



SUMMARY REPORT

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**Agenda Date:** 3/5/2024

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**To:** Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District  
**Department or Agency Name(s):** Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District  
**Staff Name and Phone Number:** Amy Ricard, 565-7261; Pamela Swan, 565-7348  
**Vote Requirement:** Majority  
**Supervisorial District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

Ag + Open Space Matching Grant Program Revised Program Materials

**Recommended Action:**

- A) Approve revised Matching Grant Program Materials for the rolling application pilot program.
- B) Authorize the launch of the Matching Grant Program two-year pilot program.
- C) Authorize Ag + Open Space to extend the project implementation deadlines for three active Matching Grant Projects.

**Executive Summary:**

Since 1990, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District has offered a competitive Matching Grant Program to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for open space projects within and near Sonoma County's cities and communities. The Board of Directors updated the Matching Grant Program Guidelines in 2009, 2011, and 2019. The primary goal of these revisions was to clarify language and improve transparency in the evaluation criteria and review process. See **Attachment 1** for a detailed overview of those revisions.

With an ongoing commitment to program improvement to best serve Sonoma County communities, and to increase equity and accessibility for underserved communities in particular, this year staff coordinated an additional program evaluation process resulting in significant proposed revisions in the areas of program model, funding, technical assistance, evaluation and scoring, and administration.

On October 24, 2023, the Board of Directors received a presentation outlining proposed Matching Grant Program revisions and provided direction for the amendment of program materials. With this Board direction, staff has made the recommended revisions and is returning to the Board of Directors to seek final approval and adoption of the updated Matching Grant Program materials.

**Discussion:**

**Background:**

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) offers a competitive Matching Grant Program (MGP or Program) for projects within or near the County's urban areas. The Program is borne out of Measure F and is described in paragraph 5 of the Expenditure Plan as follows:

*“5. Other open space projects include but are not limited to, urban open space and recreation projects within and near incorporated cities and other urbanized areas of Sonoma County. Funds for these projects shall be available to cities, the County and other entities through a matching grant program, with preference given to acquisition and development of projects that link communities. Examples of these projects include creek restoration and enhancement, such as along the Petaluma River, Santa Rosa Creek and Laguna de Santa Rosa, trails, athletic fields, and urban greenspace.”*

Since 1994, Ag + Open Space has accepted 69 projects into the MGP in each of the County’s nine incorporated cities and numerous unincorporated areas, pledging over \$50 million to community-based organizations, cities, County departments, and other public agencies.

Generally located in areas lacking open space, Program funding has enabled the development and implementation of innovative projects that reflect the needs of Sonoma County’s unique and diverse communities. To date, the Program has protected over 500 acres of urban open space and that amount of acreage will more than double when all active projects are complete. With funding from the Matching Grant Program, 28 new public parks have opened and over 400 acres of natural habitats including urban creeks, marshes, wetlands, and riparian habitats have been restored or enhanced. See **Attachment 2** for a map and list of all MGP projects to date.

As a condition of funding, Ag + Open Space achieves permanent protection of lands through a conservation easement. As the majority of MGP projects include a public recreation component, Ag + Open Space may also receive a recreation conservation covenant which enables and permanently protects public recreational uses.

Ag + Open Space staff coordinates the Program with support from an MGP Staff Subcommittee and a Subcommittee comprised of representatives from the Ag + Open Space Advisory Committee and Fiscal Oversight Commission. These Subcommittees assist in evaluating applications and recommending projects for funding, as well as in the review and revision of Program administration and materials, forwarding any recommended changes to the full advisory bodies and Ag + Open Space Board of Directors (Board). For each funding cycle, the full Advisory Committee and the Fiscal Oversight Commission make recommendations for Program funding to be considered by the Board. The Board provides final approval for which projects are accepted into the Program, along with associated funding amounts.

**Matching Grant Program Recommended Revisions:**

The current Matching Grant Program update is in response to feedback received from community members, partners, program participants, the Advisory Committee and Fiscal Oversight Commission, and our Board of Directors directing staff to increase program equity and accessibility, particularly with underserved communities, and continue to improve transparency and community awareness.

Staff initiated an intensive revision process in January 2023, engaging a wide range of stakeholders. This effort included soliciting feedback from Ag + Open Space staff and advisory bodies; consulting the Office of Equity and County Counsel; interviewing community partners; surveying past and prospective applicants; and researching funding models and best practices from peer granting organizations. A summary of the meetings and feedback received is included in **Attachment 3**. The findings and recommendations from this effort have been incorporated into revised MGP Guidelines (**Attachment 4**) and are outlined in more detail below.

