



# Nature in Neighborhoods Capital Grants Program Evaluation

December 2015

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Clean air and clean water do not stop at city limits or county lines. Neither does the need for jobs, a thriving economy, and sustainable transportation and living choices for people and businesses in the region. Voters have asked Metro to help with the challenges and opportunities that affect the 25 cities and three counties in the Portland metropolitan area.

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## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The roots of the Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants program can be found in the Regional Framework Plan where Metro's 2040 Growth Concept is designed to create sustainable and prosperous communities for present and future generations. While our region's growth concept protects farm and forest land outside the urban growth boundary, preserving nature in our neighborhoods is equally important.

Adopted in 2005, Title 13 put into action the Metro Council's commitment to conserving, protecting and restoring the region's fish and wildlife habitat. Otherwise known as Nature in Neighborhoods, Title 13 spurred the Metro Council to ask voters in 2006 for funding for natural areas land acquisition. In order to incentivize investments in the ecological functions of urban areas and enrich people's experience of nature as a fundamental element of their neighborhood's character, the Metro Council included \$15 million for the capital grants program.

Resolution 06-3672B, referring the 2006 Natural Areas bond measure to the voters, defines the intent of the grant program and established seven key criteria and seven supplemental criteria. These criteria were broadly worded to inspire innovation and allow a wide variety of projects to emerge from the community. Two broad program goals are embedded within these criteria:

- Increase and/or recover ecological functions and processes in order to protect water quality and enhance habitat. (ReNature)
- Increase the presence of nature (water, trees and other vegetation) to enrich people's experience and help strengthen a physical connection to the region's ecology. (ReGreen)

The Regional Equity Atlas, a spatial analysis of the distribution of people and assets, also influenced the program criteria. The Atlas confirmed that the distribution of parks and natural areas was not uniform across the region and identified that the most deficient areas were low-income and in communities of color. While capital grants are available to any neighborhood that wants to improve access to nature, two criteria encouraged projects with broader social and economic outcomes to emerge. The criterion "Multiple benefits for people and nature," was interpreted by the review committee as having benefits beyond the project itself such as projects that advance health equity, are in close proximity to affordable housing, or address an environmental justice issue. In addition, there is a supplemental criterion for projects in low-income neighborhoods.

The administration of this grant program is designed to be responsive to the needs of potential applicants and flexible enough to assist with the evolving nature of capital improvement projects. Metro staff develops the program materials, outreach strategy and scoring methodology. Staff also review letters of interest and give extensive feedback that strengthen full applications, which are accepted only by invitation.

A 10-member Grant Review Committee, appointed by the Metro Council, is comprised of two Metro councilors, one Metro scientist, and seven appointed community members that include a fish biologist, water resource specialists and representatives of the general public. The Review Committee bases their funding recommendations on how strongly a project is able to address the selection criteria and if the amount of the funding requested is proportional to the outcomes achieved. Funding recommendations are submitted to the Metro Council for approval.

As of July 2015, the Metro Council has awarded a total of 47 capital grants since the first grant cycle in 2008. With three projects unable to be completed, a total of \$13,297,780 is currently dedicated to 44 projects. These projects can be categorized as follows:

- Nine **acquisition** projects
- Ten **restoration** projects
- Eight **urban transformation** projects
- Seventeen **neighborhood livability** projects.

## **PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION**

In 2009 the Natural Areas Bond Performance Oversight Committee asked staff to create performance measures to document the outcomes of each project awarded funding as they relate to the program's criteria.

While the type of projects funded and the outcomes reported can reveal program accomplishments and offer accountability to the voters, the evaluation team and program staff believe that a qualitative approach that explores how the projects were envisioned, designed, built and programmed will reveal more about how Metro's investments have contributed to vibrant communities as well as urban nature.

The natural areas bond measure focuses on conserving the region's most valuable natural resources including clean air and clean water while managing the impacts of a growing metropolitan region. The Capital Grant program was envisioned as a tool to explore how investments in local communities can contribute to regional conservation as well as healthy neighborhoods. Therefore, this report explores how awarded projects have addressed the objectives of the bond measure and advanced Metro's desired outcomes for a livable region.

