

**Equitable Grantmaking:
A Comprehensive Review of Washington State
Recreation and Conservation Office Grant Programs**

Prepared by Prevention Institute, June 2022

Background

In its ongoing efforts to achieve equitable outcomes for all residents, the Washington State Legislature issued a budget proviso requiring an equity review of some Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) grant programs. The goals of the review were stated as follows:

- To reduce barriers to historically underserved populations' participation in RCO grant programs;
- To redress inequities in RCO policies and programs; and,
- To improve the equitable delivery of resources and benefits in these programs.

In conducting the review, RCO was to complete the following:

- Identify changes to policy and operational norms and practices in furtherance of the equity review purposes;
- Identify new investments and programs that prioritize populations and communities that have been historically underserved by conservation and recreation policies and programs; and,
- Consider historic and systemic barriers that may arise due to any of the following factors: race, ethnicity, religion, income, geography, disability, and educational attainment.

RCO is a small state agency that provides grants to create and maintain opportunities for recreation; protect habitat, working farms and forests; and recover salmon and orca from near extinction. It administers 26 grant programs with 33 sub-grant programs. Since 1966 it has awarded over 11,800 grants, totaling more than \$3.3 billion, that have been matched with more than \$1.6 billion in resources for a total investment of nearly \$5 billion in Washington State.

The budget proviso focused this review on recreation grant programs, though due to the interconnectedness of recreation and conservation, several conservation-oriented programs were also included. Neither RCO's salmon recovery grant programs, nor programs funded by other state agencies were considered in the review. The following programs, which are funded by state capital resources, were analyzed:

RECREATION FOCUSED GRANT PROGRAMS	
WWRP – Local Parks	Grants to buy, develop, or renovate outdoor recreation facilities. Program is for neighborhood, community and regional parks.
WWRP – Trails	Grants to buy, develop, or renovate pedestrian, equestrian, bicycle, and cross-country ski trails. Grants are for non-motorized activities that provide connections to neighborhoods, communities, or regional trails.
WWRP – Water Access	Grants to create physical access to shorelines for non-motorized, water-related recreation activities such as boating and fishing.
WWRP – State Parks	Grants to the State Parks and Recreation Commission to buy or develop state parks.
Youth Athletic – Large	Grants to buy land and develop or renovate outdoor athletic facilities serving youth.
Youth Athletic – Small	Grants to develop or renovate outdoor athletic facilities serving youth in small communities.
Aquatic Lands	Grants to buy, protect, and restore aquatic habitat to provide public access to the waterfront.
Boating Facilities	Grants to acquire, design, build and renovate facilities such as launching ramps, guest moorage and support facilities for motorized boats and other watercraft.
Firearm and Archery Range Recreation	Grants to acquire, develop, and renovate firearm and archery training and practice facilities.
Nonhighway and Off-road Vehicle Activities	Grants to buy, develop, or maintain backcountry recreational areas or off-road vehicle parks, and to provide education and enforcement of those areas.

CONSERVATION FOCUSED GRANT PROGRAMS	
WWRP – Riparian	Grants to conserve land along the water, as well as submerged land such as streambeds, which provide habitat for salmon and other wildlife
WWRP – Urban Wildlife	Grants to conserve wildlife habitat in cities or urban growth areas.
Community Forests	Grants to conserve working forests for community benefit.

In July 2021, RCO selected Prevention Institute, a national nonprofit organization with expertise in health equity, racial justice, and park equity, through a competitive process¹ to lead this equity review over a 12-month period.

Joining Prevention Institute, [The Vida Agency](#) (TVA) coordinated community engagement activities. [GreenInfo Network](#) produced spatial analysis. Sean M. Watts, served as a project consultant bringing essential statewide context and subject matter expertise along with California-based researcher Jon Christensen, who provided additional subject matter expertise.

¹ RCO Request for Proposals No. 2105

Overview of this report

Beginning in July 2021, the Prevention Institute-led team coordinated a multi-faceted effort to review RCO’s grantmaking structures, processes and outcomes. The analysis considered opportunities to reduce gaps in the distribution of greenspace and the resources that support them.

It should be noted that while efforts to achieve fairness, justice and equity in the greenspace arena are not new, government agency leadership in achieving and sustaining equitable outcomes is still formative. Achieving demonstrable results takes time. Park agencies, recreation offices, park boards and special districts who appear to be “furthest along” in their equity efforts have a variety of results to show for their work. In commissioning this equity review, Washington State has again positioned itself among a relatively small group of “early adopters” aiming to do better with its finite, but critical, public resources.

The methods, key findings, and recommendations detailed in this report are based on an extensive review of RCO manuals and proposal records (2016-2020), interviews with 35 subject matter experts, 11 community and stakeholder engagement sessions, and iterative dialogue over the year-long period with RCO staff and key stakeholders who have engaged with RCO.

Basis for this Equity Review

Parks, nature preserves, recreation facilities, trails, gardens, and nature-based stormwater systems (hereafter, “greenspace”) are essential civic infrastructure that protect public health by providing opportunity for physical activity, social connection, ritual, and respite². In cities, greenspace also filters air and stormwater, mitigates pollution, buffers noise, cools temperatures, and replenishes groundwater³. Greenspace should serve every community fairly, justly, and safely. Yet, a growing body of analysis demonstrates that communities – including those in Washington – continue to be affected by an inequitable and limited history of investment in open space and recreation facilities; and that these communities are likely to be the least wealthy and most racially diverse.^{4,5} Prevention Institute has advanced a framework developed by Yuen and colleagues to help practitioners and decision-makers interpret the systemic factors underlying greenspace inequities, and to advance policy and funding strategies that reverse them⁶.

Historic drivers of greenspace inequity include racial segregation, biased planning decisions, discriminatory home lending practices, exclusionary zoning, racial covenants, and redlining, among

² Wolch, J.R., Byrne, J and Newell, J.P. (2014). Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities ‘just green enough.’ *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 125, 234-244.

³ Jennings, V., et al. (2017). Emerging issues in urban ecology: Implications for research, social justice, human health and well-being. *Population and Environment*, 39(1), 69-86.

⁴ King County Open Space Equity Cabinet (2019). Report and Recommendations to King County Executive and Council. URL: your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/library/water-and-land/land-conservation/equity/20190319-Open-Space-Equity-Cabinet-Report.pdf

⁵ Recreation and Conservation Office, Outdoor Recreation Equity Grant Program, 2021-2023 Budget Request

⁶ Yañez, E., Aboelata, M.J., Rigolon, A. & Bennett, R. (2021). Changing the Landscape: People, Parks and Power. URL: www.preventioninstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/PI_People-Parks-Power_Report_210624_FINAL.pdf

others.^{7,8} Present-day drivers include tax and fiscal restructuring, shifting responsibility for public services, and a reduced ability to fund recreation facilities and programs among local governments with limited tax-bases and lower-income populations.^{9,10} Local factors unique to the physical, economic, social, and regulatory environments of communities can also explain how access barriers for distinct groups of greenspace users were created and maintained. The strategies described in this equity review are intended to benefit Washingtonians most impacted by these disparities; mainly, lower-income households, people of color, people with disabilities, and other socially and economically diverse users.

Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.¹¹

Greenspace equity is the fair and just distribution of parks and open space, such that all communities have access to these health-promoting resources. Pursuing greenspace equity requires closing gaps in access to parks, trails and open space that disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color. This includes considering elements such as the geographic distribution of recreational facilities and greenspaces, funding and the grantmaking structures that determine allocations, and the organizational policies and norms that have created and maintained greenspace inequities over time. The equity review considered each of these elements.

The framework used to support this review identifies three distinct dimensions of equity that pertain to green infrastructure funding and planning. They are summarized as follows:

Distributional Equity often comes to mind first when considering greenspace access because it relies most on quantifiable information. This includes the geographic distribution of existing recreational facilities and protected spaces and funding allocations to support capital projects, operations and programming.

