

Greenspace Equity Advisory Board Meeting Minutes December 20, 2024, 1:00 pm

The third meeting of the Greenspace Equity Advisory Board (GEAB) was held via Google Meet on Friday, December 20, 2024. 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 1:05 pm.

Attendees were advised that 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:

Senator Karen Lewis Young (Senate)
Delegate Jackie Addison (House of Delegates) – Tiara Goodwin, Chief of Staff, attending on Delegate Addison's behalf
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) – Joined Late

Absent:

Savannah Winston (Resident)
Keith Colston (Maryland Environmental Trust)
Robert Branham, Calvert County (County Park and Recreation)
Mandela Echefu (Resident)

Staff:

Hillary 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
Tiffany Depaoli, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator
Michael McQuarrie, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator
Kate Mayberry, DNR, LAP Local Grants Administrator
Mariah Davis, DNR, Environmental Justice Officer

Other attendees were not specifically identified.

The Chair introduced Stephanie Benavides as the Greenspace Equity Program Administrator who joined DNR in mid-November. Tiara Goodwin introduced herself as Delegate Addison's Chief of Staff attending on the delegate's behalf.

First order of business, motion to approve meeting minutes from meeting on June 10, 2024. Motion supported by Suzanne Ludlow and seconded by Senator Karen Lewis Young. None opposed and minutes were approved.

Second order of business, Stephanie Benavides commenced the presentation on the grant application review process and the role of the review board. The Advisory Board is to serve as a consultant in the implementation and administration of the program including review and comment on grant applications. All eligible projects were sent to the Advisory Board along with the rubric for reference.

The statutory requirements for the application review process were addressed. Each fiscal year at least 50% of the grants should be awarded to land acquisitions. If there aren't enough to meet that requirement the remainder may go to development projects. The department shall consider:

- The extent to which the project engages and is supported by residents, businesses, and organizations in the community.
- The amount of financial or in-kind contributions, if any.
- The degree to which the project demonstrates partnership and collaboration.
- The geographic diversity of the state.

Rubric explanation was presented to the Advisory Board. Criteria were as follows:

- Project Type (Acquisition / Development)
- Area Served (Overburdened / Underserved)
- Project (Community Greenspace)
- Collaboration and Engagement
- Enhancements
- Considerations (Public Use/Access, Ability to Maintain, etc.)
- Additional Costs

There was a breakdown of applications received (40 total and 36 eligible), types of projects (one eligible acquisition and 35 development projects), allocated funding (\$5,000,000), and preliminary selections (\$4,603,992 – one acquisition, one urban farm, three community woodlands, four community gardens, five parks, eight community gathering open spaces, nine trails).

Yuri Borovsky asked if only one acquisition project was sent to the board for review.

Stephanie replied yes given the other three land acquisition projects were missing pieces and incomplete.

Margaret Lashar clarified the other three acquisitions were not reviewed given there were no appraisals received. Without the appraisals there isn't any certainty that the costs provided were representative of the amount being asked for. There needs to be some indication that applicants are paying for the property or at least negotiated for the property. Additionally, not all the application information was complete.

Yuri stated an understanding of the need for stringent mechanisms when it comes to land acquisition in terms of verifying valuations. However, are there stringent mechanisms in place to verify the estimates of the budgets for the development projects? If there aren't any in place it seems we are holding the land acquisitions to a higher standard.

Margaret replied that in terms of acquisitions requirements are that market rates are considered. Whereas for development projects they are dependent on the type of development, the scope and scale, as well as price variation with contractors.

There was a discussion on providing assistance for appraisals of acquisitions given we are looking at equity as an issue. Appraisals are covered for reimbursement under the legislation. However, there are some entities that are unable to obtain appraisals. A proposed solution to this problem was to hold back some funding for FY2025 and hold a round of applications solely for acquisitions needing funding for appraisals. Most of the Advisory Board agreed in support of this solution and is aware that it will need to be discussed further with leadership and the attorney general. Katie Lautar encouraged talking to John Griffin for another perspective.

Katie raised the topic of providing ineligible projects to the board in a separate folder. This would allow her to reach out to applicants in her locality to explain what they did wrong and help them with future applications. Margaret agreed that ineligible projects could be provided separately in the future.

Yuri presented the concern of the livability and public health commitments of community gardens. There was also a concern about the wide variety of cost estimates between similar projects. To which Katie replied with examples of farms that are in food deserts in Baltimore City which allow access to fresh food. There are also many farms that do farm stands where the proceeds go back into the garden/farm itself. Katie also provided links with projects completed in Baltimore City by two organizations and how they've made an impact on their communities.

Suzanne Ludlow presented the concern for the fiscal capacity of some municipalities to be considered. Given that some projects were for park renovations but were in poor municipalities whereas other applicants have access to more funds. There was also a project where the parking lot costs more than the trail/park. The consideration was to limit parking lots but ensure ADA accessibility is available. There was also a concern about fields being renovated for sports teams instead of for community use. Yuri also raised the concern of the diversity of the state. There are some counties that have many trails however, they do not have parks or sports fields available to the kids to use. Katie also presented the concern of projects that just allow a facility to refresh something, so they don't have to spend their budget is not how this funding was intended to be used.