### **The specific evaluative questions established for the analysis are:**

1. How well do capital grants complement and support the work of local agencies and communities in bringing nature into the developed areas of the Metro region?
2. How did the program's emphasis on public-private partnerships affect projects?
3. How worthwhile were the outcomes for nature?
4. How worthwhile were the outcomes for people?

## METHODOLOGY

The Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants evaluation was conducted primarily using qualitative data collected in interviews with grantees and program staff and supplemented by records kept by the staff over the life of the program. A Hatfield Fellow through Portland State University’s Hatfield School of Government was hired to conduct and transcribe these interviews. Ryan Dunk interviewed grant recipients, the projects’ government sponsors and partners throughout September and October 2015. Catherine Moore, a Program Performance Analyst at Metro, then worked with Ryan to analyze the data and produce the final report. These two individuals made up the “evaluation team”.

### Overview of Grant Evaluation Process



Only grantees that had completed their projects were interviewed. Grant staff identified nineteen projects that had been completed, including a minimum of three projects in each category. Where possible, staff also identified public and private partners connected to the projects. By selecting cases from all categories and interviewing two different grantees from the same project where possible, the evaluation team hoped to both document the diversity of experiences with the grant projects and identify common patterns between their experiences. Before grantees were contacted to schedule an interview, they received a letter from program staff letting them know they may be contacted and explaining the intent of the evaluation. In the end, interviews were conducted with twenty one individuals, representing fifteen different projects.

The interview protocol was designed to keep the focus of the data collection relatively tight since the evaluation team already had four large questions to answer. The interviews were conducted using a standardized open-ended approach in order to minimize the variation between interviewees, although the follow-up probes were left more open ended. In addition to direct questions about their experience as a grantee, the interviewer used solution-focused questions in order to stimulate deeper reflection from the interviewees. Interviews were conducted at the location of the participant’s choice and frequently occurred at the project site. All interviews were audio recorded, carefully transcribed and then uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program.

Qualitative content analysis was conducted using a combination of concept-driven and data-driven approaches (Schreier 2014). For each of the four research questions a series of codes and subcodes were created based on hypotheses of what the evaluation team expected to see in the data. The “subcodes” or “nested codes” allowed the evaluation team to look at the data with less or greater specificity as needed (Saldaña 2013). These codes were primarily descriptive

<b>Projects interviewed for this evaluation</b>	
<p><b>Acquisition Projects</b></p> <p>Baltimore Woods – North Portland</p> <p>Summer Creek – Tigard</p> <p>White Oak Savanna Phase I – West Linn</p> <p>Nadaka Phase I - Gresham</p>	<p><b>Restoration Projects</b></p> <p>Crystal Springs – Southeast Portland</p> <p>Klein Point – Milwaukie</p> <p>Mt. Scott Creek – North Clackamas Park,, Clackamas</p> <p>Stone Bridge – Tryon Creek State Park, Southwest Portland</p> <p>Wapato Marsh – Jackson Bottoms</p>
<p><b>Urban Transformation Projects</b></p> <p>Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Clinic – Cornelius</p> <p>ReGreening I-205 – East Portland</p> <p>Park Avenue Station – Oak Grove</p>	<p><b>Neighborhood Livability</b></p> <p>Conservation Corner – North Portland</p> <p>Hawthorne Park – Clackamas County</p> <p>Nadaka Phase II – Gresham</p> <p>Westmoreland Park –Southeast Portland</p>

in nature, focusing on the subject that the individual was discussing. After four transcripts were coded by two different coders, the codebook was revised in order to remove codes that had not been used and add codes to capture information that had been missed by the original codebook. After that, two additional interviews were coded and inter-rater reliability was checked. Reliability was deemed high enough to proceed with coding for the rest of the interviews.

Once coding had been completed the evaluation team used two primary strategies to answer the research questions. First, they created several meta-matrices that assembled descriptive data around a specific component of the project (community engagement, partnership, funding, etc.) from different projects into a standard format. Second, they looked at differences in approaches between different projects and how these might have affected the outcomes.

Once the initial analysis was completed, the evaluation team conducted two key informant interviews with both the individual responsible for the capital grants program since its inception and the grant program manager. These interviews were targeted at getting their perspective on some of the key findings, including how the set up and the administration of the grant may have contributed to the results found in the initial analysis. At this time the evaluation team also decided to add in a review of the grant application materials that all successful grantees had completed in order to get more information about the intended impacts of the projects, specifically in terms of outcomes for nature. These additional materials helped add context to the analysis.

