

# Information Item

Community Development Committee



Meeting date: June 1, 2026

## Topic

Community Tree Planting Grants: 2026-2027 Program

|                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b>District(s), member(s):</b>   | All  |
| <b>Policy/legal reference:</b>   | Minn. Stat. § 473.355  |
| <b>Staff prepared/presented:</b> | Gillian Greenberg, Senior Climate Planner, 651-602-1726<br>Erin Brueggemann, Senior Grants Administrator, 651-602-1112 |
| <b>Division/department:</b>      | Community Development / Regional Planning  |

## Background

The Metropolitan Council established a Community Tree Planting Grant Program in 2025 following direction from the Minnesota Legislature in the 2024 legislative session. The 2025 Program distributed \$2.5 million dollars to 14 local governments in the region and also passed through \$688,000 that was directed to the City of South Saint Paul. 2025 Grantees are expected to plant at least 5,128 trees and remove at least 2,219 damaged or diseased trees and stumps.

The Met Council received additional State appropriations in 2025 and in 2026. As such, Council staff are bringing a program update that will guide the 2026 and 2027 funding cycles, largely following the structure of the 2025 Program with some minor changes discussed below. Council staff propose to distribute up to \$3.4 million in 2026 and \$3.5 million in 2027.

At the Committee meeting, Council staff will review the funding additions, proposal for distribution, and proposals for updating the program criteria. Council staff will seek Committee feedback on the approach to fund distribution and on the proposed criteria updates.

## Program Purpose

The purpose of this program is to support the maintenance and expansion of the tree canopy in the region. The statute language specifically outlines three purposes:

- Removing and planting shade trees on public land to provide environmental benefits
- Replacing trees lost to forest pests, disease, or storms
- Establishing a more diverse community forest better able to withstand disease and forest pests

## Program Priorities

The statute language also outlines two priorities for the grant program:

- Projects removing and replacing ash trees that pose significant public safety concerns
- Projects located in census block groups with a Supplemental Demographic Index score in the 70th percentile or higher within the state

The Supplemental Demographic Index (SDI) score comes from the 2024 methodology documentation for the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Screening Tool referenced in state statute. The SDI combines five factors: income, persons with disabilities, education level, English speaking, and life expectancy. The SDI is intended to provide perspective on potential community

vulnerability.

## Proposed 2026-2027 Program Changes

### Program Funding

The first key change to the 2026-2027 Program relates to the type of funding that will be distributed. The Met Council received \$1 million from G.O. Bonds and \$900,000 from State General Funds in the 2025 legislative special session and \$5 million from G.O. Bonds in the 2026 legislative session. The biggest impact of bonding funding is on eligible uses of funds. In contrast to general funds, bonding funds cannot be used for local government staff time, equipment purchases, or establishment costs during the grant period. The other major impact of bonding funding is that grantees will have to go through the declaration or waiver process which will be an administrative burden on the grantees.

With a total of \$6.9 million in funding, Council staff recommend splitting the funding into \$3.4 million for 2026 and \$3.5 million for 2027. This structure creates relatively consistent program funds each year. It also creates more competitive grant programs each year, ensuring that the Council is funding high quality projects aligned with program priorities. If there are not enough projects that meet the minimum score requirements in 2026 to exhaust the funding, any remaining funds will roll into the 2027 cycle.

### Proposed Project Tiering Update

In the 2025 Program, applications were reviewed, scored, and ranked in one of three tiers:

- 1) applications meeting both legislative priorities (found on page 1),
- 2) applications meeting just one priority, or
- 3) applications meeting neither priority.

Funding was awarded in ranked order to applications in the first tier. If funds remained, awards would have been made to applications in the second tier (meeting one priority) in rank order, and finally to applications in the third tier (meeting neither priority). However, Council staff found that this structure allowed a few projects into the first tier that very minimally met the program priorities.

For the 2026-2027 Program, Council staff recommend improving this approach by using the tiering structure to reflect *the degree* to which a project that meets a legislative priority, rather than the 2025 all-or-nothing approach. The 2026-2027 Program would assign priority points based on alignment with program priorities and then use priority points to assign projects into a review tier, as outlined in the tables below.

Table 1. Priority Points Scoring Rubric

| Priority Points:   | 0        | 1            | 2             | 3          |
|--|----------|--------------|---------------|------------|
| Ash Removals and Replacements                              | 0 trees  | 1 – 15 trees | 15 – 29 trees | 30 + trees |
| Trees Planted in Priority Areas out of Total Trees Planted | 0 – 24 % | 25 – 49%     | 50 – 74%      | 75 – 100%  |

Table 2. Priority Points to Tier Conversion



| Priority Points | Review Tier |
|-----------------|-------------|
| 5 – 6           | Tier 1      |
| 3 – 4           | Tier 2      |
| 0 – 2           | Tier 3      |

Council staff expect that this approach would make the tiering structure better reflect the nuance of projects across the region and reward projects most aligned with the legislative priorities.

### Proposed Evaluation Criteria Updates

Council staff are proposing to update the evaluation criteria in a few ways. First, the 2026-2027 evaluation criteria further emphasize the program priorities. One of the reflections from our external review panel in 2025 was that the number and point distribution in the evaluation criteria allowed projects to score well even if they did not excel at the program priorities. As such, for the 2026-2027 criteria, Council staff propose that half of the points are in categories directly reflect the priorities.

Second, Council staff propose that the 2026-2027 criteria replace the category “Project serves residents that experience extreme heat” with “Project addresses climate change impacts.” This change better reflects that tree canopy supports climate resilience through many benefits including providing shade, improving stormwater management, and improving air quality. The 2026-2027 program map will allow users to look at Met Council’s extreme heat and localized flooding data to identify project locations where adding tree canopy can increase climate resilience.

Finally, to create a clear and simplified structure, Council staff propose to break the 2026-2027 criteria into four categories, each worth 25 points. The evaluation criteria categories would be Project Management, Tree Canopy Health and Resilience, Project Serves Vulnerable Communities, and Project Addresses Climate Change Impacts.

### Next Steps

Council staff will return to the Community Development Committee and Council with a Notice of Funding Availability for approval in July. The application period is currently planned to open mid-September August and run through mid-October. Applications will be reviewed in November, and recommendations will be brought to CDC and Council at the end of 2026 or early 2027. Council staff anticipate grant agreement execution will begin in early 2027.

