. She questioned the extent to which these projects fulfilled the program's purpose and addressed equity concerns, particularly if they didn't genuinely improve greenspace access for underserved communities.

Carolyn suggested that once the board agrees on a final scoring rubric, it should be made public to applicants. She posited that knowing the scoring criteria would give applicants an idea of what they would be scored on, potentially reducing applications for projects like adventure parks or dog parks that might receive fewer points and leading to more focused and relevant submissions.

Hilary clarified that while the program materials currently list the evaluation criteria, they do not assign point values, and the criteria are largely tied to statutory requirements. Katie noted that it is not unusual for applications to include the rubric and that applicants often study the point system to maximize their scores. Hilary agreed that sharing the point system could be considered but cautioned that the score is not the sole factor for funding and would require qualifying language.

Suzanne emphasized that the application criteria need to better weigh how projects address equity concerns related to greenspace access, beyond simply checking boxes for overburdened or underserved areas. Stephanie agreed, highlighting that linking this to evidentiary community support is essential. She noted that people in overburdened or underserved areas might not be aware of a project, so evidence of community involvement is critical. Margaret countered that while more guidance is needed, she wanted to avoid a situation where applicants add elements just to gain points without truly serving the community. Suzanne noted that demand may be low in very poor communities simply because residents lack the capacity or energy to advocate for themselves.

Stephanie thanked the board for their comments, suggestions, and feedback, acknowledging that it helps guide staff when fixing the application, scoring projects, and considering all elements of the program. She noted that hearing the board's perspectives helps staff determine if they are "on the right track" or if they missed a necessary perspective. Suzanne expressed appreciation for the presentation and the opportunity to discuss the projects. Margaret encouraged the board members to send any additional follow-up questions or suggestions, whether for the current set of projects or for adjusting the next set of application questions.

Hilary then summarized the next steps:

- Staff will take the day's feedback, review the project list, and try to obtain more information from applicants.
- The team is tracking the General Assembly's budget process, hoping to secure the $7 million included in the governor's budget. DNR's budget hearings are scheduled for early March, with decisions expected by mid to late March.
- DNR staff will develop the FY28 schedule, noting the continuous nature of the work.
- Staff will also consider repeating the mini-appraisal grant round, which resulted in two acquisition applications, to be held in advance of the next grant cycle.

Following the formal summary, Katie asked a separate question about the Roland Park project, which was earmarked for funding but had not yet submitted an application. Hilary, Margaret, and Stephanie noted that when the funds were initially earmarked, the organization did not own the property, which was a requirement for moving forward with the development project. Although it is believed that the organization now owns the property, the organization has not yet submitted the required application forms. Hilary explained that since it is a capital appropriation, the funds will last longer than operating funds, giving the project more time before the money would technically go back to the special fund and need to be reappropriated.

Katie then compared this to the "Adventure Park" earmark, and Hilary clarified that staff worked with the Adventure Park applicants to ensure that the Greenspace money would only be used for passive, traditional greenspace amenities, separate from other grants they received for the larger footprint. Stephanie confirmed this, stating that they requested an itemized budget to appropriate the funds only to the more passive and green areas.

Carolyn asked if there was a motion to adjourn the meeting, which was accepted Suzanne. Keith seconded and was unanimously approved.

The meeting ended after 1 hour and 18 minutes.