

Equity Analysis
Sonoma County Ag + Open Space Matching Grant Program
March 2024

Aligned with Sonoma County Strategic Plan's *Racial Equality and Social Justice Pillar*, Ag + Open Space is committed to working towards achieving racial equity in County service and ensuring a workforce reflective of the community we serve. Ag + Open Space's DEI Committee has been working since the summer of 2020 on staff training and are now, as directed in our community-driven [Vital Lands Initiative](#), developing a roadmap to infuse the principles of racial equity and inclusion throughout our work. The roadmap has the following goals:

- Empower management with tools and direction to lead
- Enhance Ag + Open Space competency and commitment to DEI initiatives
- Embed institutional change in operations and culture
- Focus on recruitment and hiring to diversify and retain talent
- Expand and deepen community engagement / institutional relationships with a DEI lens
- Ensure commitments are sustained into the future

Thus, utilizing the Racial Equity Toolkit (Toolkit), published by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, and the support of the Sonoma County Office of Equity, staff has expanded consideration of racial equity in Matching Grant Program (MGP) decisions, including policies, practices, programs, and budgets. Staff recognizes the Toolkit can help to develop strategies and actions that reduce racial inequities and improve success for underserved members of our community. Below are responses to several questions adapted from the Toolkit provided by the County.

1. How does your Program align with or leverage other Countywide initiatives to advance racial equity?

The Matching Grant Program's goal is to center community in Sonoma County's open space. Thus, by funding acquisition and improvement grants, the program protects vibrant lands and creates inviting open spaces within our cities and communities and at the urban edge, providing an opportunity for residents and visitors alike to experience open space in and near Sonoma County's population centers.

Matching Grant open space projects have the potential to transform communities. They provide places to find solitude; hold public, family, and cultural gatherings; get exercise; grow local food; sequester carbon, mitigate wildfire and flooding, and provide relief from overheated environments; and experience and learn about the importance of natural resources and agriculture in the landscape. The Matching Grant Program aims to bring these benefits to all of Sonoma County's diverse and unique communities, especially those that are underserved, including communities of color and those with low incomes.

Aligned with the County Strategic Plan's *Racial Equality and Social Justice Pillar*, the Ag + Open Space's *Vital Lands Initiative* provides additional guidance in advancing racial equity, including initiatives to:

- Protect a variety of lands that ensure an equitable distribution of benefits to our diverse communities;
- Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaptation, which disproportionately impact communities of color and those experiencing low incomes; and
- Partner with community-based non-profit and public agencies and ensure that all communities have open space to enjoy.

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Specifically, the MGP has leveraged other County initiatives to advance racial equity by partnering with community-based applicants, including non-profit organizations, County agencies, and every incorporated city to develop open spaces in communities that lack open space benefits. To date, the MGP has dedicated over \$50M for 64 projects, which has/is being leveraged with over \$50M in matching grant funds to provide additional benefits to the community. Of those projects, most are located in areas lacking parks and open space, including Bayer Neighborhood Park & Gardens (LandPaths), Andy's Unity Park (Regional Parks), and Colgan Creek Restoration and Neighborhood Park (City of Santa Rosa). In these cases, the MGP provided funding to aid in the acquisition and development of these parks, which are in communities of color that lack open space.

Upon consultation and review of MGP Guidelines and Application, the Office of Equity (OOE) made significant recommendations regarding the program's administration, design, process, and funding recommendations, which have further bolstered alignment with the Board of Director's racial and economic equity strategy. Going forward, the MGP Revision process will continue to leverage the expertise of the OOE, in addition to other community partners, to ensure the MGP continues to evolve and be responsive to our county's need to advance racial equity.

2. What specific racial and/or economic inequities in Sonoma County does this Program intend to address/reduce?

The current MGP Guidelines as noted above provide a general "underserved communities" framework for addressing racial and/or economic inequities in Sonoma County. The current MGP Evaluation Matrix includes criteria that support underserved communities, including:

Intent: Develop new, outdoor nature-based open space, recreation, and urban agriculture opportunities, with preference given to projects located where no such opportunities currently exist.