Procedural Equity in grantmaking involves processes that are transparent, navigable, and free of barriers and biases that would ignore or unduly complicate proposals in prioritized settings. When considering capital development grants, it seeks to provide greater opportunity for under-resourced and equity-driven applicants to successfully propose and administer projects.

⁷ Rigolon & Németh (2018). What shapes uneven access to urban amenities? Thick injustice and the legacy of racial discrimination in Denver's parks. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 41(3), 312-325.

⁸ Boone, C.G., Buckley, G.L., Grove, J.M. & Sister, C. (2009). Parks and people: An environmental justice inquiry in Baltimore, Maryland. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 99(4), 767-787.

⁹ Rigolon, A., Browning, M., & Jennings, V. (2018). Inequities in the quality of park systems: An environmental justice investigation of cities in the United States. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 178, 156-169.

¹⁰ Joassart-Marcelli, P. et al. (2011). Building the healthy city: The role of non-profits in creating active urban parks. *Urban Geography*, 32(5), 682-711.

¹¹ Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference? (2020 November 5). MPH@GW, the George Washington University online aster of Public Health program. URL: onlinepublichealth.gwu.edu/resources/equity-vs-equality/

Structural Equity addresses organizational policies and norms that have created and maintained greenspace inequities over time. Though it may involve less quantifiable factors, it is crucial for operationalizing equity to the extent of mitigating prior harm and preventing unintended consequences. This often begins with building internal staff capacities with equity frameworks and practices, and regularizing assessing implementation and learnings on equity related actions.

Major Recommendations

This equity review revealed several opportunities to forge a pathway toward more equitable grantmaking and outcomes. These are organized by the following six overarching categories:

- 1) Prioritize funding for high-need areas
- 2) Modify scoring criteria to elevate projects addressing park and greenspace inequities
- 3) Change processes and procedures to support equitable proposal development and review
- 4) Proactively build applicant capacities to attract and support equity-driven sponsors and projects
- 5) Build in structures and criteria to promote community involvement in shaping project proposals
- 6) Fund projects that address intersecting social and economic challenges in communities

This analysis emphasizes two key strategies to improve distributional equity, which have been central features of other equitable granting models: funding set-asides that ensure grant programs prioritize underinvested areas and strengthened scoring criteria that identify and reward equity-driven proposals.

This review also identifies two key procedural areas where crucial equity gains can be achieved: a recruitment strategy to improve representation within evaluation panels and a grant payment structure that reduces the cost-carrying challenges of under-resourced applicants.

From a structural standpoint, this review spotlights a need for more proactive technical assistance and capacity-building to a diversifying pool of project applicants. Advancing greenspace equity also calls for more collaborative approaches with nongovernmental partners, whose varying capacities can help to generate momentum and resources for needed projects, and whose local intelligence and convening power is critically needed to contextualize investments for marginalized communities.

SECTION 1. METHODS

Between July 2021 and April 2022, Prevention Institute worked with RCO staff and the project team to conduct the comprehensive equity review. The review focused on the following:

Granting Outcomes Analysis: Data from three RCO grant cycles (2016-2020) were analyzed to better understand the relationship between neighborhood and jurisdiction characteristics and the grant programs studied. Project staff reviewed both awarded funding and proposal activity, to consider where participation or success rates may be uneven.

Granting Procedures Review: Grant manuals for each program were reviewed in detail. Eligibility criteria, fiscal requirements and administrative needs were examined to better understand potential impacts for under-resourced applicants and community-driven partnerships. Evaluation criteria and scoring scales were also examined for their specificity regarding key equity objectives, weighting within scoring formulas, and potential to bias projects away from the most vulnerable and underinvested areas. Evaluation panel membership was assessed to understand if disadvantaged communities in Washington and diverse sectors (e.g. government, nonprofit, tribes) were represented. Consideration of these criteria was informed by feedback provided in prior applicant surveys, as well as practitioner expertise from recent park and greenspace funding initiatives in Washington and elsewhere. Input provided throughout the engagement sessions and interviews provided valuable context for understanding ways that procedures impact the granting process from project inception to funding.

Emerging Practices Research: Though equitable greenspace funding models are a relatively new phenomenon, Prevention Institute staff conducted a scan of efforts to advance equitable procedures and outcomes. Specifically, project staff reviewed: need assessment criteria developed by the King County Open Space Equity Cabinet, California's Proposition 68, and Los Angeles County's Measure A grants manual. The project team also reviewed policy and design literature of to better understand the equity landscape for public space.

Stakeholder Engagement: A mixed-methods approach to engagement was utilized to gather qualitative input from a range of practitioners whose work intersects with parks and conservation funding. During October-November 2021, TVA facilitated eight community conversation sessions for specific audiences, including past applicants, nonprofit and community serving organizations, government and tribal sector staff, members and staff of some tribal communities and organizations, as well as a Vietnamese-language session. These sessions sought input on greenspace priorities and use, proposal development capacities, and RCO granting procedures. Two additional sessions were facilitated by TVA during March-April 2022 to reflect on research and engagement findings, and brainstorm recommended strategies. Interviews were another important method for gathering intelligence about the RCO process and relevant equity strategies. Prevention Institute conducted 12 interviews with subject matter experts between October 2021 and January 2022 with RCO staff, other greenspace space funders, staff from large and small jurisdictions, and community leaders to gather input on the RCO process and relevant equity strategies. TVA also conducted 23 interviews with community leaders in either English or Spanish. In addition to these methods, TVA distributed digital surveys in five languages to prior applicants and other entities, seeking feedback on RCO proposal procedures, fiscal requirements and project parameters.

SECTION 2. FINDINGS

Based on the analyses, research and engagement performed for this equity review, Prevention Institute found the following:

- RCO grants skew markedly toward places with pre-existing park and conservation lands.** Census tracts with 8 or more acres of protected open space per thousand residents make up 56% of the total tracts but received 69-100% of the funding in a given grant account, 70-100% of awarded proposals, and accounted for 74-100% of proposal activity during the past three funding cycles. Conversely, census tracts with 3 or fewer acres of protected open space per thousand residents make up 28% of total tracts, but received 0-17% of funding, awarded proposals and proposal activity in a given grant account (see Tables 1-3).

Table 1: Proportion of awarded funding (2016-20) by park acreage (per thousand residents)

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
WA census tracts	28.2 %	15.8 %	56.0 %
WWRP-Local Parks	16.5 %	14.2 %	69.3 %
WWRP-Trails	2.5 %	4.9 %	92.5 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	16.3 %	83.7 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	-	100 %
Youth Athletic-large	4.2 %	22.7 %	73.1 %
Youth Athletic-small	15.5%	-	84.5 %
Aquatic Lands	3.8 %	11.4 %	84.8 %
Boating Facilities	5.1 %	-	94.9 %
Firearms & Archery	-	2.9 %	97.1 %
Nonhighway &Offroad	1.2 %	-	98.8 %

Table 2: Proportion of awarded proposals (2016-20) by park acreage (per thousand residents)

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
WA census tracts	28.2 %	15.8 %	56.0 %
WWRP-Local Parks	15.4 %	14.1 %	70.5 %
WWRP-Trails	4.0 %	8.0 %	88.0 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	14.3 %	85.7 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	-	100 %
Youth Athletic-large	3.8 %	20.3 %	75.9 %
Youth Athletic-small	16.7 %	-	83.3 %
Aquatic Lands	5.7 %	9.4 %	84.9 %
Boating Facilities	4.4 %	-	95.6 %
Firearms & Archery	-	4.8 %	95.2 %
Nonhighway &Offroad	1.6 %	-	98.4 %

Table 3: Proportion of proposal activity (2016-20) by park acreage (per thousand residents)