## FINDINGS

### Project Drivers

While the majority of the findings in this report are presented by the evaluative questions posed, one key finding that cuts across multiple questions is the distinct differences in projects that were developed and led by community members and projects that originated from local governments or park providers. In general, agency-led projects began with an idea from a local municipality that was looking for both funding and appropriate community partners to support their work. In contrast, many of the community-led projects began with an idea from either a single individual or a small group of people. From there, community groups had to find government partners who were willing to work with them to make their idea a reality, both in terms of helping to secure funding and becoming the final “owner” of the capital asset. Of the 15 projects reviewed for this report, seven were community-led and eight were agency-led.

The origins of the project affected many of the outcomes discussed in this report including how projects enhanced long-term planning efforts, their ability to increase the credibility of community-led projects, partnership development, the leveraging of additional financial and in-kind resources, and the programming of the site after construction was completed.

### ***How well do the capital grants complement and support the work of local agencies and communities in bringing nature in to the developed areas of the metro region?***

Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants support the efforts of both local government agencies and community groups by enhancing long term planning efforts, providing catalytic funding, and financing urban projects, which frequently have low funder interest but high local value. The combination of these three elements helped the grant program move projects forward that were important to local communities and agencies, but were unlikely to have been accomplished without Metro’s funding and support.



## Enhancing Long Term Planning Efforts

Metro's grants supported long term planning efforts at the local level. Many times local agencies had clear cut plans for projects that had already been approved and were "shovel ready". These plans ranged from the restoration of streambeds to the renovation of existing parks. In some cases, Metro's grant funding was able to help revitalize projects that had sat in agency funding queues for decades. While the designs for community-led projects were not as well developed, they were frequently projects that accomplished goals identified by larger planning efforts. One community grantee described their vision as fitting "exactly with what the city's master plan was." By funding these projects, capital grants helped local communities achieve a larger vision they typically had difficulty advancing (see "Funding acquisition and restoration in urban areas" below).

Capital grants also enhanced existing projects by adding a focus on nature to projects that would not have otherwise included it. By bringing capital grant funding to the table, Metro was able to enhance the scope of projects to include more natural components or to add more robust restoration elements. Several grantees spoke of adding additional value to wildlife and access for people because of the addition of capital grants funds. One individual stated, "Without Metro we would have done maybe half of the project with no community involvement, no service learning, no access, no viewing blinds, no perch poles, nothing. We would have just had hydrology. It completely changed the project". This augmentation and support resulted in a number of projects achieving goals like the addition of habitat features in a wetland or the ability to acquire supplementary land for preservation projects. Additional benefits for nature are further discussed in the section on Outcomes for Nature (see page 11).

## Funding Acquisition and Restoration in Urban Areas

Many agencies and community groups looking for nature-based projects in urban environments have significant difficulties securing funding. Urban projects are often viewed by other conservation funders as more expensive and less effective when compared to projects in rural areas where costs are lower and less degradation has occurred. As one grantee put it, "as far as conservation agencies, they are really looking for the biggest bang for their buck, not a strip of urban land filled with blackberries." Difficulty funding urban restoration is a frustration point for many organizations, local governments and

*"We scoured the available funding but we could not find anything that would even come close. We had obstacles; it was an urban area, expensive, and not particularly fabulous because of the invasive problem. But it was intensely great as far as community building, because if you have natural area in the middle of the community it has transformative power."*  
(Grantee)

communities alike. One grantee described being rejected by a grant program three times because their project was inside city limits. Interviewees explicitly cited Metro as a unique benefactor for those groups who are looking to do important urban conservation work.

### Catalytic Funding

The capital grants program provided catalytic funding for projects by being willing to be the first funder to commit financial resources to emerging projects. Having a committed funder at the table increased the credibility of these projects and helped secure additional funding. Being the first funders for projects required Metro to have greater flexibility over the life of the grant since grantees could not anticipate what requirements would come with the additional funds or funders. However, it was key for getting many of these projects off the ground. One grantee said that Metro “could see the possibilities of this project and were there from the beginning. They could see the vision and they wanted to be a part of it.”

