

WilliamPennFoundation

Request for Proposals

Improving Public Spaces in Greater Philadelphia

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Lunar New Year celebration in the Rail Park. Photo: B. Spause for Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

Introduction

The William Penn Foundation (WPF) has a long history of investing in efforts to improve environmental conditions for residents of Greater Philadelphia. The Foundation’s Environment and Public Space program was created to help improve and protect the natural and built environment in communities around the region. A full description of the Environment and Public Space program, its goal, and its objectives can be found on the Foundation’s website. This Request for Proposals (RFP) was created to help organizations to advance the following objective, which was developed in consultation with many stakeholders around the region:

By 2035, help to improve at least 100 existing public spaces that support recreation, refuge, and social interaction.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many ways that organizations and communities can contribute to advancing this objective. This RFP is inviting proposals that will improve public spaces by making them more accessible and inclusive for persons who would otherwise experience barriers to their use and enjoyment.

Projects may include capital investments, operations, advocacy for policy or system changes, or other ways to produce improvements that will reduce barriers and encourage the use and enjoyment of public spaces. Proposals may seek to directly implement improvements on specific public spaces, or they may seek to facilitate improvements across a number of public spaces. This RFP is not seeking projects primarily focused on programming.

Proposed projects must take place in and primarily serve residents of the cities of Philadelphia and/or Camden.

Regardless of the approach, all applicants should provide a compelling explanation for how their proposed work will improve public spaces by expanding inclusion and accessibility. The specific criteria that will be used to assess all proposals can be found on pages 9-10 of this document.

Why is the Foundation using a Request for Proposals to advance this objective?

The Foundation has chosen to advance this objective using a Request for Proposals for several reasons. First, we believe that stakeholders across the region have a great deal of expertise and experience that can be supported to make progress on an objective that we heard was important to communities in our region. We want to hear about the impactful projects that are underway or could get underway and need funding. Second, we want to be as transparent as possible about the opportunity for non-profit organizations in the region to secure funding for work to advance this objective. Third, we heard from applicants and grantees in the past that our grant application process was overly burdensome, had unpredictable timelines, and did not provide sufficient information about the funding availability or the criteria used in selecting grantees. Fourth, we heard that applicants wanted an opportunity to show Foundation staff their work, not just tell them about it. The RFP process, including site visits as described below, is part of our effort to address this important feedback and to align with the Foundation's grantmaking values (as detailed on our website).

This RFP seeks project proposals that will help to improve the accessibility of public spaces in Camden and Philadelphia.

Background

The William Penn Foundation has a long history of making grants to support public spaces that are open to the public at no cost and that positively impact our communities.

Public spaces—including parks, urban gardens, community centers, libraries, public health facilities, and recreation areas—are among the essential elements of civic life. They serve as gathering places where people connect, learn, relax, and engage in cultural and recreational activities. Accessible and well-designed public spaces contribute to healthier, more vibrant communities by fostering social interaction, encouraging physical activity, and providing services that enhance overall well-being.

However, not all public spaces are equally inclusive or welcoming to all individuals. Many historically underserved communities face barriers to accessing high-quality public spaces due to physical, social, and economic challenges. Inaccessible infrastructure, limited accommodations for people with disabilities, lack of culturally responsive design, concerns over safety and belonging, among other obstacles, can deter certain groups from fully participating in public life.

For example, playgrounds may lack adaptive equipment for children with mobility challenges, pathways and entrances might not accommodate individuals using wheelchairs or strollers, and community centers may not reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of their neighborhoods. Additionally, public spaces can sometimes feel unwelcoming due to a lack of amenities that meet diverse needs, safety concerns, or design choices that do not consider the abilities and challenges of particular potential users, like senior citizens or neurodiverse individuals.

74% of Americans support reimagining or redesigning public spaces to better represent all community members.¹



Photo: Playworld, <https://playworld.com>

¹ [PRRI Research: Creating More Inclusive Public Spaces](#)

Ensuring that public spaces are inclusive, accessible, and welcoming requires intentionality in planning, design, and policy. By prioritizing inclusive design principles, engaging communities in the decision-making process, and addressing barriers to access, we can create public spaces that truly serve everyone. These improvements are not just about compliance with accessibility laws; they are about equity, dignity, and fostering a shared sense of belonging in the places we live, work, and play.