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
WA census tracts	28.2 %	15.8 %	56.0 %
WWRP-Local Parks	8.1 %	17.7 %	74.2 %
WWRP-Trails	7.1 %	7.1 %	85.9 %
WWRP-Water Access	2.2 %	11.1 %	86.7 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	-	100 %
Youth Athletic-large	4.5 %	20.2 %	75.3 %
Youth Athletic-small	16.7 %	-	83.3 %
Aquatic Lands	5.6 %	9.3 %	85.2 %
Boating Facilities	5.0 %	-	95.0 %
Firearms & Archery	-	4.5 %	95.5 %
Nonhighway &Offroad	1.9 %	-	98.1 %

Table 4: Proposal success rates (2016-20) by park acreage (per thousand residents)

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
WA census tracts	28.2 %	15.8 %	56.0 %
WWRP-Local Parks	60.0 %	25.0 %	29.9 %
WWRP-Trails	16.7 %	33.3 %	30.1 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	80.0 %	61.5 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	-	68.2 %
Youth Athletic-large	75.0 %	88.9 %	89.6 %
Youth Athletic-small	100 %	-	100 %
Aquatic Lands	100 %	100 %	97.8 %
Boating Facilities	80.0 %	-	89.6 %
Firearms & Archery	-	100 %	95.2 %
Nonhighway &Offroad	57.1 %	-	68.5 %

- Communities of Color are underinvested by most RCO grant programs, particularly those with low park and greenspace acreage.** Since 2016, census tracts that were at least one-fifth Black saw grants in only 3 of 13 program accounts, with only 2 at a proportional level to the statewide total. Census tracts that were at least one-fifth American Indian or Alaska Native received grants in only 4 of 13 program accounts. Census tracts that were at least one-fifth Asian received no grants in 3 program accounts and were markedly underinvested in 11 accounts. Census tracts that were at least one-fifth Hispanic/Latinx received no grants in 4 program accounts and were markedly underinvested in 9 accounts (see Tables 5-6).

Of further concern, only 2 proposals and awards were located in communities of color with lower park and conservation acreage (less than 3 per thousand residents) during the past three funding cycles. As Table 7 demonstrates, high-acreage White census tracts make up 55% of all Washington census tracts, but received 89% of awarded grants, whereas low- and medium-acreage tracts were underinvested across all groups. Notably, high-acreage communities of color were awarded grants

at closer to proportional levels, but not at the disproportionately higher levels of high-acreage White census tracts.

Table 5: Proposal activity (2016-20) by race¹²

	Black alone (20%+)	Asian alone (20%+)	Am Ind/Ak Nat alone (20%+)	Hispanic or Latino (20%+)	White alone (20%+)
WA census tracts	30 (2%)	145 (10%)	12 (1%)	190 (13%)	1,417 (98%)
WWRP-Local Parks	4 (2%)	8 (3%)	5 (2%)	39 (16%)	238 (96%)
WWRP-Trails	3 (4%)	10 (12%)	-	5 (6%)	84 (99%)
WWRP-Water Access	-	2 (4%)	-	3 (7%)	45 (100%)
WWRP-State Parks	-	2 (5%)	-	-	44 (100%)
WWRP-Riparian	-	2 (6%)	-	-	35 (100%)
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	2 (6%)	-	-	31 (100%)
Youth Athletic-large	-	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	15 (17%)	84 (94%)
Youth Athletic-small	-	-	-	1 (8%)	12 (100%)
Aquatic Lands	-	5 (9%)	-	2 (4%)	54 (100%)
Boating Facilities	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	15 (15%)	99 (98%)
Firearms & Archery	-	-	-	5 (23%)	22 (100%)
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	19 (5%)	363 (100%)
Community Forests	-	-	-	-	15 (100%)

Table 6: Awarded proposals (2016-20) by race¹³

	Black alone (20%+)	Asian alone (20%+)	Am Ind/Ak Nat alone (20%+)	Hispanic or Latino (20%+)	White alone (20%+)
WA census tracts	30 (2%)	145 (10%)	12 (1%)	190 (13%)	1,417 (98%)
WWRP-Local Parks	2 (3%)	4 (5%)	-	10 (14%)	73 (99%)
WWRP-Trails	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	-	-	25 (100%)
WWRP-Water Access	-	2 (8%)	-	1 (4%)	24 (100%)
WWRP-State Parks	-	2 (9%)	-	-	23 (100%)
WWRP-Riparian	-	-	-	-	18 (100%)
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	1 (6%)	-	-	16 (100%)
Youth Athletic-large	-	3 (4%)	3 (4%)	14 (19%)	71 (95%)
Youth Athletic-small	-	-	-	1 (8%)	12 (100%)
Aquatic Lands	-	4 (8%)	-	2 (4%)	53 (100%)
Boating Facilities	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	14 (16%)	89 (99%)
Firearms & Archery	-	-	-	5 (24%)	21 (100%)
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	10 (4%)	248 (100%)
Community Forests	-	-	-	-	6 (100%)

¹² A small portion of proposals counted for more than one race identified within the data table, when those proposals were located within census tracts that had multiple races accounting for 20% or more of population.

¹³ A small portion of proposals counted for more than one race identified within the data table, when those proposals were located within census tracts that had multiple races accounting for 20% or more of population.

Table 7: Proposals and awards by race and park acreage (per thousand residents)¹⁴

census tracts proposals / awards	Black alone (20%+)	Asian alone (20%+)	Am Ind/Ak Nat alone (20%+)	Hispanic or Latino (20%+)	White alone (20%+)
low (<3 acres)	9 (1%) 1 / 1 (0% / 0%)	48 (3%) - / -	3 (0%) - / -	59 (4%) 1 / 1 (0% / 0%)	395 (27%) 49 / 29 (4% / 4%)
medium (3-8 acres)	8 (1%) 1 / - (0% / -)	23 (2%) - / -	1 (0%) - / -	47 (3%) 21 / 10 (2% / 1%)	222 (15%) 79 / 37 (7% / 5%)
high (8+ acres)	13 (1%) 6 / 4 (1% / 1%)	74 (5%) 36 / 22 (3% / 3%)	8 (1%) 11 / 6 (1% / 1%)	84 (6%) 82 / 46 (7% / 7%)	800 (55%) 998 / 613 (87% / 89%)

- Some RCO grant programs serve lower-income communities at proportional levels to population, but not where there is low park and greenspace acreage.** Lower-income census tracts (those with median household incomes below \$50,000) make up 21.5% of the statewide total and received 4-32% of funding in a given grant account, 4-50% of awarded proposals, and account for 0-50% of proposal activity during the past three funding cycles. Conversely moderate-income census tracts (those with median household incomes up to \$100,000) make up 62% of the statewide total and received 50-92% of funding, 50-84% of awarded proposals and account for 50-80% of proposal activity in a given grant account (see tables 8-10). Accounts geared more towards parks and physical activity (which tend to be the most competitive) were closer to proportional than other accounts, but still underserved lower-income census tracts in some cases. It is important to note, however, that proposal activity and grant awards still skewed heavily toward places with already high park and conservation acreage, whether they were lower- or moderate-income census tracts. This disparity can be seen when noting that moderate-income/higher-acreage areas fielded a proposal and grant award for nearly every applicable census tract, whereas lower-income/lower-acreage areas fielded a proposal for every 9.1 census tracts and an award for every 16.7 census tracts (see Tables 11-12).

¹⁴ A small portion of proposals/awards counted for more than one race identified within the data table, when those proposals were located within census tracts that had multiple races accounting for 20% or more of population.