*“The Metro grant was so critical to starting this wave of external funding that came in that allowed us to keep moving forward.”*  
(Grantee)

Once the funding was acquired, many grantees felt like having the funding “gives you a level credibility with partners and even with leaders in your own organization to show that this outside organization thinks that you have a good project.” Once they had the initial grant from Metro, it was easier, although still sometimes difficult, for organizations to find the matching funds. Many grantees said that without the Metro’s funding, they believed that they would not have been able to get additional external funding. Capital grants were seen as “instrumental. Without Metro, this would not be happening.” By making an effort to be the first funder to the table the capital grants program was successful in helping many projects get off the ground.

### *How did the program’s emphasis on public-private partnerships affect projects?*

One goal of the capital grants program was to bring together new public and private partners and to encourage collaboration and innovation between them. While all of the projects had both public and private partnerships and community engagement, the extent to which the partnership “moved the needle” on how deeply partners were engaged varied based on whether the project was led by the community or an agency. Capital grants were most successful in deepening partnership with community-led projects. However, all projects developed partnerships that leveraged resources and supported community engagement after the project was completed.

### Fostering Partnership

While all projects included valuable partnerships, community-led projects and agency-led projects varied greatly in how they talked about and worked with partner groups.

Community members tended to regard partners as any group who contributed to their project in any number of ways including with donations, volunteer time, planning, etc. Community groups were often geographically focused and took on projects that were important to the residents of specific neighborhoods or areas. This gave these projects a built-in base of engaged community support that the projects could draw on as well as a sense of ownership, particularly since community members helped bring in funding for the project. These two factors meant that groups were able to achieve deeper levels of community engagement, including influencing project design. One community partner described this engagement process when they said, “We didn’t want to raise money and then hand it to [the local agency]. We wanted it to be a community driven project . . . reaching out to people and getting people together.” For many agency partners, this level of engagement and co-creation was a new experience.

Local agencies were more likely to think of their primary funders as their partners on their projects and had varying goals regarding community engagement. Because the ideas for their project typically came out of other planning efforts and not directly from a community group, there was generally not a pre-existing group invested in the project. Some communities lacked organized, local groups to approach as a partner. The grant team reported that some agencies have said they did not apply for grant funding because they were unable to identify potential community partners. To achieve public-private partnerships, agencies more often tended to work with larger, regional groups. Often the level of community engagement depended on the capacity of the individual project manager and what strategies the agency typically used to engage the community. Community groups were typically engaged through participation in native plantings or tours but were not as likely to influence the project’s design or development of programming.

### **Leveraging Resources**

As a prerequisite to receiving Metro’s capital grant funding, all grantees were required to match Metro’s funding two to one with other funding or through in-kind donations. This requirement was written into the bond measure and was deemed reasonable given that previous Metro grant programs were able to achieve an average four to one match. As stated in the previous section, many projects found that the funding from Metro started the flow of additional resources. As Metro was frequently the first funder to the table, these additional resources often formed the matching portion of the grant.

Due to the constraints of different grant sources, grantees had to be able to shift the design and focus of their projects. A project that was focused on infrastructure or sparking redevelopment might add an additional restoration component in order to access Metro grant funding. Many projects wanted to include an urban agriculture/community garden in their project, but had to seek a different funding source since that was not within the scope of Metro’s grant program. Different partners in the project might also receive different portions of the funding, depending on who was eligible for what grant. The grantees had to

be proactive in seeking out additional partnerships and funding not only to raise the match, but also to raise funds that matched the vision of what they were trying to accomplish.

While the organizations interviewed for this evaluation were ultimately successful in securing match and completing their projects, a number of interviewees expressed a great deal of frustration with the match, particularly the level at which it was set. Furthermore, three organizations that received grant awards ended up having to withdraw after not being able to raise the matching funds. Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence that some groups may not have applied because they found the match requirement too daunting.

