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Connecting Constituents with Federal Programs for Public Parks

Congress has established programs to assist constituents—including individuals, organizations, tribes, and local governments—with projects to establish or upgrade public parks and related outdoor recreation facilities. These parks and facilities could include athletic fields, courts, trails, playgrounds, community buildings, and others. This In Focus includes a list of selected federal grant, loan, and other programs that may support such projects.

Federal programs provide for parks and related outdoor recreation facilities in a variety of contexts. Some programs are specifically focused on outdoor recreation, while others address park and recreation projects within the context of community planning and development. Other programs may focus on conservation or environmental restoration initiatives that could affect recreation opportunities for communities. The following programs vary in scope and purpose, and do not represent a comprehensive list of all potentially relevant programs for a given park or outdoor recreation project. For instance, this In Focus does not seek to include all programs to conserve lands, although in some cases such programs may provide for uses including outdoor recreation.

Most federal grant funds go to state and local governments, which in turn may issue sub-awards to other entities. Interested applicants are encouraged to contact federal agencies, state agencies, or both for information on eligibility, the application process, award cycles, and funding availability. Funding levels for the programs listed below vary, and funding availability depends on appropriations. Where applicable, program websites and Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) numbers are provided to assist constituents with accessing more information about each program. CFDA numbers can be used to search for and identify potential funding opportunities at <https://grants.gov>.

National Park Service Programs

The National Park Service (NPS) receives appropriations for several programs to support the establishment or expansion of public outdoor recreation areas, such as parks.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

There are two types of grants available under the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): the formula-based State and Local Assistance Program and competitive Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) grants program.

By law, only state LWCF lead agencies may apply for funds. Under both the formula and competitive grant programs, states may “sub-award” grants to state agencies, local units of government, and federally recognized tribes.

Nonprofits and other private organizations, though not eligible for a subgrant, are encouraged to collaborate with an eligible sub-recipient in developing projects.

State and Local Assistance Program

Under the formula-based State and Local Assistance Program, the Secretary of the Interior (acting through NPS) apportions funds to states. States then award funding to local units of government and federally recognized tribes for projects that acquire lands and waters for parks and other public outdoor recreation purposes, as well as develop new or renovate existing outdoor recreation facilities.

CFDA no. 15.916

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/stateside.htm>

Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership

Under the nationally competitive ORLP program, NPS awards discretionary grants to urbanized areas meeting certain eligibility criteria, with priority given to projects located in economically disadvantaged areas and lacking in outdoor recreation opportunities. ORLP funds may be used for the development or renovation of public parks and other outdoor recreation areas.

CFDA no. 15.916

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/outdoor-recreation-legacy-partnership-grants-program.htm>

Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance

The Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) assists communities and public land managers in developing or restoring parks, conservation areas, rivers, and wildlife habitats, as well as creating outdoor recreation opportunities. Project applicants may be state and local agencies, tribes, nonprofit organizations, or citizen groups. NPS and other federal agencies may apply in partnership with local organizations. This is a nonmonetary program that provides technical assistance to communities seeking to accomplish conservation and outdoor recreation goals.

CFDA no. 15.921

<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/rtca/index.htm>

Land Use Innovation Grant Program

This assistance, provided in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, supports the creation of locally based nonprofit organizations (“Groundwork Trusts”) and their activities to transform brownfields and neglected lands and waters into parks, trails, natural areas, and greenspace.

CFDA no. 15.965
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/groundwork-charting-a-more-just-and-equitable-future.htm>

Selected Other Federal Programs

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Community Facilities Grants

Community Facilities Grants support projects to construct or improve community facilities providing essential services to rural residents. Recreational facilities may be eligible for these grants in limited circumstances. Eligible recipients include public bodies, federally recognized tribes, and community-based nonprofits.

CFDA no. 10.766
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Environmental Justice Government-to-Government Program

This program provides funding at the state, local, territorial, and tribal levels to support government activities that provide environmental or public health benefits in communities disproportionately burdened by environmental harms. Park and recreation projects may be eligible.

CFDA no. 66.312
<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-government-government-program>

U.S. Forest Service, Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program

This program provides financial assistance to establish community forests. The purchased lands must be managed for public economic, recreational, environmental, or educational benefits to communities and provide public access. Community forests can be owned by local governments, tribal governments, and qualified nonprofit entities. The program may fund up to 50% of project costs.

CFDA no. 10.689
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/program>

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Community Development Block Grants

This program provides flexible federal funding to states and localities to support a wide variety of economic and community development activities. Public outdoor recreation, greenspace, and community facilities projects may be eligible for funding.

CFDA no. 14.218
<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg/>

U.S. Department of Transportation, Recreational Trails Program

This program provides funding to states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both nonmotorized and motorized recreational users. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58) reauthorized this program through FY2026 under the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside from the Surface Transportation Block Grant program.

CFDA no. 20.205
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/

Additional Resources

CRS has a number of products related to grants work, many of which are listed on the Grants and Federal Assistance page of the CRS website.

The Assistance Listings page on SAM.gov is the primary source of information on federal assistance programs. The listings include information on eligibility, how to apply, and matching requirements. Actual funding of specific grant programs depends on annual congressional budget appropriations.

Grants.gov provides grant seekers with information on competitive federal grant opportunities and how to apply for them.

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