### Two-Year Pilot Rolling Application Model

To better respond to time-sensitive urban open space projects, bolster projects that are ready for implementation, and build more applicant support into the process, the Board of Directors endorsed the staff proposal to pilot a rolling application model over the next two years.

The rolling application process will accept applications on a continuous basis during the pilot term and will consist of a pre-application to assess eligibility and readiness, and a full application for funding once eligibility and readiness requirements are met (see **Attachment 5** and **Attachment 6** for application details). Staff will evaluate and score full applications as they come in, and then batch them once a year to make initial funding recommendations based on project scores and funding available at that time. Staff will then present these findings to its advisory bodies for their endorsements, which will be included in the funding recommendations presented to the Board of Directors, who make the final funding determinations. This approach allows applicants to submit applications at any time, with staff batching applications and making funding recommendations on an annual basis, as opposed to on the previous biennial cycle. Projects not awarded funding in one batch may be considered in the next without reapplying.

This rolling application model will allow applicants to submit projects when they are truly ready, resulting in more urban open space projects completed sooner, which provides greater benefits to the community. This rolling model is also more responsive to time-sensitive projects that may require urgent funding and are not able to wait two years for the next cycle. Lastly, this model reduces the active project tenure time before project completion, where some projects linger longer than necessary due to steps that could have been taken prior to application.

Staff intend to survey program stakeholders at the end CY 2025 to assess the effectiveness of the pilot. The stakeholder findings will be reported to our advisory bodies and Board of Directors in the spring of 2026, accompanied by a recommendation to either end the two-year pilot and convert it to a permanent program, or to make further changes to the program model. □

### Program Funding

To support the growing demand for urban open space projects, the Board supported the staff recommendation to increase the annual funding allocation from \$2 million to \$3 million per year, which represents a 50% increase from the current funding level.

The Board also provided guidance that the MGP will not have minimum or maximum funding request requirements. This recommendation was made while acknowledging that even with increased funding, there may be more demand than funding available.

### Pre-Award Applicant Support

Many stakeholders, especially those in underserved communities, expressed the need for increased technical assistance to be competitive in the Program. In response, the Board endorsed the staff proposal reflecting best practices in grantmaking to increase equity and accessibility including:

- Increase staff assistance with readiness and eligibility assessment, application, project conceptualization,

and identifying other partners or funding sources.

- Include a simple pre-application to check project eligibility, assess readiness, and determine technical assistance needs.
- Offer workshops that may include, but are not limited to, grant-writing, project design and planning, community engagement and visioning, and real estate support for interested applicants, and record proceedings to ensure all applicants have access.
- Offer full application-related technical assistance to those who need it.
  - Pre-application includes a section where applicants can request technical assistance.
  - Ag + Open Space will retain a suite of consultants to provide pre-award technical assistance to applicants with an eligible project that serves an economically disadvantaged community.
  - Types of application-related, pre-award assistance may include but are not limited to community engagement, preliminary project design/planning, site assessment, mapping/GIS, CEQA and permitting support, and real estate support, all of which expedite project readiness.
  - Staff will assess these requests for eligibility and work with applicants to provide needed assistance. Commensurate with peer grant programs, applicants will be able to use up to \$15,000 for technical assistance services.

### Evaluation & Scoring

The Board of Directors affirmed Staff recommendations regarding several changes to the scoring matrix to increase equity, enhance transparency, reduce redundancy, and reflect Ag + Open Space and County priorities. These amendments have been integrated in the revised MGP materials and include:

- Addition of a CEQA checklist in the pre-application so applicants are aware of these requirements early in the process, which will increase project readiness prior to full application.
- Removal of applicant experience and quality of application from the scoring matrix, which is a grant making best practice in increasing equity and accessibility.
- Inclusion and scoring of a “sustainability plan” description of how applicants plan to ensure the successful completion, and long-term operation and maintenance of the proposed project.
- Increased score for acquisition of new land, reflecting the MGP’s prioritization of adding new open space land.
- Made the following changes to match requirements to even the playing field for organizations lacking capacity to provide matching funds:
  - Removed match level and match security from the scoring matrix
  - Made match a minimum eligibility requirement

- Reduced match requirement to 50% from recommendation of up to 100%
- Included a variance option whereby applicants that are not able to meet the 50% match may submit a written variance request describing why they are unable to provide the recommended match. In such cases, Ag + Open Space may approve a grant request secured by a smaller match contribution.
- Moved currently unscored “Other Considerations” to the scoring matrix:
  - Community Support will be scored based on narrative, letters of support, and the level of community engagement. □
  - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) considerations will be scored based on the project’s location and standardized metrics frequently used in Sonoma County, including the Portrait of Sonoma County’s Human Development Index (HDI), California EnviroScreen 4.0, and the Sonoma County Parks and Open Space Gap Analysis.
  - Projects in a Fire and/or Flood Area will be incorporated into Climate Resiliency scoring and will be evaluated based on the project’s location relative to such data sets as California EnviroScreen 4.0 and Sonoma County fire and flood vulnerability map layers.