Table 8: Proportion of awarded funding (2016-20) by median household income

	very low <25k	low 25-50k	moderate 50-100k	high 100-200k
WA census tracts	1.0 %	20.5 %	61.9 %	16.7 %
WWRP-Local Parks	-	18.9 %	70.2 %	10.8 %
WWRP-Trails	-	15.1 %	76.5 %	8.4 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	21.8 %	51.6 %	26.6 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	13.3 %	64.5 %	22.1 %
WWRP-Riparian	-	27.4 %	72.6 %	-
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	-	56.6 %	43.4 %
Youth Athletic-large	-	31.1 %	60.0 %	8.8 %
Youth Athletic-small	-	49.3 %	50.7 %	-
Aquatic Lands	1.8 %	18.5 %	59.2 %	20.5 %
Boating Facilities	-	16.2 %	80.6 %	3.2 %
Firearms & Archery	-	4.6 %	78.2 %	17.2 %
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	10.1 %	77.3 %	12.5 %
Community Forests	-	8.9 %	91.1 %	

Table 9: Proportion of awarded proposals (2016-20) by median household income

	very low <25k	low 25-50k	moderate 50-100k	high 100-200k
WA census tracts	1.0 %	20.5 %	61.9 %	16.7 %
WWRP-Local Parks	-	21.8 %	66.7 %	11.5 %
WWRP-Trails	-	28.0 %	64.0 %	8.0 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	17.9 %	57.1 %	25.0 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	20.0 %	63.3 %	16.7 %
WWRP-Riparian	-	36.8 %	63.2 %	-
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	-	73.7 %	26.3 %
Youth Athletic-large	-	34.8 %	56.2 %	9.0 %
Youth Athletic-small	-	50.0 %	50.0 %	-
Aquatic Lands	1.9 %	17.0 %	60.4 %	20.8 %
Boating Facilities	-	17.8 %	78.9 %	3.3 %
Firearms & Archery	-	4.8 %	81.0 %	14.3 %
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	10.1 %	79.4 %	10.5 %
Community Forests	-	16.7 %	83.3 %	-

Table 10: Proportion of proposal activity (2016-20) by median household income

	very low <25k	low 25-50k	moderate 50-100k	high 100-200k
WA census tracts	1.0 %	20.5 %	61.9 %	16.7 %
WWRP-Local Parks	0.4 %	23.4 %	67.7 %	8.5 %
WWRP-Trails	2.4 %	20.0 %	60.0 %	17.6 %
WWRP-Water Access	-	15.6 %	60.0 %	22.4 %
WWRP-State Parks	-	20.5 %	65.9 %	13.6 %
WWRP-Riparian	-	34.3 %	57.1 %	8.6 %
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	-	71.0 %	29.0 %
Youth Athletic-large	-	32.9 %	57.0 %	10.1 %
Youth Athletic-small	-	50.0 %	50.0 %	-
Aquatic Lands	1.9 %	16.7 %	59.3 %	22.2 %
Boating Facilities	-	17.8 %	79.2 %	3.0 %
Firearms & Archery	-	9.1 %	77.3 %	13.6 %
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	14.0 %	76.3 %	9.6 %
Community Forests	-	40.0 %	53.3 %	6.7 %

Table 11: Census tracts per proposal by income and park acreage

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
low/very low (<50k)	9.1	2.3	0.8
moderate (50-100k)	8.4	2.8	0.7
high (100-200k)	58.0	4.4	1.2

Table 12: Census tracts per award by income and park acreage

	low (<3 acres)	medium (3-8 acres)	high (8+ acres)
very low (<25k)	16.7	5.2	1.4
moderate (50-100k)	11.1	5.7	1.1
high (100-200k)	58.0	7.0	2.0

- **Sizeable differences in proposal activity are the driving factor in disparate funding outcomes.** The granting disparities described above occurred despite proposal success rates that were similar (or occasionally better) in lower-acreage, lower-income and racially diverse communities. Gaps in awareness of RCO funding opportunities provide a partial explanation for these differences, but does not tell the whole story. Capacity differentials, barriers to civic participation and influence, and compounding issue priorities created by generations of exclusion, discrimination and neglect have produced a challenging but not insurmountable context for grantmaking, necessitating fresh approaches by funders. A sustained, multi-faceted effort will be needed to generate proposals where they are most needed, including a new focus on collaboration and innovative project models, building the capacity of applicants that have a track record of working in and with underserved communities but are newer to the field of conservation, and continuing efforts to make proposal and administrative structures accessible.

- **Smaller jurisdictions (5,000 population or fewer) field successful proposals at similar rates to larger jurisdictions, but some population-related criteria do impact outcomes.** Smaller jurisdictions obtained grants for 52% of their proposals in the past three funding cycles, while those with populations above 150,000 succeeded on 51% of their proposals (see Table 13). On a per constituent basis, smaller jurisdictions consistently proposed and were awarded a higher ratio of grants than those moderately and larger sized jurisdictions across the grant programs applicable to this study (see Tables 14-15). However, jurisdictions that met criteria for Urban Growth Areas (UGA) and county population density showed a 12.5% higher success rate in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program-Local Parks account. The analysis also noted 16 proposals (of local, state, and federal applicants) during the past three funding cycles that scored well enough to be funded were it not for these withheld points, which do not relate to vulnerable or marginalized populations at the local level.

Table 13: Proposal success rates (2016-20) by jurisdiction size

constituents	<2,500	5k-10k	10-20k	20-150k	150k+
WWRP-Local Parks	31.8 %	16.0 %	26.2 %	44.6 %	24.5 %
WWRP-Trails	8.3 %	37.5 %	27.3 %	27.3 %	44.0 %
WWRP-Water Access	62.5 %	0.0 %	80.0 %	44.4 %	85.7 %
WWRP-Riparian	-	-	-	0.0 %	0.0 %
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	-	0.0 %	66.7 %	50.0 %
Youth Athletic-large	70.0 %	70.0 %	90.9 %	100 %	100 %
Youth Athletic-small	100 %	100 %	-	-	-
Aquatic Lands	100 %	100 %	100 %	96.3 %	100 %
Boating Facilities	85.7 %	100 %	50.0 %	84.2 %	87.5 %
Firearms & Archery	-	-	-	50.0 %	-
Nonhighway &Offroad	0.0 %	-	-	46.7 %	46.2 %
Community Forests	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	50.0 %	0.0 %

Table 14: Constituents per proposal (2016-20) by jurisdiction size

constituents	<2,500	5k-10k	10-20k	20-150k	150k+
WWRP-Local Parks	5,515	8,882	13,179	46,664	160,214
WWRP-Trails	20,223	27,757	50,319	176,050	314,019
WWRP-Water Access	30,335	222,056	110,701	215,172	1,121,495
WWRP-Riparian	-	-	-	3,873,091	3,925,232
WWRP-Urban Wildlife			276,752	1,291,030	1,962,616
Youth Athletic-large	24,268	22,206	50,319	121,034	713,678
Youth Athletic-small	40,446	55,514	-	-	-
Aquatic Lands	48,536	74,019	110,701	143,448	654,205
Boating Facilities	11,556	222,056	92,251	203,847	981,308
Firearms & Archery	-	-	-	1,936,546	-
Nonhighway &Offroad	242,678	-	-	258,206	603,882
Community Forests	242,678	222,056	276,752	1,936,546	7,850,463

Table 15: Constituents per award (2016-20) by jurisdiction size

constituents	<2,500	5k-10k	10-20k	20-150k	150k+
WWRP-Local Parks	17,334	55,514	50,319	104,678	654,205
WWRP-Trails	242,678	74,019	184,501	645,515	713,678
WWRP-Water Access	48,536	-	138,376	484,136	1,308,411
WWRP-Riparian	-	-	-	-	-
WWRP-Urban Wildlife	-	-	-	1,936,546	3,925,232
Youth Athletic-large	34,668	31,722	55,350	121,034	713,678
Youth Athletic-small	40,446	55,514	-	-	-
Aquatic Lands	48,536	74,019	110,701	148,965	654,205
Boating Facilities	13,482	222,056	184,501	242,068	1,121,495
Firearms & Archery				3,873,091	7,850,463
Nonhighway & Offroad	-	-	-	553,299	1,308,411
Community Forests	-	-	-	3,873,091	-