### **Biggest Challenges for Partnerships**

Collaborating between different groups to coordinate and complete a complex capital project is difficult work. Partnerships take additional time and energy to align interests, maintain communications, resolve differences, and work through bureaucratic obstacles. Many interviewees expressed frustration over the difficulty of coordinating the movements and intentions of all of the partners on their projects. Communication breakdowns between partners and shifts in project details sometimes lead to disagreements over leadership, funding, construction, timelines, and roles and responsibilities. One grantee described it as, “A lot of cooks in the kitchen. In some ways that can be good because you get a lot of different perspectives, but sometimes they don’t always line up as smoothly as you would like them to.” There were points in time when Metro grant staff would coach grantees through difficult situations and provide a listening ear and sounding board.

The second major partnership challenge that many respondents expressed was with the bureaucratic nature of partner agencies and, at times, their own agencies. From a community perspective many interviewees felt that the most frustrating aspect of their project was dealing with government bureaucracies, often citing a slowdown in their timeline or red tape that presented barriers to their work. Likewise, those respondents who worked for local agencies often expressed the very same frustrations. One grantee stated that, “For all of its incredible benefits, working with [the agency partner] was also incredibly frustrating. Trying to meld such huge bureaucracies was very, very challenging.”

The biggest bureaucratic challenge was the contract bidding process. Agencies had to follow their procurement guidelines for selecting a final bid for the work, but those rules felt limiting and esoteric to community members. One agency partner stated that, “The community had to accept an outcome that was following the rules but that they didn’t agree with – and we could not change it. That was really frustrating for everyone on both sides of the fence.” Frustration arose regarding the time it took to go through the bidding process, the desire to provide jobs to women and minorities, requirements to go with the lowest possible bidder and the wage requirements for government contracts.

## Capacity Building

It is difficult to pin down whether or not Metro’s emphasis on partnerships has led to greater capacity among partner organizations. While some exceptional projects did demonstrate an observable shift in the level of influence community groups gained post-project, it is much harder to make that claim for the majority of grantees. A few grantees felt that by completing a project while partnered with Metro and other organizations they had demonstrated their abilities and might be seen by others as capable of bigger and better things. A few agency partners said that it had changed the way that they thought about engaging with the public. All of these cases came out of community-led projects rather than projects led by agencies. However, at this point in time it is too soon to tell what capacities might have been built and whether community or agency partners will experience long-term change based on their experience.

### *How worthwhile were the outcomes for nature?*

## Conservation in Urban Areas

One key feature of Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants is the focus on urban conservation, mostly falling under the “ReNature” goal of the program. Acquisition and restoration projects advanced urban conservation in a variety of ways including protecting sensitive habitats and wildlife corridors, restoring riparian areas and streams by increasing shade and adding more woody debris, improving fish passage and managing human impacts on the environment. While acquisition and restoration projects had the greatest impact on nature, urban transformation and neighborhood livability projects also implemented strategies that reduced impervious surfaces and mimicked natural systems in the built environment.

The Regional Conservation Strategy (RCS) for the greater Portland-Vancouver region identifies three key ways that developed areas can help preserve regional biodiversity and environmental health; increasing urban permeability for wildlife, enhancing the function of natural areas and corridors, and engaging the public in wildlife stewardship (Intertwine, p. 67). All four categories of the Capital Grant program – acquisition, restoration, urban transformation and neighborhood livability – employ these approaches at a local scale. Quantifying their impact on regional conservation is difficult, but in general the ecological outcomes of capital grants are aligned to the strategies of the Regional Conservation Strategy as they relate to the developed landscape.