#### Program Administration

Staff heard from stakeholders that the application and guidelines are lengthy and onerous. To address this, the Board of Directors directed staff to simplify the process by minimizing document length, reducing the amount of documentation required, removing the requirement to submit a hard copy application, and including checklists and online maps to help applicants through the process.

Lastly, with Board of Director support, the staff recommends renaming the Matching Grant Program to the **Community Spaces Matching Grant Program** to better reflect what the program does and the benefits it provides to the community.

#### Revisions Public Review

Public participation and community engagement included a survey of over 200 past, present and prospective applicants and targeted interviews with current and potential program partners. Staff presented proposed revisions resulting from this public outreach at the September 5, 2023 public workshop of the Matching Grant Program Revision Ad Hoc Subcommittee, which is comprised of members of the Fiscal Oversight Commission and Advisory Committee. Refined revision recommendations were then presented to the full Advisory Committee on September 28, 2023, and Fiscal Oversight Commission on October 5, 2023, and finally to the Board of Directors on October 24, 2023. A summary of the meetings and feedback received is included in **Attachment 3**. The input from these meetings has been incorporated into the revised Matching Grant Program administration and materials, see **Attachments 4, 5 & 6**.

#### Matching Grant Program Rolling Application Launch

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Following approval of the proposed Matching Grant Program revisions, staff will take the administrative steps necessary to launch the Matching Grant Program two-year rolling application pilot (CY 2024/2025), with an annual allocation of \$3,000,000. Outreach will include workshops and targeted engagement with priority communities. Staff will present the first bundled funding recommendations to the Board by December 2024.

#### Matching Grant Program Active Projects Extensions

Ag + Open Space is also requesting authorization to extend the project implementation deadlines as needed for three active MGP projects for a period not to exceed one year from the current project completion date. These projects include Bayer Neighborhood Park & Garden, Southeast Santa Rosa Greenway, and River Lane. These MGP projects are all nearing completion but may continue beyond their originally stated completion dates due to unexpected delays. Upon consultation with grantees, it is anticipated these projects will be complete within the requested completion extension dates. Please see **Attachment 7** for related details.

#### Recommendations

- A) Approve the revised Matching Grant Program administration and related two-year rolling application program materials, which are informed by guidance from the public, our advisory bodies, and the Board of Directors. □
- B) Authorize the launch of the Matching Grant Program two-year pilot (CY 2024/2025) rolling application, with the Notice of Funding Availability on March 25, 2024 and an allocated budget of \$3,000,000 annually.
- C) Authorize Ag + Open Space to extend the project implementation dates not to exceed one year beyond current completion dates, for three active Matching Grant Program projects, which include Bayer Neighborhood Park & Garden, River Lane, and the Southeast Santa Rosa Greenway. □

#### **Racial Equity Analysis - Matching Grant Program**

Supported by the Office of Equity, staff used the Government Alliance on Race and Equity's (GARE) Equity Toolkit to craft a racial equity analysis of the Matching Grant Program. Please see **Attachment 8** for a Racial Equity Analysis of the Ag + Open Space Matching Grant Program.

#### **Prior Board Actions:**

October 24, 2023: District Board of Directors approved an update of the Matching Grant Program Guidelines.

November 12, 2019: District Board of Directors approved an update of the Matching Grant Program Guidelines.

December 6, 2011: Board Action #31 the District Board of Directors approved an update of the Matching Grant Program Guidelines.

August 11, 2009: Resolution 09-0739 the District Board of Directors approved an update of the Matching Grant Program Guidelines.

February 6, 2007: Resolution 07-0110, the District Board of Directors approved an update of the Matching Grant Program.

#### **FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 23-24 Adopted</b>	<b>FY 24-25 Projected</b>	<b>FY 25-26 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>			
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
<b>Total Sources</b>			

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

There is no fiscal impact at this time. However, with the Board’s direction, staff will designate \$3,000,000 annually from Measure F funds toward Matching Grant Program projects and will budget for individual projects on an annual basis during the fiscal year in which a project is expected to be completed.

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

NA

**Attachments:**

- Attachment 1. MGP Revision History
- Attachment 2. MGP Map and List of All Projects
- Attachment 3. MGP Revision Workplan & Meetings Summary
- Attachment 4. MGP Guidelines
- Attachment 5. MGP Pre-Application
- Attachment 6. MGP Full Application
- Attachment 7. MGP Active Project Extensions
- Attachment 8. MGP Revision Racial Equity Analysis

**Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:**