- **Developing grant proposals is time-consuming, which may deter less well-resourced applicants.** Engagement participants estimated that staff can spend well beyond a hundred hours on application and evaluation activities. For small jurisdictions where staff perform a variety of functions, applying for grants comes with significant trade-offs and requires advance planning. Though nonprofits sometimes rely on grant-writing staff and volunteer capacity, they also voiced similar staffing and planning challenges. Further assessment would be needed to determine what extent the complexity of the RCO proposal process discourages smaller and lower-resourced organizations and how that may affect the distribution of greenspace resources. Our review of emerging practices includes government programs that have sought to make adjustments to address the deterrence of less-resourced applicants.
- **The reimbursement model is likely precluding some smaller entities from pursuing RCO funding.** It is difficult to assess how many applicants struggle (or potential applicants would struggle) to pay the up-front costs of developing projects (before reimbursement), or to fund the technical work needed for proposals. However, engagement participants consistently noted that mitigating this challenge could be a game-changer for nonprofits and small local governments seeking to fund greenspace and recreation facilities. This challenge is compounded for nonprofits, whose funding does not always cover basic operations and staffing costs that are essential for project management.
- **Match Reductions improve accessibility to RCO grants, but can limit project size.** Feedback and proposal records show that providing match contributions (i.e. matching shares) is a challenge for some applicants. RCO’s current match reduction structure does help projects in lower-income areas and smaller jurisdictions; however, reducing a project’s required match also reduces its overall budget.¹⁵ This has the potential to preclude or reduce the scope of park and greenspace investment where it may be most needed. The calibration of grant maximums with match reductions can help these projects “pencil-out” (cover costs).

¹⁵ Recreation and Conservation Office, Outdoor Recreation Equity Grant Program, 2021-2023 Budget Request

- **Washington’s nonprofit partners serve an important function in greenspace projects, particularly in under-resourced communities.** Large and small nonprofits have provided crucial energy and guidance for recent greenspace projects in Washington’s underinvested communities. However, stakeholder input and proposal records indicate that nonprofits have not been actively engaged in RCO granting programs. Eligibility barriers are one factor related to this, as nonprofits are precluded from primary sponsorship roles on certain in-demand accounts, such as Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Outdoor Recreation grants. Fiscal sponsors, community-based advisors and multi-sector collaborations are also not recognized as sponsors within current grantmaking programs. A need for sustained investment in nonprofit capacities, and fraught or non-existent collaboration between nonprofits and local park/recreation agencies were also identified as factors in the under-involvement of nonprofits.
- **Current scoring scales rely considerably on the subjective determinations of panelists, which may undermine current and future equity indicators.** With lower proposal activity coming from underinvested, high-vulnerability communities, it is imperative that the evaluation process capture as many project proposals from these areas as are viable and aligned with community vision. Measurements for socioeconomic (e.g. disability, race, income) and health disadvantage are included in some grant criteria and not others, and are sometimes mixed with other inventory and service considerations, leaving panelists to their own interpretation of data points and weighting to determine scores. Our recommendation for project need criteria includes a list of key indicators that can be objectively measured and more directly linked to project scores.
- **Evaluation panels lack important dimensions of diversity.** A lack of social and sectoral diversity on RCO evaluation panels is a widely recognized issue among staff, applicants, equity advocates and panelists themselves. Stakeholders indicated that people representing marginalized and underinvested communities, as well as those contributing non-governmental experience, are typically not part of evaluation panels and suggested that better representation could help make panels better equipped to evaluate proposals. However, stakeholders also noted the difficulty in recruiting diverse panelists with the needed availability and that it will take sustained effort and some innovation.
- **Communications about RCO tend to focus on traditional contacts and could be broadened.** Updates about RCO granting processes have been distributed mainly to prior applicants, government staff, and organizations within the land conservation sector. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to broaden the reach of RCO communications to community development organizations and other small nonprofit project developers that are likely to work toward equity-driven projects, as well as technical assistance providers, park and greenspace equity advocates and other field-building organizations. Given lower proposal activity from these communities, a comprehensive strategy, which includes but is not limited to a proactive communication plan, will be important to increase knowledge and interest.
- **RCO grant agreements involve distinct challenges for some tribal applicants.** During the past three funding cycles, 9 of 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington submitted proposals for grant programs included in this review. Based on the feedback we gathered, waivers of sovereign

immunity have been a deterrent for some tribes in the past, particularly as grant-seeking staff must gain tribal council approval to finalize grant agreements. While the current agreement language resulted from negotiations with tribal representatives across the state, there is also recognition that tribes are not a monolith, and will be encouraged or deterred to varying degrees by the shape of agreement language.

SECTION 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are grounded by the premise that greenspace should serve every community fairly, justly, and safely. However, the least wealthy and most racially diverse communities in Washington continue to be negatively affected by recreation and open space investment patterns.

To help inform future outdoor equity efforts, a multi-faceted review was conducted to identify factors driving the current distribution of greenspace resources (detailed in sections 1 and 2), and to advance policy and funding recommendations to reverse them, described below.

The underlying framework for these recommendations is based on three distinct dimensions of equity that pertain to green infrastructure funding and planning. These lenses were applied to various aspects of the RCO grantmaking process and the broader landscape of greenspace management in Washington:

Distributional Equity includes the spatial distribution of existing recreational facilities and protected spaces, as well as the fiscal allocation of resources to support capital projects and operations.

Procedural Equity involves processes along the grantmaking continuum, from the earliest stages of outreach and engagement to eligibility criteria, scoring rubrics, and evaluation processes. It seeks to remove impediments to viable projects in high need or prioritized areas, so that grantmaking can proceed in ways that result in the fair and equitable distribution of greenspace resources.

Structural Equity addresses underlying policies and norms at the institutional/organizational level that have created and maintained greenspace inequities over time. Structural or systemic factors may include internal staff beliefs, norms and capacities with equity frameworks and practices, and the extent to which course corrections can be made by RCO when it identifies inequities.

Equity recommendations are organized into the following six overarching categories:

- 1) Prioritize funding for high-need areas
- 2) Modify scoring criteria to elevate projects addressing park and greenspace inequities
- 3) Change processes and procedures to support equitable proposal development and review
- 4) Proactively build applicant capacities to attract and support equity-driven sponsors and projects
- 5) Build in structures and criteria to promote community involvement in shaping project proposals
- 6) Fund projects that address intersecting social and economic challenges in communities

Below, each recommendation is followed by a brief description and summary table of specific strategies and approaches to operationalize the recommendation. Not all recommendations may be appropriate for all grant categories. Recommendations focus largely on those that support active recreation such as park, trails, and other open space amenities.

1) Prioritize funding for high-need areas

Funding programs that proactively address (current-day or historically produced) inequities use strategies to close observed gaps. One strategy is to develop a grant program with an explicit focus on the population or geographies of interest. Another strategy is to dedicate portions of program funding for projects that directly address (in both location and service) documented park and greenspace inequities. Mechanisms such as “earmarks” or “set-asides” designate a minimum amount of resources specifically toward geographies, populations, or applicant-types that have historically not received adequate, or equitable funding.

There is not an easy way to determine the “right” percentage of funding that represents a fair and equitable set-aside, given several factors such as: the size of inequities between geographies and population groups, population growth and movement over time, the long timeline between planning and implementing projects, and the complex histories that have shaped current inequities. Recent examples show that the percent set-aside is influenced by political will and public input. However, there is both a tangible and symbolic dimension to the set-aside. Beyond directing real resources to high-need areas, the language governing a set-aside indicates an intent to address identified racial, geographic, health or other inequity in grantmaking and may be a way to build and strengthen the pool of applicants from historically under-resourced areas. One way to start is to base the set-aside amount on the percentage of population living in marginalized communities. Current practices signal that set-asides can also account for past harm and be calibrated to redress and reverse racial and health inequity, which necessitates a further commitment of funding beyond what is proportional.

