

Impacts of Metro’s Nature in Neighborhoods Capital Grants Program

Summary of Findings

BACKGROUND

The 2006 voter-approved natural areas bond measure established the \$15 million Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants program in order to recover ecological functions and to increase the presence of nature in people’s lives. The natural areas bond 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 the region’s more developed areas can contribute to regional conservation as well as healthy communities. The Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants program evaluation explores how capital grant funded projects have impacted the vibrancy of communities and urban nature.

METHODS

A Hatfield Fellow through Portland State University’s Hatfield School of Government was hired to conduct interviews with grantees that have completed their projects. The data was analyzed with the support of a Metro Program Performance Analyst. The analysis protects the confidentiality of the interviewees.

- The evaluation was driven by four evaluative questions framed within this summary.
- The evaluation examined the potential impacts of all 44 grants made between 2008 and 2015.
- Interviews were conducted with twenty-one individuals representing both agency and community partners from 15 completed projects.
- Qualitative content analysis was conducted using a combination of concept-driven and data-driven approaches through a software package called Dedoose.

Grant Portfolio

As of July 2015 the Metro Council has awarded 47 projects Capital Grants since the first funding cycle in 2008. With three projects unable to be completed, a total of \$13,297,780 is currently dedicated to 44 projects.

Project Type	Number of Grants	Total dollars awarded	Range of awards
Acquisition	9	\$3,431,404	\$136,012 - \$1,000,000
Restoration	10	\$2,286,532	\$47,090 - \$579,500
Urban Transformation	8	\$4,374,466	\$322,234 - \$1,000,000
Neighborhood Livability	17	\$3,205,398	\$22,042 - \$577,000

FINDINGS

Out of the 44 projects funded currently 19 are classified as community-driven and 25 as agency-driven. The origins of the projects affected many of the outcomes discussed in the report, including how projects enhanced long-term planning efforts, partnership development, the leveraging of additional resources, and the programming of the site after construction is complete.

How well does the capital grants program complement and support the work of local agencies and communities in bringing nature in to the developed areas of the Metro region?

- Local planning efforts were supported on multiple levels from funding shovel-ready projects managed by agencies to initiating efforts to implement community-driven projects responding to local plans.
- Grantees reported that Metro’s capital grant program is fulfilling an important funding niche in urban conservation.
- Grantees reported that Metro’s willingness to be “first to the table” to commit financial resources added credibility and encouraged the participation of other funders.

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

What was the affect of the program’s emphasis on public-private partnerships on projects?

- Community-driven projects were successful at creating meaningful partnerships that influenced how the project was designed and used. Grantees from community-based organizations are geographically focused and projects are important to local residents.
- Agency-driven projects engaged non-profit organizations that work at a regional level such as SOLVE or Friends of Trees, particularly when there was no pre-existing relationship with a local group.
- The match requirement made partnerships a necessity. Due to the constraints of different grant sources, grantees had to shift the design and focus of their projects. Metro’s flexibility was critical to bringing different funding sources to the table.
- Public-private partnership associated capital projects take time and attention to align interests, maintain communication, resolve differences, and work through “bureaucracy” in areas such as permitting and contracting.

“We didn’t want to raise money and then hand it to [the local agency]. We wanted it to be a community driven project . . . so reaching out to people and getting people together.”

How worthwhile were the outcomes for nature?

- All project types align with the *Strategies for Developed Landscapes* identified in the Regional Conservation Strategy for the greater Portland-Vancouver region. By applying these strategies at a local scale, projects are advancing regional conservation and supporting a resilient ecosystem by improving permeability for wildlife, enhancing wildlife corridors and habitat function, and engaging the public in stewardship opportunities.
- Restoration projects increased habitat quality and passage for the region's endangered fish, affecting local ecology as well as the health of the watershed as a whole.
- All of the projects helped boost the region's biodiversity – a cornerstone objective of the Regional Conservation Strategy.
- Additional water quality benefits were achieved through the use of low-impact development approaches such as porous pavement, rain gardens, bioswales, and other stormwater facilities.
- A majority of the projects foster environmental stewardship in a number of ways including through informational signage, education programs, engaging volunteers and partnering with local schools and universities.

*“Integrating nature into the built landscape can augment wildlife areas and biodiversity corridors by increasing permeability and creating stepping stones for wildlife movement.”
(Regional Conservation Strategy, 67)*

How worthwhile were the outcomes for people?

- Vibrant communities are places where people's everyday needs are met and easily accessible, including nature. Increasing people's access to and experience of nature was consistently addressed in all four project categories.
- The program resulted in the public acquisition of 76 acres of land that are now available for community use.
- Eight new parks have been created which include features such as trails, wildlife overlooks, boardwalks and nature play areas.
- Six projects incorporated nature into urban development projects, increasing the use of these urban spaces by local residents.

“This park wasn't that great of a place to come and be in. Now . . . the kids like to play here for so long that we are hanging out together.”

CONCLUSION

Nature in Neighborhoods capital grants funded both **community-driven and agency-driven 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 ranging 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 the evaluation reported some consistent feedback about the capital grants program.

- Metro provided **catalytic** funding that was critical to the success of most of the projects, particularly the community-driven 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 as needed during the 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 the 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.

For additional details on the findings summarized above, please see the full report titled *Nature in Neighborhoods Capital Grants Program Evaluation*.