Incorporating inclusive design principles into public space improvement projects is essential for creating environments that are accessible and welcoming to all community members, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Inclusive design not only ensures compliance with accessibility standards but also fosters social equity, enhances user experiences, and promotes community engagement².

So as not to exacerbate Philadelphia’s maintenance backlog, the Foundation has recently chosen to prioritize investments that will produce improvements to *existing* public spaces rather than funding *new* public spaces that would require additional upkeep. We are therefore making capital, operational, and programmatic investments that will support maintaining, repairing, renovating, and activating public spaces in an inclusive and accessible way.



² [American Planning Association: Well-Designed Public Spaces Are Inclusive Ones](#)

Opportunity Overview

This Request for Proposals (RFP) seeks projects that enhance public spaces through inclusive design, ensuring that all people—regardless of ability, age, gender, or background—can fully enjoy and benefit from these essential community assets. We invite creative, community-driven solutions that identify and remove barriers that prevent specific populations from engaging and enjoying public spaces, as well as solutions that design and develop interventions that make public spaces more inviting and welcoming to specific populations that might otherwise be dissuaded from enjoying them.

Public spaces are defined by WPF as those that are managed, free, and open to the public. Public spaces include but are not limited to urban gardens, urban farms, parks, parklets, recreation centers, libraries, public health centers, and community centers. Improvements in right-of-way areas like sidewalks that are contiguous to the public space are eligible for funding through this RFP.

Organizations that propose projects in partnership with other applicants will be considered on their individual merits. However, the Foundation recognizes that making significant progress on the objective is difficult and believes that the most competitive proposals are likely to be those that include robust partnerships that leverage complementary strengths, resources, and expertise.

Furthermore, the Foundation recognizes that there are many different tactics or approaches that could be used to advance this objective. All proposals that meet the outlined criteria described below are encouraged.

WPF has a total of **\$4.5 million** available to support improvements that will expand the inclusivity and accessibility of public spaces. At least 70% of the funding in this RFP will support capital projects.

There is no minimum or maximum grant amount that organizations may request but we expect to attract and fund a range of projects of different types and sizes. The grant amount requested should be commensurate with the contribution that the project will make to the overall objective. We are especially eager to receive applications from small organizations and/or from organizations that are led by individuals who are members of groups with a history of discrimination. Projects that demonstrate a diversity of funding sources are likely to be more competitive.

Each proposal should identify the population of users and/or potential users that it intends to serve and describe the way in which the proposed work will remove a barrier to that population's full use and enjoyment of the public space and/or make the space more welcome and inviting for that population.

Proposals should have project terms of 1 - 3 years and can include planning. The proposed project must be completed, demonstrably enhancing accessibility and inclusion, within the term of the grant.

Examples of eligible improvements include but are not limited to:

1. **Multi-Sensory and Multi-Language Wayfinding Systems:** Implementing navigation aids in multiple languages and utilizing visual, tactile, and auditory cues can assist individuals with varying abilities in orienting themselves within public spaces. For example, tactile maps combined with audible instructions can guide users effectively.³
2. **Gender-Inclusive Facilities:** Providing restrooms and changing areas that are safe and accessible to all genders ensures that everyone feels comfortable using public amenities. This can include the design of single-occupancy restrooms or facilities that accommodate non-binary and transgender individuals.⁴
3. **Culturally Responsive Improvements:** Designing or improving areas to reflect and accommodate the cultural practices or pastimes of the local community can make public spaces more welcoming.
4. **Adaptive Recreational Equipment:** Installing playgrounds and fitness areas with equipment designed for users of all abilities allows children and adults to engage in physical activities alongside their peers, promoting inclusivity and physical well-being.⁵
5. **Playful Learning Projects:** Improvements that make spaces more welcoming, inviting, and useful for families and children ages 0-8 by encouraging children to explore, experiment, and engage with their environment in ways that promote cognitive, social, and physical development.