For RCO, a new equity-focused grant program provides a direct mechanism for funding needed projects in the short-term and provides time for potential statutory changes and further analysis of existing programs, though it should not be considered a substitute for embedding equitable funding strategies throughout RCO’s procedures and practices.

Operational strategies:

1.1	Update fund allocation policies for WWRP Outdoor Recreation and Youth Athletic Facilities (YAF) grants to dedicate (i.e. set-aside) no less than 18.75% of account funding for proposals located in areas lacking ¼-mile park/greenspace proximity that are also in the bottom third of census tracts for household income or the top third of census tracts for asthma or diabetes hospitalization rates. Also provide a qualitative method for proposals to access this funding source by describing how those served disproportionately experience access barriers to greenspace in addition to social, economic, health or environmental hardships.
1.2	Work with state legislators and outdoor equity advocates to create a transitional Outdoor Equity Grant program that funds high-quality parks and greenspace, recreation facilities, trails and youth sports facilities in underinvested areas. The program should fund planning and pre-development costs and require zero or minimal matching funds, conditional upon community input that is demonstrably

	incorporated into project scope and design. After a finite number of grant cycles, funding for the Outdoor Equity Grant program should be shifted permanently to set-asides advancing equity in other grant programs.
1.3	Analyze a potential revision to the WWRP Local Parks account to include distinct categories for large and small jurisdictions.
1.4.1	Refine match reduction criteria to more specifically consider the neighborhood-level conditions surrounding projects sites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Minimize the required match for proposals located within/adjacent to low park-acreage census tracts (<3 acres per thousand residents) that also have low/very-low household incomes (<60% of county median). ○ Minimize the required match for jurisdictions of 20,000 residents or fewer that also have low/very low household incomes (<60% of county median); for projects that provide specific climate and accessibility features (e.g. shade-sheds, splash-pads, universal playgrounds) in new or substantially upgraded form
1.4.2	Make all match reductions conditional upon the documentation of a collaborative process, including iterative design/scoping meetings and/or project MOU agreements (as described in 5.3).
1.4.3	Raise maximum grant limits to enable the adequate funding of grant proposals utilizing match reductions (i.e. located in historically underinvested, high-need communities), based on an analysis of recent project costs within key program accounts. Consider structuring maximum grant thresholds on an inverse scale corresponding to the required match.
1.5	Analyze the potential demand for match reductions in the Aquatic Lands Enhancement (ALEA) and Boating Facilities Program (BFP).

2) Modify proposal scoring criteria to elevate projects addressing park and greenspace inequities

Grantmaking relies on objective and subjective measures. When seeking to address inequities, evaluation criteria should elevate proposals aimed at equity goals set by the grant maker. RCO should adjust “project need” criteria at one-third or more of the overall points range so that addressing RCO-identified gap areas is emphasized alongside criteria related to design and cost. Because the equity review has identified measures of underinvestment, RCO can use these measures to clarify project need and weight its impact within the scoring rubric. In future rounds of granting, as RCO notices whether gaps are closing or widening, it could increase the weight of project need, as appropriate. In the public sector and private grantmaking, it is common to weight project need to emphasize its importance. The strategies described below also address places where criteria could be working against needed projects in smaller jurisdictions or in urban neighborhoods, because they do not prioritize underinvested populations (e.g. UGA boundaries, county population density) or consider the context of high-need areas (e.g. scenic values).

Operational strategies:

2.1	Reassess point scale to reward projects that provide climate and accessibility related features (e.g. shade-sheds, splash-pads, universal playgrounds) in low-income census tracts.
2.2	Update evaluation criteria to provide more weighting for proposals that addresses park/greenspace access, health/environmental vulnerability, and community engagement and partnership. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assess point scales to increase emphasis on <i>Project Need</i>. ○ Assess point scales to increase emphasis on <i>Project Support</i>.
2.3	Update <i>Project Need</i> criteria to include current best management practices for proximity and access to outdoor recreation facilities, trails and amenities:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Population living more than a ¼-mile walking distance from a publicly-owned park, greenspace or trail ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in low/very-low income census tracts ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in census tracts with 35% or more persons of color ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in higher disability census tracts ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in higher hospitalization census tracts for asthma, diabetes or heart disease ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in lower life expectancy census tracts ○ Population within a ¼-mile walking distance of project site that reside in lower tree equity census blocks ○ Walking distance to the nearest prominent climate and accessibility related recreational features (e.g. shade-sheds, splash-pads, universal playgrounds) ○ Walking distance to the nearest existing recreation amenity identified as a priority need through community engagement (e.g. operational barbeque stalls)
2.4	Assess evaluation criteria where smaller communities may be disadvantaged by population data that is not specific to the project vicinity or vulnerable user-groups.
2.5	Eliminate scoring for scenic values in the WWRP-Trails category to reduce the competitive imbalance between pristine natural areas and locations offering daily access to greenspace and physical activity.
2.6	Update <i>Project Need</i> criteria to provide additional points if an inventory of recreation facilities/amenities within a jurisdiction is provided, including a comparison of maintenance levels and existing conditions.

3) Change processes and procedures to support equitable proposal development and review

Presentations are a challenging part of the RCO proposal process for some applicants. Converting to virtual presentations during the pandemic affecting the 2020 and 2022 funding cycles has been welcomed, but applicants still seek clarity on presentation quality and scoring outcomes. Evaluation panels are also a key equity variable, as described earlier. The strategies described below focus on a broadened network of communication and collaboration to help build panels with more diverse racial, gender, geographic and sectoral perspectives (including advocates and community leaders), and compensation for this vital form of participation.

An important opportunity for expanding a base of equity-driven applicants relates to fiscal procedures. RCO should collaborate with legislators and analysts to study potential granting structures that would fund pre-development activities, such as architectural and engineering work, other technical functions, as well as participation and facilitation stipends for design workshops. Possibilities for advance reimbursement, direct invoicing methods, and funding of the overhead/indirect costs of nonprofit applicants (who are systematically underfunded in this regard) should be considered.

Part of a continual improvement process towards equity involves routine assessment of actions taken, learnings and potential shifts in outcomes. Where equity-related gaps persist, state partners should work with RCO to fund and implement solutions.

Operational strategies:

3.1	Make remote presentations (utilizing online meeting platforms) a permanent option for applicants, beyond the current pandemic.
3.2	Provide a standardized presentation format in advance of panel evaluation sessions (for each program subaccount, updated for each granting cycle). These templates should clarify for applicants and panelists a baseline level of graphic content and project details, the organization/progressions of slide content (including time estimates), and links between content areas and the evaluative criteria to be scored.
3.3	Consider methods for providing more detailed feedback related to scoring outcomes to applicants following presentations.
3.4	Create an eligible project type and allowable costs for pre-development activities, based on a proposal's location. This proposal classification would provide advance funding for architectural and engineering work, appraisals, permitting work, and other technical functions, as well as participation and facilitation stipends for design workshops.
3.5	Enable direct invoicing or cash advances for anticipated project expenses in RCO grant programs, conditional upon a project's location within a high-need setting and collaboration with community organizations and leaders.
3.6	Develop capacity-focused funding available to nonprofit organizations that supplements the indirect/overhead costs needed to administer grant funded projects.
3.7	To support tribal governments with limited administrative capacity, provide a waiver option from competitive procurement requirements.
3.8.1	Update evaluation panel charters to achieve improved social, geographic and sectoral representation among panel participants.
3.8.2	Implement strategies that help improve social, geographic and sectoral representation within evaluation panels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continue offering volunteer compensation (stipends) for community participants and non-profit/tribal representatives (as implemented in September 2021) ○ Solicit panelist referral lists from relevant state commissions, as well as park equity and environmental justice organizations. ○ Utilize an expanded, multi-sectoral contacts list (as described in 4.7) to more broadly communicate about panel participation.
3.9	Develop performance measures to track impacts of equity efforts, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Proportion of proposal activity, grant awards and funding amounts based on race, income, park/greenspace access, health/environmental vulnerability, jurisdiction size, geographic regions, etc. ○ Analysis of proposals in underinvested geographies (neighborhood and regional level) to identify scoring gaps, capacity barriers, and process disruptions ○ Analysis of proposal elements and project features (e.g. universal playgrounds, shade-sheds, snack bars), and other relative weighting within scoring rubrics ○ Report on progress and learnings of capacity-building efforts, in both external collaborative settings and within the agency.