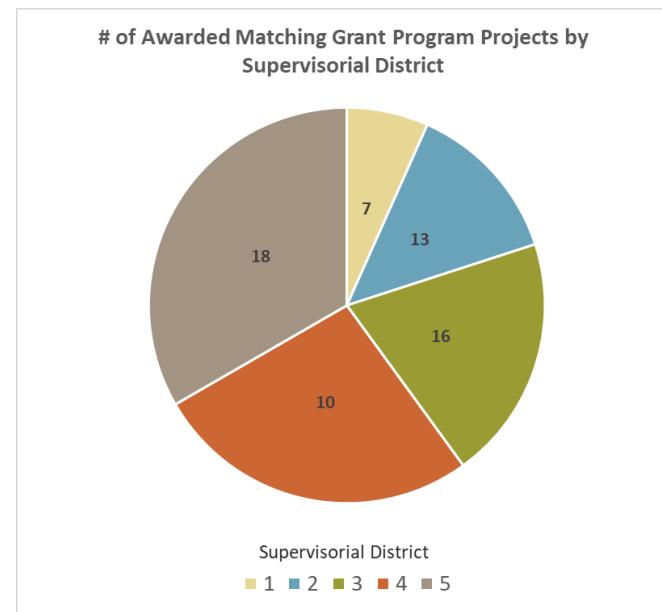
Need: Implement projects that fulfill identified and high priority need within a geographic area.

Benefit: Preference is given to projects that provide multiple benefits including protection, creation, development of new public recreation and/or education opportunities; access to locally grown agricultural products; connection to open space lands (trails/corridors); improvement of public health and natural resources; and benefits to the local economy.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI): While not currently provided a numerical score, proposed projects are assessed on how well they meet DEI goals. The MGP aims "to provide funding for projects that benefit everyone in Sonoma County and to ensure that funding recipients reflect the breadth and diversity of our community. First-time applicants are encouraged to apply. Competitive applications are those for projects in communities where no previous MGP funding has been awarded, where MGP funding has not been awarded in the last two MGP cycles, and/or where little or no access to open space exists nearby."

3. Will the Program have impacts in specific geographic areas (neighborhoods, areas, or regions)? What are the racial demographics of those living in the area?

