

Business Item

Community Development Committee



Committee meeting date: June 15, 2026

For the Metropolitan Council: June 24, 2026

Business Item: 2026-86

Community Tree Planting Grant Notice of Funding Availability

District(s), member(s):	All
Policy/legal reference:	Minn. Stat. § 473.355
Staff prepared/presented:	Gillian Greenberg, Senior Climate Planner, 651-602-1726
Division/department:	Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Authorize fund distribution for the Community Tree Planting Program in two rounds, one each in 2026 and 2027.
2. Authorize the attached Notice of Funding Availability for the 2026 Community Tree Planting Grant Program, to be issued after the Council formerly amends its budget to bring in new state appropriation funding.

Background

Minnesota and the Twin Cities region have faced an acute threat to healthy tree canopies since the discovery of Emerald Ash Borer in Saint Paul in 2009. Ash trees made up a large portion of tree canopies in communities across the seven-county region, and treating or removing effected ash trees has been a significant strain on forestry budgets for many local governments. In 2020 community tree surveys conducted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, counties in the metropolitan region had ash tree populations that made up between six and 14% of surveyed areas.

To help communities address the challenge of replacing ash trees and maintaining healthy tree canopies, the Minnesota Legislature established a Community Tree Planting Grant Program in the 2024 legislative session. In 2025, the Metropolitan Council ran the first cycle of this program for the region, distributing \$2.5 million dollars to 14 local governments in the region and also passing through \$688,000 that was directed to the City of South Saint Paul. Grantees from the 2025 cycle are expected to plant at least 5,128 trees and remove at least 2,219 damaged or diseased trees and stumps.

The Met Council received additional State appropriations in the 2025 and 2026 legislative sessions. As such, Council staff have proposed a program update that will guide the 2026 and 2027 funding cycles, largely following the structure of the 2025 Program. Council staff propose to distribute up to \$3.4 million in 2026 and \$3.5 million in 2027.

Program Purpose

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

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

Program Priorities

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

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

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

2026 Program

Program Funding

The Council received \$1 million from general obligation bonds and \$900,000 from general funds in the 2025 special session, and \$5 million from general obligation bonds in the 2026 special session. The 2026 Notice of Funding Availability details plans to distribute up to \$3.4 million in 2026, representing \$900,000 in general funds and \$2.5 million in general obligation bonds. Since bonding funds are part of the funding mix for the 2026 cycle, eligible uses of funds have been updated since the 2025 program and no longer include local government staff time, equipment purchases, or establishment costs during the grant period.

Project Tiering

The 2026 Notice of Funding Availability includes an updated approach to project tiering that will better reflect the degree to which a project meets legislative priorities. The structure assigns priority points based on alignment with program priorities and then uses priority points to assign applications into a review tier.

Evaluation Criteria

The 2026 Notice of Funding Availability also includes updated evaluation criteria that better reflect program priorities. The four evaluation criteria categories are Project Management, Tree Canopy Health and Resilience, Project Serves Vulnerable Communities, and Project Addresses Climate Change Impacts. To ensure emphasis on the program priorities, the Tree Canopy and Vulnerable Communities categories represent half of the total points, with 25 points each. In response to discussion at the June 1, 2026 Community Development Committee meeting, the Project Management category now represents 35 of the 100 points and specifically includes a subcomponent focused on demonstrated need. This subcomponent will allow reviewers to weigh whether the applicant has received recent public funding for tree planting efforts. Rounding out the criteria is the Climate Impacts category with 15 points.

Thrive lens analysis

On Feb. 12, 2025, the Council adopted Imagine 2050, which builds on policy direction in Thrive MSP 2040. The Community Tree Planting Grant Program supports all Imagine 2050 goals: Our region is equitable and inclusive, our communities are health and safe, our region is dynamic and resilient, we lead on addressing climate change, and we protect and restore natural systems. A healthy and diverse tree canopy is integral to restoring natural systems and improving resilience to a changing climate. Prioritization on overburdened communities ensures that funding is spent



equitably and supports all residents in the region in accessing a high quality of life.

Funding

The Council received \$1 million from general obligation bonds and \$900,000 from general funds in the 2025 special session, and \$5 million from general obligation bonds in the 2026 session.

Small business inclusion

There are no direct impacts to small businesses with the proposed action.