Margaret and Hilary addressed all concerns and assured the Advisory Board that staff had similar questions when reviewing applications. There is a concern for sports facilities to be included in a project when they are not in the legislation whereas community gardens and urban farms are in the legislation. Therefore, pickleball courts, sports fields, and other sports elements are less likely to be selected for funding as they are not in the spirit of creating and enhancing greenspace. The

funding is also not meant to fund commercial ventures, therefore, the money from produce sold should go back into the community garden/urban farm and that intention must be made clear.

Delegate Addison's representative, Tiara, also presented the concern for maintaining projects in communities that are already overburdened. There is an agency asking how they can maintain the project the community needs when they don't have funding to do so. Suzanne also echoed the concerns stating overburdened communities may not have a business nearby who can partner with community members and help fund projects. Margaret replied that this is a capital grant program, thus limited by the legislation in terms of what constitutes an overburdened and underserved area and what costs are eligible. Mariah Davis, the Environmental Justice Officer with DNR, invited Tiara to connect with her to discuss this problem further in agreement with the concern presented.

There is also concern for access in terms of walkability for those who do not have cars to go to the nearest greenspace. Can a tool be devised to calculate how many residents are within one-mile of the proposed project to know the outreach capabilities? Margaret replied that we do not have a specific tool for that but there may be a way to do some proximity analysis. The burden may lie on the applicant a little more to ensure this accessibility.

Katie raised a concern about match funds not being required by the legislation. Margaret confirmed the legislation states the program must consider financial or in-kind contributions if any. Stephanie clarified that the in-kind contributions considered went beyond financial contributions. DNR staff considered volunteer organization pledging time, parents volunteering to work on the project, and residents who are also volunteering time. Hilary clarified that we are not requiring match funds.

Yuri proposed updating the application based on the discussion today and asked for the costs to be put on the first page. He also remarked that not everybody filled out the application and simply attached a narrative. Margaret confirmed the application will be updated and a budget sheet will be added. Katie echoed the overload of documentation on some projects that buried the information in large plans. DNR staff will work to clarify the expectations for the next round. Yuri suggested staff providing a one-pager to the Advisory Board to summarize the project. Margaret acknowledged the need for summarized information and pointed out that DNR staff did provide a spreadsheet with all applications listed and highlights of the proposed projects.

Suzanne asked if it is preferable for the project to already have public support or should obtaining public support be a part of their plan. Margaret replied that a few projects did have public support given they were projects that have been planned for a few years. There were other projects that included their Local Land Preservation and Park and Recreation Plan from 2022. The expectation is that applicants do more community engagement to create something that would be feasible to implement. Katie also suggested considering a plan to engage the community given the level of difficulty to do so in some communities. Yuri agreed with Suzanne and Katie given there should be a more standardized way to engage the community while acknowledging that overburdened communities are also working to make ends meet and don't have the time to engage with community events. Katie suggested clarity on knowing what

funding is available for engagement. Margaret replied those costs can be factored into the administrative costs.

Margaret closed the meeting with the plans for proceeding with project approval. DNR staff will obtain missing documents from applicants in January, clarify some project points, and the ability to do the work on property they may or may not own. Once that is complete, DNR staff will finalize the projects that are recommended for funding. Notifications will be sent to the applicants of their selection. Selected projects will be sent to the State Clearinghouse for review and then schedule the selected projects for the Board of Public Works approval. DNR staff will continue to identify updates needed for the next application round. DNR staff will be asking for monitoring reports/status reports for those that are funded.

Yuri asked for updates on how those conversations happen, especially if the Board of Public Works doesn't approve of an application. This way those considerations can be addressed for the next round of applicants. Margaret confirmed we will provide updates. The goal is to have selections by February and the Board of Public Works has their own process. Hilary confirmed we can share with the Board which projects will be recommended.

Carolyn suggested we can use some of these discussion points to be added to the Frequently Asked Questions on the website. Margaret confirmed Stephanie is working on that.

Katie proposed another meeting to look at the application again to address the changes needed. Hilary recognized that it was a quick turn-around but was hoping to show in the upcoming legislative session the need for this program and the group can meet again to revise the application. Suzanne mentioned being willing to write a letter in support for the program if needed to present in the upcoming legislative session.

For future meetings, quick response to the Doodle poll with proposed times was encouraged to get as many participants as possible. The plan is for the Doodle poll to be sent in mid to late February to review the application.

The Chair asked if there are further comments or questions. Hearing no additional comments or questions, the Chair thanked everyone and asked for a motion to adjourn. Suzanne Ludlow motioned to adjourn, seconded by Yuri Borovsky. Hearing no opposition to the motion, the Chair ended the meeting at 2:51 pm.