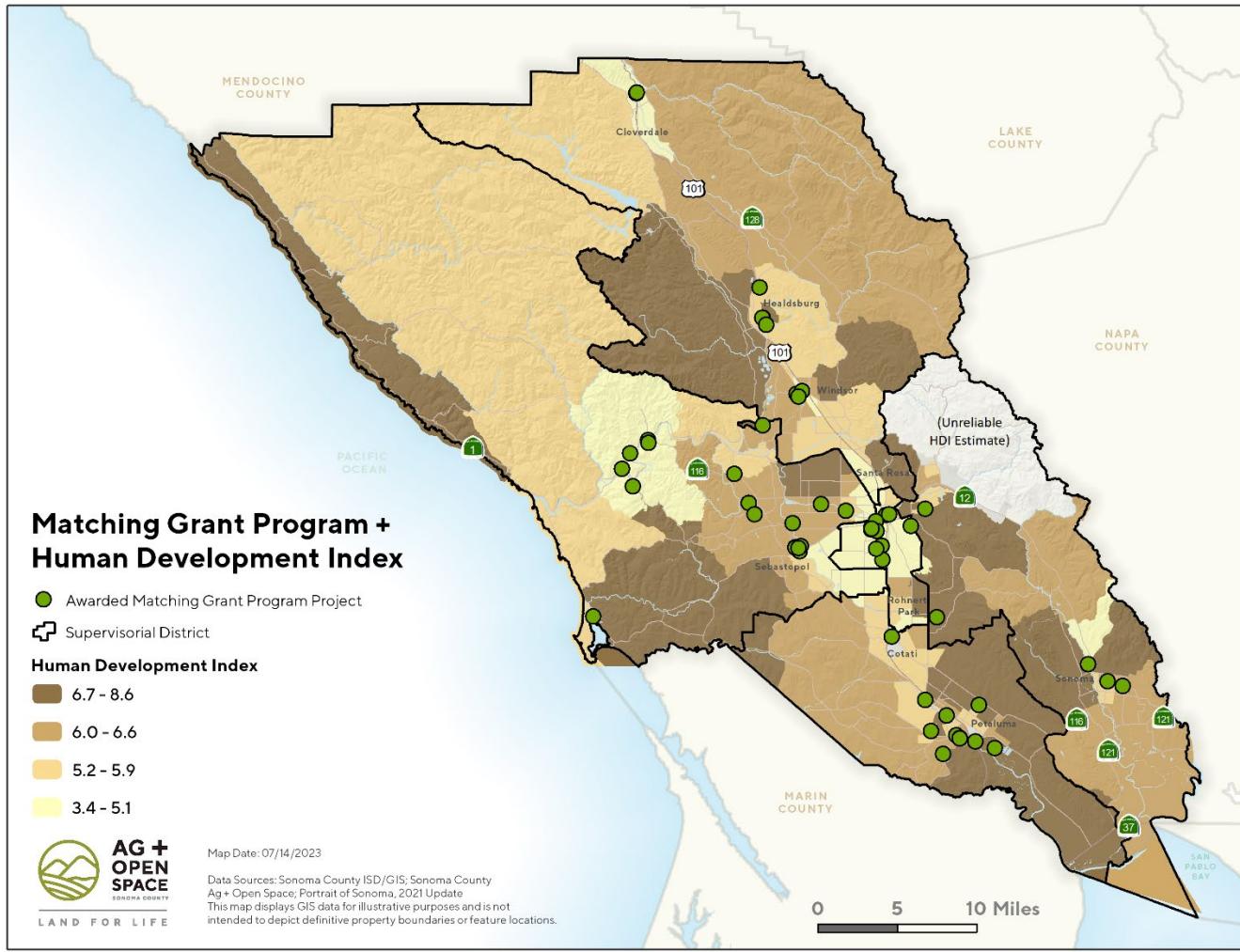
MGP grants are available countywide, and have been awarded in every supervisorial district, incorporated city, and many unincorporated residential areas. While specific geographic racial and income information has not been routinely analyzed, research findings around open space resources identify increased positive mental and physical health outcomes. The Trust for Public Land's related research **"Economic & Health Benefits of Open Space"** (www.TPL.org/resource/economic-health-benefits), finds that community parks in underserved areas, many of which are communities of color, advance equity and well-being by promoting physical activity, improving mental health, reducing urban pollutants, sequestering carbon, and reducing flood risk by sinking and slowing runoff.



Recent movement to better understand Sonoma County's park gaps, including racial and economic inequities, involves a partnership between Regional Parks and Ag + Open Space. This partnership is conducting a **"Park Gap Analysis"** to understand park needs and park equity in both the unincorporated communities and incorporated cities of Sonoma County. These data may be incorporated into Ag + Open Space's Matching Grant Program criteria for park developments throughout the county, and used to inform policies that dictate Regional Park's priorities and funding strategies, enabling a more proactive approach to establish new parks.

While this analysis is still in the developmental stages, an initial analysis of the 64 awarded MGP projects finds that a majority are accessible to areas with a relatively low Human Development Index—a measure of quality of life based on health, education, and living standards—per the *Portrait of Sonoma County: 2021 Update*.