For applicants requesting funding for capital improvements: Applicants requesting funding for capital improvements have two opportunities to receive technical assistance in addition to grant funding, if selected through this RFP. If you are interested in either or both of the below opportunities, please indicate it via a checked box in the application:

1. WPF works with [Green Building United](#) to provide optional, free, hands-on technical assistance (TA) to grantees to ensure that **sustainability and climate resilience** are factored into capital projects funded by WPF. Free TA is available to grantees in the planning, design, or early construction phases of their projects. TA can help organizations reduce operational costs, including energy costs; prepare for extreme weather; access financial incentives; and meet other sustainability goals. To date, support has included one-on-one discussions, design reviews with relevant professionals, and facilitated site visits to peer organizations who have addressed similar sustainability/resilience challenges. Organizations that are selected to advance beyond the written proposal stage of the review process will have the opportunity to learn more about free TA from Green Building United during their site visit with WPF staff.
2. WPF works with the [Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network](#) to provide optional, free, hands-on technical assistance (TA) to grantees to **integrate intentional learning objectives and activities into children’s play environments**. This encourages children to explore, experiment, and engage with their environment in ways that promote cognitive, social, and physical development. Free TA is available to grantees in the planning, design, or early construction phases of their projects. TA can help organizations transform everyday public spaces into interactive learning hubs, which foster meaningful interactions between children, their caregivers,

³ [URBACT, “Turning Accessibility and Inclusion into Measurable Factors for Active Mobility”](#)

⁴ [American Planning Association, “Well-Designed Public Spaces Are Inclusive Ones”](#)

⁵ [URBACT, “Accessible and Inclusive Public Spaces: Foundations for Thriving Communities”](#)

and the community. Organizations that are selected to advance beyond the written proposal stage of the review process will have the opportunity to learn more about free TA from Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network during their site visit with WPF staff.

Eligibility

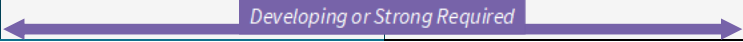
Applicants must be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)3 public charities or operate under a public charity fiduciary. Public charities include community-based organizations, schools and educational institutions, and other types of public-serving groups. Government entities are also eligible to apply.

Proposed projects must occur in **Philadelphia or Camden**.

Review Criteria

Proposals will be judged on the criteria below. **Applicants should address these criteria in their narrative responses to the application questions.**

Alignment with Objective			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Conveys no meaningful connection to the RFP objective.	Would make a marginal and/or uncertain contribution to advancing the RFP objective.	Proposed work would make a clear contribution to advancing the RFP objective.	Proposed work would make a clear and major contribution to advancing the RFP objective.
Beneficiaries			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Does not identify expected beneficiaries of the project.	Identified beneficiaries of the project do not include prioritized communities.	Project beneficiaries are identified, include prioritized communities, and will significantly benefit from the proposed work.	Project beneficiaries are identified, include prioritized communities, and will receive significant and major benefits from the proposed work.
Meaningful Community Engagement			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No meaningful engagement of community in preparation of proposal or implementation of proposed work.	Limited engagement of community in preparation of proposal or implementation of proposed work.	Meaningful engagement of community in development of proposal or implementation of project.	Robust and sustained engagement of community in preparation of proposal and implementation of proposed work.
Partnership and Collaboration			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Does not address partnerships that will be necessary for success.	Identified relevant partners but does not describe the role that partners will play in the proposed work.	Identifies relevant partners and fully describes collaboration with those partners.	Identifies relevant partners, fully describes the role that partners will play in the proposed work, and provides evidence of partners' commitment to fulfilling the roles described such as through an included letter of support.
Organizational Capacity			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Insufficient evidence of leadership, resources, staffing, partnerships, and/or experience necessary to achieve project goals.	Evidence of leadership, resources, staffing and/or partnerships, but insufficient evidence of ability to successfully implement work of the type being proposed.	Evidence of leadership, resources, staffing and partnerships, and some experience with successful implementation of the type of work being proposed.	Evidence of all necessary leadership, resources, staffing, and partnerships in place to achieve project goal. Applicant and/or partners also have extensive experience with successful implementation of the type of work being proposed.