## Healthy Ecosystems, Clean Air and Water

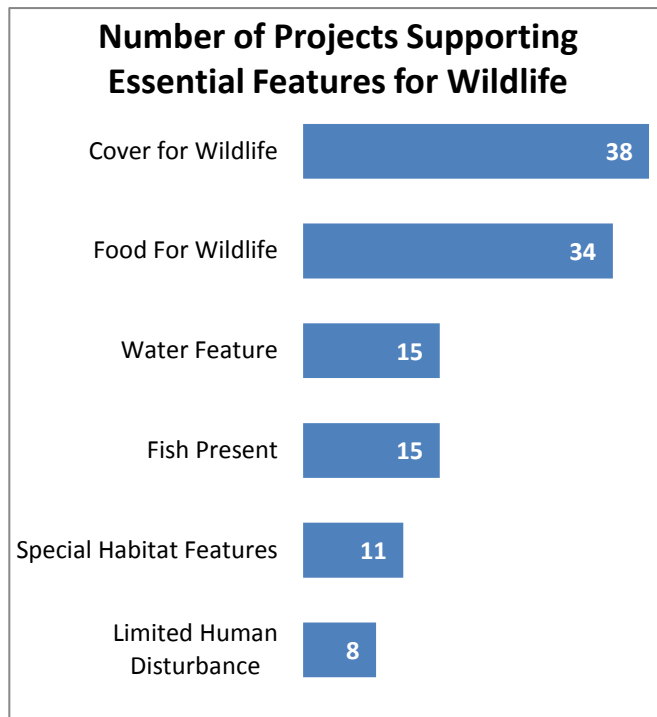
A principle feature of an urban ecosystem that supports wildlife is permeable landscapes – defined as areas through which wildlife can move freely. Capital grants increased the permeability of the landscape by supporting projects that provided essential features for wildlife either in a natural setting, or integrated into the built environment. Projects also

increased habitat quality for the region’s endangered fish by focusing on the restoration and protections of their habitats which, as many of our interviewees point out, directly affects local ecology as well as the health of the watershed as a whole. Lastly the capital grants helped improve and preserve important wildlife corridors. In order for a landscape to be considered permeable it must have spaces through which wildlife can move without significant roadblocks. By purchasing, preserving, and improving natural spaces in the region, grantees were able to ensure that wildlife saw healthy mobility between habitats. Grantees were proud of these efforts and saw their projects as key links in the larger picture of a more permeable landscape, describing their work as something that will eventually “link a lot of different habitats together” and “a piece of the puzzle”.

*“Even with the most aggressive programs to protect and restore wildlife habitat and biodiversity corridors, wildlife still have to cross vast tracts of developed lands. Integrating nature into the built landscape can augment wildlife areas and biodiversity corridors by increasing permeability and creating stepping stones for wildlife movement.”*  
(Intertwine, p67)

Capital grants were also able to fund a number of projects that helped to boost the region’s biodiversity, a cornerstone objective of the RCS. Projects added to the available green space, restored degraded areas, removed invasive species and planted natives. This provided a necessary service to the region’s ecological health: a healthy mix of organisms allows for production of clean air and water, healthy soil, and it adds greater stability and durability to our natural systems.

Capital grants also supported improving the quality of the region’s water. Projects improved water quality through streambed restoration and the installation of treatment systems that mitigated the impacts of stormwater runoff. Seven projects did this by preventing untreated runoff from entering the region’s rivers and streams. When storms roll through the region the rain they produce often lands on impervious surfaces where it collects pollutants and debris as it finds its way to the nearest sewer system or river. Reducing the amount of stormwater runoff prevents those pollutants from entering the water system. In addition to the stormwater





## Project Examples

### Benefits to Nature



#### Land Acquisition

Tigard acquired 43 acres at the confluence of Summer and Fanno Creeks. With 7 unique habitats on site, including a rare forested wetland, this site will become a hub for environmental education.



#### Neighborhood Livability

The grounds at the East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District offices in North Portland have been transformed into an outdoor classroom and living laboratory of low impact development practices, giving visitors ideas to try at home.



#### Urban Transformation

The new Park Avenue Transit Station is contributing to biodiversity by including seven unique planting zones including a riparian forest and an oak grove. The project is treating stormwater from more than 10 acres of land, improving water quality of the Kellogg Creek watershed.



#### Restoration

Crystal Springs has realized its potential as an excellent salmon stream thanks to the restoration of floodplain and riparian habitat and the removal of a culvert that blocked fish passage to newly restored habitat upstream.

treatment capital grant projects are providing, many sites are teaching residents about stormwater management through interpretive signs and/or tours. One project that was particularly focused on stormwater management said, "They can come in here and learn about eco-roofs they can learn about composting toilets, rain gardens, pervious pavement,

green streets, there's a stormwater planter out there, trench drains, we are trying to add as many components as possible so that folks can come here and learn about these things". In many cases these green infrastructure projects happen in areas of the region where there has been little previous development of these types of projects. Many capital grants used low-impact development approaches such as porous pavement, rain gardens, bioswales, green roofs and more.

