



PROPOSED: Planning for Recreation Access Evaluation Criteria Changes

Public Comment Packet

March 2, 2026

Background

The Planning for Recreation Access (PRA) grant program was created in 2021 when the Washington State Legislature allocated capital funding for recreation planning grants in communities that lack access to the outdoors. PRA projects specifically address recreation gaps in small, rural communities and diverse neighborhoods in dense urban areas. In addition, the program prioritizes those who have been less active in Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) development (i.e. construction) grant programs.

Planning for many types of outdoor recreation facilities may be funded through PRA grants including efforts related to developing local parks, trails, water access, community forests, boating, community athletics, and more.

For the 2026 grant round, there will be two distinct types of projects that applicants will choose from:

- 1) **Parks, recreation, and open space (PROS) planning**, or comprehensive parks planning;
- 2) **Site-specific planning**, which includes, but is not limited to architectural and engineering pre-design, design, or construction ready plans or bid documents, feasibility studies, environmental and cultural resources surveys, or permitting.

Preparation for 2026 Grant Round

RCO will accept applications for PRA in mid-2026. In anticipation of this second grant round, RCO is reviewing the program and making changes to policies and practices. These changes are based on input from applicant and advisory committee surveys in

2023 and ongoing sponsor and staff feedback. Additionally, RCO is seeking public comment on proposed changes to evaluation criteria.

How to Comment

RCO is requesting public comment on the proposed evaluation criteria in this document. Comments can be submitted by completing the web form at this link: <https://forms.office.com/g/VvPym2AvN>.

The **Proposed Evaluation Criteria** section below may be used as a companion for completion of the web form.

Comments will be accepted until **11:59 pm on Monday, March 16, 2026**.

Questions?

Questions about the proposed criteria changes can be emailed to Leah Dobey, Policy Specialist, at leah.dobey@rco.wa.gov.

Next Steps

RCO staff will use public feedback to inform final evaluation criteria recommendations for the director's approval. Once approved, the PRA grant manual will be posted to the RCO website. The application window for this program is anticipated to be mid-May through mid-July.

Past Evaluation Criteria

In 2022, all PRA applications were evaluated by the same criteria; they were not differentiated by the type of planning project that was proposed. Applicants submitted a letter of interest to answer three questions related to 1) impact of the recreation being planned, 2) engagement and outreach on the project, and 3) the project's opportunity for success.

The 2022 criteria also included eleven data-based (objective) criteria. Nine were based on the project location, and included racial diversity, low density, high density, non-taxable land, low income, park desert, unaffordable housing, environmental health disparity, and community capacity. Two other criteria were based on the applicant's and location's history within RCO grant programs, awarding points to those who had not received development grants in the previous ten years.

Full details of the 2022 criteria are provided in Appendix A to this document.

Proposed Evaluation Criteria

2026 Evaluation Criteria

Two sets of evaluation criteria are being developed for the 2026 PRA grant round: one for PROS planning applications and another for site-specific planning applications. This change recognizes that there are fundamental differences in these stages of planning and will allow applicants to more specifically address their needs and the activities they will undertake, if funded.

Draft Criteria for PROS Planning

PROS planning processes help communities assess existing lands and facilities, gather public input and perspectives, and analyze demand and needs to inform strategic acquisition, development, and programming goals and projects across an entity's service area.

The following questions were designed to support PROS planning in communities that may not have a current or past PROS plan, nor the internal resources to develop one, but that have unmet recreation needs. Attention is also given to applicants that have vetted the intention to plan and gained support within their organizations, and to a lesser extent within their communities. RCO also recognizes the difficulty that some applicants face "getting in the door" to grant programs, and therefore points are available for entities who have not had recent success in RCO development grant programs.

Need. (20 points)

Describe the community's need for a PROS plan. A complete response should address the following:

- **Timing.** Why now is the right time for the community to undergo comprehensive recreation planning.
- **Potential Outcomes.** Has the community provided early input about the types of facilities that are desired? Do you have a sense of what types of facilities this plan may identify?
- **Planning History.** Has the project's jurisdiction adopted a long-range recreation plan in the past? If so, how long has it been since the plan was meaningfully updated?

Opportunity for Success. (10 points)

What has been done to gain support for PROS planning within the applicant’s organization and community? A complete response should address the following:

- **Internal Commitment.** What is the level of awareness and commitment within the applicant’s organization to undergo PROS planning? How has that commitment been demonstrated? As applicable, consider the buy-in of the parks director, city administrator, public works director, executive director, governing bodies, etc.
- **External Commitment.** What is the level of awareness and commitment of partners within the community to participate in PROS planning?

Planning Capacity. (10 points)

Describe the planning capacity or lack thereof within the applicant’s organization or jurisdiction, including whether the applicant has access to dedicated planning staff.

Grant History. (5 points, staff scored)

Has the applicant received a recreation development grant from RCO in the past?