Project Design and Feasibility			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Does not provide a clear, specific, or realistic approach to the work. Project outcomes and success are not clear and well-defined.	Provides a clear approach to the work, but some aspects of the approach are vague or seem unrealistic. Project outcomes are defined, but are of uncertain achievability, based on the details provided.	Provides a clear approach to the work and successful outcomes are defined and achievable. Some aspects of the project design may require further clarification to assess feasibility.	Provides a clear approach to the work that describes the organizational capacity to carry out the proposed project, a feasible plan to implement the work, and a plan to track project outcomes and the impact on the RFP objective.
			

Additional expectations and considerations:

Inclusive Decision-Making	In addition to overall meaningful community engagement, proposals should describe how project design, planning, and implementation will include input from the specific user populations that the project is intended to serve.
Maintenance	Proposals that include strategies for the sustainable maintenance and operations of proposed improvements will likely be more competitive.
Realistic Budget and Timeline	Proposals should include a clear and realistic budget and timeline.
Evidence-Based Practices	Proposals informed by research, best practices, and lessons learned from other successful inclusive public space initiatives will be more competitive.

Learning and Insights

Grantees will be expected to complete a brief written report each year describing how they have made progress toward the objective above and what they have learned during the year.

In addition, organizations funded through this RFP will be convened in a Learning Community to build networks among those advancing a common objective, to share learning and best practices, and to identify ways in which progress could be enhanced. Grantees will help to determine the frequency, content, and specific goals of the Learning Community. The overhead funding included with any awarded grants is, in part, meant to help subsidize staff participation in the Learning Community.



Webinar

Interested organizations are invited to participate in an optional informational webinar on **Thursday, March 27, 2025 at 11:00 AM EST.**

Register for the webinar at <https://lu.ma/williampenfoundation>.

Budget

Organizations are encouraged to build on their existing programs and initiatives, using WPF funding to supplement or enhance those efforts.

Project budgets should be all-inclusive, including any fees to partner organizations or consultants. This information can be provided in the proposal narrative.

Except in rare circumstances, total funding from WPF should not exceed 25% of an organization's operating budget.

All aspects of project development and execution, including planning, design, materials and equipment, community engagement, staffing, implementation, and capital expenses are eligible for funding.

Application Process

Before you apply, please review the questions below. If you can confidently answer “yes” to the questions, this funding opportunity may be relevant to you. If you respond “no” to any of the questions, this opportunity is not a good match for your project, and you should not apply.

	YES	NO
Will your project implement or facilitate improvements of one or more existing public spaces, as defined on page 6?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will your proposed project make public space more accessible and/or welcoming for a clearly defined group of users?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is your proposed project in the city of Philadelphia or Camden?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please also review all of the criteria on pages 9 and 10 and make sure that your program aligns with those.

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions above and meet the stated criteria, the application process begins by completing a proposal on our online submission system at <https://wpcf.my.site.com/grantee>. Submit your application by **5:00PM ET on April 25, 2025**. A WPF team will review all proposals and will notify applicants if they have been selected to move forward in the review process. **To download a working copy of the application to draft responses, please [click here](#).**

Selected organizations will take part in a site visit with WPF staff so that the Foundation can learn more about applicants’ work. Site visits will be approximately two hours in duration. We ask that organizations use this time to introduce key staff working on the proposed project, to show WPF staff where the work will take place, and to elevate the voices of the potential beneficiaries of the proposed project. Based on a combination of the written materials and the learning from the site visit, **a final slate of organizations** will be recommended to the WPF Board for consideration of their proposals.

This request or any subsequent response does not commit William Penn Foundation or the responding organization to any future funding or engagement. If you have any questions, contact Jazmine da Costa at jdacosta@williampennfoundation.org.

Timeline

March 19, 2025

Proposal submission period opens.

March 27, 2025

Informational Webinar (see page 11)

April 25, 2025

Proposals due by 5:00PM ET

May 7-12, 2025

Select applicants notified that their proposals have been chosen for further consideration and a site visit. Other applicants will be notified that their proposals are not advancing in the process.

May 12-June 6, 2025

Site visits conducted by WPF staff with selected applicants.

July 25, 2025

WPF Board review selected proposals.

August 2025

Project implementation can begin.