4) Proactively build applicant capacities to attract and support equity-driven sponsors and projects

Reversing differences in proposal activity between high- and low-acreage communities is crucial to narrowing gaps in greenspace access. Recognizing that entities which may be most able to develop equity driven proposals, because of location and experience, may not have sought RCO grants before, RCO should invest in a proactive technical assistance program to grow and diversify its base of applicants.

One approach RCO can use is to assemble a consultant “bench” with a range of expertise to help applicants create excellent project proposals. In addition to addressing content and technical expertise, RCO’s bench should be diverse racially, culturally and linguistically. As noted earlier, structural factors have excluded many non-white groups from the recreation and conservation arena, writ large. RCO’s efforts to include and invite projects grounded in various dimensions of equity will therefore require proactive steps to address these norms in the field.

RCO should also return to providing more frequent webinars between grant cycles, with a greater focus on content standards and proposal techniques. Because RCO delivers assistance through grants managers, and they are frequently working at capacity, a new funding commitment to support this work will be needed.

Another key pathway for investing in applicant capacities is to collaborate with philanthropies, equity-minded conservancies, and advocacy organizations that are also committed to improving equitable outcomes for park and greenspace accessibility. RCO can help to inform both private and government funders as they consider strategies to support nonprofits to grow their capacity to develop proposals, fund projects and administer grants.

Finally, RCO should implement regular communications with non-profits, private foundations, and equity-focused conservancies to provide grant program updates and highlight emerging practices and collaboration opportunities in the park and outdoor equity field.

Operational strategies:

4.1	<p>Implement a <i>Technical Assistance</i> program that deploys specialized expertise in support of project applicants in underinvested jurisdictions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Retain a consultant “bench” encompassing these and other knowledge areas: proposal development, site/environmental analysis, sustainability, project design, cost estimation, compliance/permitting, operations/maintenance planning, community engagement, partnerships/agreements, grants administration, project implementation ○ Include consultant expertise that is familiar with the capacity limitations of small jurisdictions, tribes and nonprofit organizations ○ Utilize eligibility and prioritization criteria (similar to <i>Project Need</i> metrics described in 2.3) to determine the recipients of technical assistance resources in a given grant cycle ○ Coordinate a peer-to-peer learning exchange that connects less experienced applicants with grantees of similar projects
4.2	<p>Conduct a series of webinars before the start of each granting cycle, with in-depth and practical content that addresses challenging aspects of project proposals (e.g. cost estimates, project design, environmental procedures, need assessment, presentations) and describes successful examples of past proposals from each grant program subaccount. A portion of the webinar should be devoted to Q-and-A and content should be shaped by applicant feedback from the previous cycle.</p>
4.3	<p>Develop technical assistance guides for each grant program that help to clarify high-quality proposal standards, and crowdsource practical methods for developing proposal components from recent applicants. These should be supplemental to grant manuals, which serve to define requirements and protocols for the proposal process and grant implementation.</p>
4.4	<p>Develop grants available to nonprofit organizations that focus on project administration, community engagement, and other aspects of project development and implementation.</p>
4.5	<p>Continue to augment the SCORP Grant Applications Data Tool with easily referenceable socioeconomic, health and environmental information that applicants use to articulate project need. Incorporate new</p>

	measurement tools of park/greenspace access, proximity to specialized recreation amenities, and compounding health/environmental disadvantage as they are available.
4.6	Sponsor and co-facilitate convening events (i.e. workshops, webinars) that highlight innovative greenspace funding and project development trends in underinvested, environmentally-burdened communities. Potential content could include the Parks for People collaboration in the Wenatchee Valley, the work of Seattle Parks Foundation partner organizations, and the development methods of urban parkland trusts/conservancies. A key goal of such convenings is to share and replicate emerging practices between Washington communities and beyond, and to catalyze collaboration between sectors and with RCO.
4.7.1	Expand the active contacts lists used by RCO for email updates to include equity-focused and community development organizations throughout the state.
4.7.2	Implement a communications strategy (between grant cycles) for equity-focused and community development organizations that highlights community-driven mechanisms (e.g. MOU) for RCO proposals and case examples.
4.8	Implement learning curriculum amongst RCO staff and RCFB membership that builds knowledge of historic and present-day injustice related to outdoor equity and community-level challenges that intersect with greenspace, as well as emerging funding and design models advanced by equity practitioners. The curriculum should include both externally and internally led activities.
4.9	Adopt an increased rate of overhead funding within grant program budgets to accommodate additional capacity needed to manage capacity-building activities and other equity-related actions.

5) Build in structures and criteria to promote community involvement in shaping project proposals

To ensure greater inclusion of community voices and perspectives, RCO should create more flexibility for collaborating sponsors and community groups to be named on RCO proposals. This will help to deepen engagement and oversight at a local level as projects move from design to implementation. Structures that document community agreements and contributions toward RCO proposals can also help to solidify project partnerships where trust-building is needed or where local issues are particularly sensitive.

Project Support criteria is another place where RCO can signal the importance of authentic engagement and reward proposals deriving from community-level knowledge and priorities. Equity driven nonprofits and tribes often do this work already – based on their own participatory values – so it is also important and more equitable to reward those engagement efforts that produce better contextualized project proposals. Recommendations below provide additional guidance for assessing community involvement.

Operational strategies:

5.1	Make nonprofit organizations eligible applicants for Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) grants in the local parks, trails and water access categories.
5.2	Allow community-based organizations utilizing fiscal sponsorships to be identified as secondary sponsors of RCO grant proposals.
5.3	Work with nonprofits to develop Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) templates to help guide partnerships between agency applicants, community organizations and private sector funders. MOU templates should clarify how project scope and design details advance the equity goals of community leaders and respond to local factors and intersecting social and economic challenges.
5.4	Consider evaluation criteria that rewards land and habitat conservation proposals collaboratively developed with local tribes.
5.5	Revise <i>Project Support</i> criteria to emphasize more thorough, authentic and collaborative forms of community engagement. A potential scoring scale could include:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Minimal scores for support letters, supportive public comments at adoption hearings, informative sessions that provide superficial opportunities for input, or a mere lack of documented public opposition ○ Better scores for voter-approved funding or planning processes that are specific to the immediate neighborhood context of a project, or paired with collaborative project design efforts ○ Better scores for outreach processes that are collaboratively planned and facilitated with community organizations and leaders, are adapted for distinct user-groups, and document an iterative process for input gathering and related design/scope outcomes ○ Maximum scores for the execution of a project MOU (as described in 5.3)
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6) Fund projects that address intersecting social and economic challenges in communities

Greenspace and its related programming provide critical physical and social infrastructure for promoting health and wellbeing in all communities, but especially in environmentally and socially disadvantaged communities. Greenspaces intersects, directly and indirectly, with other social, cultural and economic issues, such as universal accessibility, housing stability, and community safety and self-determination. Best practices in greenspace management from across the nation show staff working outside of statutory silos to advance collaboration, partnerships and strategies at these intersections. There is potential for RCO to play a proactive and facilitative role in identifying solutions (particularly those advanced through grant funding mechanisms) to benefit all Washingtonians in a fair and just manner.