Lastly, by focusing on planting native species, grantees have increased biodiversity in urban areas and helped to enhance the region's air quality. These projects help to clean the air of carbon emissions created by the burning of fossil fuels by planting organisms that absorb carbon emissions at the source. Capturing this carbon slows the buildup of greenhouse gasses which helps to forestall the effects of climate change. These efforts are strongly represented in the Metro-funded effort by Friends of Trees and ODOT to plant a variety of native trees and shrubs plants along a 13-mile stretch of Interstate 205.

### Fostering Stewardship

In addition to the list of direct environmental benefits, the majority of the projects that the capital grants program funded incorporated educational components and encouraged stewardship of the region's natural spaces. This was done in a number of ways including installing informational signage, offering educational programs, and partnering with local schools and universities. Grantees are also continuing to engage volunteers at the sites through additional restoration and caretaking activities, as well as involving community members in science projects.

The goal of these efforts, as stated by many interviewees, is to create a sense of responsibility and interest in natural spaces and to create a new generation of stewards who will continue to look after the region's resources into the future. While fostering stewardship was not a focus of the capital grants program, it was one that was tied into many projects that were identified as having multiple benefits and it was one of the strongest project outcomes identified by grantees. As one grantee described it, "If we can give kids powerful and happy childhood memories related to nature then I think we have a chance to, you know, make environmental ethics proliferate and have people who just love the outdoors and want to take care of it". Fostering environmental stewardship is also one of the key strategies for developed areas identified in the Regional Conservation Strategy.

*"We had a program out here because our coordinator is really into environmental education for children. They came and did little hikes and she taught them about invasives and natives. They came once and now they are coming back all on their own!"*

(Grantee)



## *How worthwhile were the outcomes for people?*

### **Increasing Access to Nature**

One of Metro's six desired regional outcomes is for vibrant communities where people's everyday needs, including nature, are easily accessible. Increasing people's access to and experience of nature was a key goal of the Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants program. Applicants consistently addressed this goal in all four project categories: land acquisition, neighborhood livability, restoration and urban transformation projects.

The four acquisition projects included in this report have preserved close to 62 acres of land. These acquisitions preserved land that would have potentially been developed, securing a public amenity for the community to enjoy. In addition to preserving the natural resources, two of these acquisitions made it easier to get to and enjoy existing parks.

These capital grants also funded investments that resulted in the creation of eight new parks. In addition, grant funding supported new trails, play areas, boardwalks and other amenities in existing parks. These additions are making it easier for visitors to access and enjoy nature and encourage them to visit. In line with another of Metro's desired outcomes, the capital grants program worked to fund projects that specifically sought to increase access to parks and natural spaces in park-deficient neighborhoods.

Metro funded six projects that incorporated nature into urban settings by either integrating natural components into new development projects or funding efforts to add nature to existing areas. These projects added natural elements such as trees, rain gardens, and bioswales to plazas, along freeways, at transit stations and in other urban environments.

One common comment heard from grantees was how the investments made at these locations increased the use of the space, sometimes beyond even their own expectations. One urban transformation project grantee said it was "surprising how much the community uses this space because there is not a park around here. The kids have basically turned this into their own park". A grantee for a neighborhood livability project described how their park became a regional draw after the investments were made.

Lastly, many of the restoration projects sought out opportunities to interpret the ecological functions that were discussed in the Outcomes for Nature section (see page 11) and to make the public more aware of the benefits of these improvements. Many restoration projects had a goal of addressing human impacts on erosion and water quality in urban streams by replacing culverts, addressing the impacts for recreational trails and providing defined wildlife viewing areas.

**Project Examples**  
**Benefits to People**



**Land Acquisition**

The City of Portland acquired three acres of Baltimore Woods, a remnant of native forest in North Portland that provides a wildlife corridor along the Eastbank Escarpment. The land fills a gap in the 40-Mile Loop Trail corridor.



**Neighborhood Livability**

Nadaka Nature Park is a 10-acre forest in Gresham. Nadaka received two capital grants: one to buy land linking the forested area to NE Glisan Street and a second for construction of trails, a picnic shelter and a nature play area.



**Urban Transformation**

At the Virginia Garcia Wellness Center in Cornelius, a capital grant helped turn an alley between two buildings into a plaza featuring native plants and low impact development techniques.