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Zero points | Applicant has received a recreation development grant from RCO in the past five years. |
| Two points | Applicant has received a recreation development from RCO in more than five, but less than ten years. |
| Five points | Applicant has not received a recreation development grant from RCO in ten or more years. |

Draft Criteria for Site-specific Planning

Site-specific planning funded through PRA can take many different forms, such as architectural and engineering plans, bid documents, feasibility studies, environmental and cultural resources surveys, permitting, etc.

The following questions were designed to be versatile enough for a wide range of planning stages and activities. These questions elevate applications demonstrating significant need, that have a clear scope of planned activities and that show an understanding of the role of engagement in the planning process. The eleven data-based (objective) criteria used in 2022 have been reduced to four, focusing on those that were found to be most effective in elevating projects in small, rural communities and diverse urban neighborhoods.

Need. (20 points)

Describe the need for a new or improved recreation facility, how the need is known, and why existing amenities in the service area do not satisfy the need. A complete response should address the following:

- A simple inventory and condition of relevant outdoor recreation opportunities in the service area.
- Description of gaps in access, opportunity, or service delivery.
- How the need for this project has been identified and prioritized, including whether it is linked to local recreation or open space plans.

Opportunity for Success. (20 points)

How will the planning effort help to eventually increase or improve recreation access? A complete response should address the following as applicable:

- Description of the planning elements proposed in the project. (For example, 30%, 60%, or 90% design plans; feasibility study; cultural resource survey; permitting, etc.)
- Description of the anticipated use of the project site.
- How the project will assist with closing recreation gaps in the community.

Engagement and Partnerships. (20 points)

RCO encourages applicants to use a variety of methods to gather input on the project and to form partnerships when available. How have or how will those most impacted by the project be engaged? A complete response should address:

- Methods that have been or will be used and the populations engaged, including underserved populations and/or Native American tribes. Describe the significance of that participation within the local community.
- Describe any partnerships that are supporting the project whether through financial, in-kind, project delivery, or other means, and the significance of the partnerships in the local community.
- If the applicant does not control the land, describe any discussions or formal agreements that have occurred with the landowner.

Low Income. (5 points, staff scored)

Is the project located in census tract with a median household income lower than the county median?

Low Density. (5 points, staff scored)

Is the project located in census block with a population density of 25 or less persons per square mile?

High Density. (5 points, staff scored)

Is the project located in census block with a population density of 500 or more persons per square mile?

Grant History. (5 points, staff scored)

Has the applicant received a recreation development grant from RCO in the past?

Zero points Applicant has received a recreation development grant from RCO in the past five years.

Two points Applicant has received a recreation development from RCO in more than five, but less than ten years.

Five points Applicant has not received a recreation development grant from RCO in ten or more years.

Appendix A

2022 Planning for Recreation Access Evaluation Criteria

Criteria responded to via letter of interest	
Recreation Impact 0-6 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what degree does the proposal demonstrate outdoor recreation needs within the community? Does the project serve priority populations including racially diverse, dense, urban neighborhoods or small rural communities? Does the proposal show a clear plan for eventually increasing or improving recreation access through the planning effort?
Engagement and Outreach 0-6 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the proposal describe a well-designed path for meaningfully engaging with the community? Has the applicant worked with the landowner or demonstrated a plan to do so?
Opportunity for Success 0-6 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the proposal's overall budget feasible and reasonable for the scope of the project? If funded, does the applicant have the ability complete the proposed project?
Criteria scored by RCO staff	
Racial Diversity 0-1 point	Project is located in census tract(s) with 35% or higher people of color.
High Density 0-1 point	Project is located in census block(s) with a population density of 500 or more persons per square mile.
Low Density 0-1 point	Project is located in census block(s) with a population density of 25 or less persons per square mile.
Non-Taxable Land 0-1 point	Project is located in a county with 60% or greater non-taxable land base.
Low Income 0-1 point	Project is located in census tract(s) with a median household income lower than the county median.

Park Desert 0-1 point	Project location is outside of a 10-minute walk to a publicly accessible natural area or park.
Unaffordable Housing 0-1 point	Project is located in census tract(s) with a high amount of unaffordable housing, ranked 7 or higher by the Washington Tracking Network ¹ .
Environmental Health Disparity 0-1 point	Project is located in census tract(s) with level of environmental health disparity, ranked 7 or higher by the Washington Tracking Network ² .
Community Capacity 0-1 point	The project location’s Rural Capacity Index ² is below the state mean. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lower score between County Subdivision and Community layers will be used. • For County Subdivision, point is awarded for RCI at or below 69. • For Community, point is awarded for RCI at or below 64.
New Applicant A 0 or 2 points	Project location’s city/town/census designated place has not received an RCO recreation grant in the past 10 years.
New Applicant B 0 or 2 points	Applicant has not received an RCO recreation grant in the past 10 years.

¹ Washington Tracking Network’s Environmental Health Disparity Map <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/wtn/WTNIBL/>

² Rural Capacity Index developed by Headwaters Economics, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/equity/rural-capacity-map/>