Universal design features amplify the benefits of greenspace investments by improving the experiential quality of outdoor and public space for people with physical, auditory or visual disabilities, autism, or neuro-cognitive disorders. Considering these broader design features could result in scoring criteria that identifies and rewards higher levels of inclusivity. Direct involvement from these user groups is also essential for developing responsive design treatments at specific project sites. At the same time, there continues to be a lag in many places for adopting and implementing transition plans that would help to ensure physical connectivity to parks and recreation assets. RCO should consider how to evaluate proposals where accessibility gaps may still impact connectivity to greenspace.

Where **cultural and housing displacement** pressures impact neighborhoods, it is important that established community members see their values and needs reflected in local greenspace. The design and management of greenspace can provide valuable community reference points for social gathering, exercise, rest, and celebration, while also helping to interpret a neighborhood’s cultural and historic roots. However, greenspace investments that are made without a mindful contextualization of these factors can appear to be preferencing the needs of newcomers and supporting speculative forces in local housing and commercial markets. As these forces amplify, the intended beneficiaries of greenspace investments can be pushed out to places of deeper underinvestment, social isolation, and long commute burdens. RCO programs should consider how cultural and economic stability can be addressed in project proposals. It is also becoming more common for equitable funding models to reward jurisdictions that already have complimentary housing policies adopted.

Questions about **safety** within green space and the public realm often arise in marginalized communities, as well as important new strategies. Safety concerns pose a real barrier to the utilization of greenspace – compounding disparities in access and quality – and involve the distinct experiences of varying identity groups. Racialized policing and the criminalization of unsheltered homelessness also continue to play out in these spaces, underlying the need for community-driven solutions and innovation. RCO can support these efforts by incentivizing design features and safety strategies that derive from violence prevention advocates and residents, particularly those most vulnerable to harassment and over-policing.

RCO’s **work with tribes** has largely focused on cultural resources review and consultation, in addition to routine assistance with proposals provided during granting cycles. However, there is a growing view that climate strategies will need to involve more direct forms of indigenous stewardship to be successful. Creating this synergy will involve nation-to-nation discourses occurring at the highest levels of government, but as a driver of land and resource conservation efforts in Washington, RCO is in a key position to inform and participate in these. Consideration should be given for how RCO grant criteria and procedures could integrate forms of tribal influence.

Operational strategies:

6.1	<p>Incorporate text within <i>Public Need, Need Fulfillment/Project Scope</i> and <i>Project Design</i> evaluation criteria to specifically reward elements of local contextualization, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Analysis of how distinct user-groups (e.g. limited-mobility children, older-adults, women, informal athletes, informal vendors and laborers) existing in a community are likely to utilize project space and features; along with responsive design and programming treatments ○ How project design addresses culturally specific preferences and reinforces existing cultural character ○ Interpretive features (e.g. land recognition) describing ancestral and social histories and ceremonial space included in project design ○ Incorporation of multilingual park/facility signage in languages relevant to users; existing procedural norms for multilingual park/facility communications (e.g. website, promotional material, Board meeting interpretation)
6.2.1	<p>Award evaluation points for engagement processes that produce community-driven recommendations addressing intersecting social and economic challenges, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Complimentary housing policies to help mitigate potential gentrification impacts of project ○ Community-based public safety and violence reduction strategies applicable to site and vicinity ○ Locations of accessibility barriers and preferred treatments within and external to project site ○ Complimentary economic policies related to development and management of project site
6.2.2	<p>Reward proposals that describe innovative work on community-based public safety strategies, housing and anti-displacement strategies, and other intersecting challenges that have potential access and utilization benefits for the project site.</p>
6.2.3	<p>Reward proposals that incorporate physical design treatments (e.g. lighting, plazas, pedestrian design, vendor activation) including those derived from the direct safety-related input of vulnerable users</p>
6.3.1	<p>Include a stand-alone points category (distinct from other project design considerations) that rewards universal design features that exceed minimum accessibility standards and incorporates the direct input of relevant user-groups. Utilize the ASLA Universal Design guide and other innovative practice guidance to inform evaluation criteria.</p>
6.3.2	<p>Award evaluation points for local government applicants that have adopted or updated an ADA transition plan within the previous eight years</p>

6.4	Work with Governor’s Office to help ensure diverse representation on the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (RCFB)
6.5	Implement a tribal liaison staff position, whose responsibilities include efforts to support applicant capacities within the tribal sector, continuing efforts to address structural barriers to developing grant proposals, and forwarding input from tribes related to proposed projects interfacing with ancestral lands and sacred sites.

Conclusion

Prevention Institute is pleased to present this equity review of RCO administered grant programs for the consideration of Washington legislators and stakeholders. It has been an honor to take part in one of the first formal evaluations of equity in recreation and conservation grantmaking initiated by a state legislature.

The budget proviso that led to this work is testament to the values of equity, fairness and transparency held by Washington’s decision-makers and the commitment of RCO leadership to advance a historic shift in how greenspace investments are prioritized. What Washington chooses to accomplish after this review will be observed by other places seeking to optimize efforts to advance environmental sustainability, health equity, economic and racial justice. The actions of the Governor, Legislature, and RCO to embrace and accelerate progress on the findings of this review hold great promise for the future, not just for greenspace equity, but for the many interrelated issues that intersect with recreation and conservation in Washington State and the nation.

Appendix 1

Project Team Descriptions

APPENDIX. PROJECT TEAM DESCRIPTIONS

Equity Review Project Consultant

Prevention Institute is a national nonprofit with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston and Washington, D.C. Our mission is to build prevention and health equity into key policies and actions at the federal, state, local, and organizational levels to ensure that the places where all people live, work, play and learn foster health, safety, and wellbeing. Since 1997, we have partnered with communities, local government entities, foundations, multiple sectors, and public health agencies to bring cutting-edge research, practice, strategy, and analysis to the pressing health and safety concerns of the day. We have applied our approach to injury and violence prevention, healthy eating and active living, land use, health systems transformation, and mental health and wellbeing, among other issues.

Community Engagement Coordinator

The Vida Agency (TVA) is a woman and minority-owned, full-service marketing and communications firm. TVA provides strategic planning for engagement and communications, qualitative and quantitative research and analysis, skilled facilitation for market segments such as public policy, advocacy, health, environment, education, transportation, and more. TVA works with public agencies and private corporations to reach diverse audiences for greater cultural impact. The TVA team is made up of subject matter experts who serve as a seamless extension of their partner teams.

Expert Subconsultants

Sean M. Watts, Ph.D. is the owner SM Watts Consulting, LLC – empowering communities to drive environmental and land use policy and helping historically white-led organizations move from awareness to action on diversity, equity and inclusion. He has worked for two decades to bridge gaps between science, policy and society to create solutions that yield the greatest human health and ecological benefits. Before launching his consultancy, Sean was Director of Community Partnerships for the Seattle Parks Foundation. There he created programs to build capacity among resident-led groups for policy advocacy and community-driven open space planning, prioritization and implementation.

Jon Christensen teaches and conducts multidisciplinary research focusing on equity and the environment, is a board member of Los Angeles River State Park Partners, and has collaborated with Prevention Institute on a range of park funding and community engagement efforts. He is a founder of the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies at the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability. He is also a partner and strategic adviser at Stamen Design, an interactive design and technology firm specializing in mapping, data visualization, and strategic communications.

Geospatial Subconsultant

GreenInfo Network supports public interest organizations and agencies with a wide range of information technology, to enable their environmental, conservation, public health, social justice and other missions.