**Restoration**

Two unique overlooks offer park users a view of Mt. Scott Creek. The project included installing large woody debris and boulders in the creek and riparian enhancements along its edges.

**Additional Social Benefits**

The majority of the additional social benefits that came out of the grantee interviews were focused on partnerships and the different community groups that benefited. Because the scope of the project did not allow for us to talk directly to the communities around the projects, we have relatively little information on the additional benefits these projects might have had on them. However, there were two areas worth mentioning as potential additional benefits: increased programming and increased sense of community.

In addition to the informal use of sites by visitors, many capital grant sites are being used for more formal programming, particularly by partner organizations. When asked about who benefited from the projects, many grantees shared lists of different organizations, some of whom had been early project partners and some of whom started using the site after it was constructed. The most common users were school groups, ranging from elementary school to college students, who were using the sites for environmental education. Community-led projects frequently had sites being used for more social benefits, including English classes and health fairs.

Another social benefit that a few grantees mentioned was community cohesion. While the evidence for this was not as strong as some of the other findings, it is potentially an outcome that was just not captured through the interview process. The strongest evidence for this outcome came from a grantee recalling a conversation that they had with a local resident. “She said “This park wasn’t that great of a place to come and be in. Now we are coming here and the kids like to play here for so long that we are hanging out together.”

## **Equity**

It was not until after the inception of the capital grants program that the Metro Council adopted equity as one of the region’s six desired outcomes, but program staff included equity while developing the program because the supplemental criteria included equity-related outcomes. For example, equity was given consideration as Metro staff conducted outreach, focusing on the potential for projects to deliver multiple benefits, the geographic reach of projects, as well as targeting areas showing a lack of parks and natural spaces. Metro staff also provided grantees with encouragement and ideas on how to incorporate social and economic outcomes in addition to the projects’ original goals.

The efforts to be a catalytic funder for new projects, the attention to equity in outreach, and the staff support throughout the application and review process allowed for a number of exceptional equity-focused projects to grow and succeed. Metro worked with a number of grantees and their partners to create parks in nature-deficient areas, develop green spaces adjacent to affordable housing, integrate natural features into a new health care facility constructed in one low-income community, and improve access to an existing nature park and build a state-of-the-art nature play facility at a newly revitalized park in another across the region. The success of these projects, and the response by the community to these added benefits, helped Metro include explicit equity language in the 2013 Natural Areas Levy.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants funded both community-led and agency-led projects that supported regional conservation strategies while improving people’s ability to experience and access nature close to home. A wide variety of approaches came out of the program’s broadly-worded criteria from typical conservation strategies such as land

acquisition, restoration and park development to creative approaches to integrating nature into urban infrastructure projects.

Regardless of the wide-variety of projects funded, grantees interviewed for this evaluation reported some consistent feedback on the capital grants.

- Metro provided catalytic funding that was critical to the success of most of the projects, particularly the community-led projects. Metro's willingness to be the first funder to the table gave grantees the momentum they needed.
- Designs evolve, permit issues need to be addressed, other funding is secured or lost, feasibility issues emerge, all of which can complicate the scope and timeline of a capital project. Metro's willingness to be flexible as grantees resolve such issues required a time-consuming level of communication but was central to the grantee's ability to manage the project.
- Capital grants provided funding for projects that support regional conservation in the developed landscape, where limited funding exists.
- In order to provide meaningful opportunities for people to interact with the natural spaces created, most projects included intentional programming and stewardship opportunities in the scope of work.
- Metro's staff provided support and coaching throughout the application and review process and continued when needed during design and construction of the improvements. Grantees felt this was key to a project's success at achieving additional community benefits.

Two items emerged as consistent challenges for grantees.

- It was easy to see how the 2 to 1 match requirement inspired partnerships and secured additional funding for the projects included in this report. However, there were indications even with this group that the match requirement was difficult to achieve. More information about whether the 2 to 1 match provided an obstacle to potential applicants should be considered.
- Public-private partnership: In many cases this requirement broadened or initiated the working relationship between agencies and community partners. While this did achieve more meaningful outcomes, it added a level of complexity to the projects that neither the agency staff nor community members expected. Metro staff frequently acted as a liaison and coach to ensure the broadest outcomes of each project were achieved.

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