- 34 of 64 awarded MGP projects are in areas with a Human Development Index (HDI) Score that is less than the county median of 5.9 (Sonoma County Portrait of Sonoma, 2021 Update)
- 53 of 64 awarded MGP projects are *within a 10-minute walk* from areas with a Human Development Index (HDI) Score that is less than the county median of 5.9 (Sonoma County Portrait of Sonoma, 2022 Update; July 2022 Draft Sonoma County Park Gap Analysis)
- 4 of the 6 submitted 2022 MGP Round 2 projects are in areas with a HDI less than the 5.9 county median, including Bounty Farm (5.7), Mark West Community Park (5.4), Colgan Creek Neighborhood Park Ph 5. (4.2), and Tierra de Rosas Public Plaza (3.4)



4. Who are the most affected community members who are concerned with or have experience related to this issue/program? How will you involve these community members in the development and implementation of this program?

While the Matching Grant Program is available countywide, given the complexity of developing an urban open space project with public funds and the Matching Grant Application process, 74% of past MGP applicants have been public agencies, with community-based organizations representing 26% of awardees.

In an effort to foster MGP projects that best reflect and are driven by the local community, the 2022 MGP process included extensive outreach and application assistance throughout the county, including working with trusted community organizations and Spanish language media. The current 2022 MGP Round 2 applications are all in communities with limited access to open space and parks. Of the six applications, four are in low-income areas, and three are in primarily Spanish speaking communities. The applicants include four public agencies and two community-based groups.

A central focus of the forthcoming MGP Revision is determining the communities with the most limited parks and open space benefits and fostering meaningful involvement in the development and implementation of the

program. Multiple resources are being consulted in this effort, including the Revision Ad Hoc Committee, Office of Equity, Facilitating Power's *Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* tool, the Parks Gap Analysis, Greenbelt Alliance's "Communities of Resiliency" data, and a survey of the county's related community-based organizations and past, current, and identified potential MGP applicants.

5. Does the estimated Program budget and timeline include sufficient resources and time to ensure accessibility, i.e. translation, interpretation, outreach, etc.?

The 2022 MGP Round 2 Board of Directors' Summary Report includes funding recommendations that exceed the initial \$2,950,000 budget. In order to deliver the community-based parks, trails, and urban agriculture projects to these underserved areas, additional resources are required as described in the **Funding Request** section of the Board Summary Report.

Once the MGP Revision is approved, the MGP budget and timeline recommendations will require updating to ensure the racial and income equity revisions are adequately resourced. It is estimated that as DEI revisions are embedded into the MGP, additional resources may be needed for expanded outreach, community engagement, and to help fill the open space disparities in underserved areas and communities of color.

6. How will the Program document and evaluate the Program's impact on communities of color and low-income communities?

At this time, staff does not have a formal approach to document and evaluate the Program's impact on communities of color and low-income communities.

As noted above, the Parks Gap Analysis, once complete, will be used in the MGP Revision process to inform policies that dictate MGP priorities, funding strategies, and starting in the next MGP funding round, will be employed to help document and evaluate the MGP impact on communities of color and low-income communities. The Parks Gap Analysis mapping will identify geographic race, income, community resiliency and HDI layers as a baseline and update geographic racial and income demographics on an annual basis. Once established, these geographic layers can serve as screens to identify Sonoma County census tracts of communities of color and low income to be prioritized for open space resources.

7. What *additional* disaggregated demographic data will your Program need to collect, track, and evaluate to inform future decisions, and/or develop mitigation practices to respond to unintended impacts of the project in communities of color?

Staff is currently evaluating these questions. Additional disaggregated demographic data needed to collect, track and evaluate going forward will be determined by the approved MGP Revision recommendations, and is discussed in question 6 above. Possible additional considerations include climate resilience, food security, and health impacts.

Unintended impacts of open space programs like the MGP can include limiting access, housing and other developments that may benefit communities of color. An example of a mitigation practice to respond to such unintended impacts include evaluating potential MGP open space sites to ensure they do not conflict with community supported affordable housing or other community-based uses that benefit communities of color.