



Federal Funding for Local Park Access

Federal funding for local park, trail, and active transportation projects can be transformative for a community! But the process of accessing federal funds can seem daunting. This fact sheet profiles several federal funding sources that have the potential to support infrastructure improvements that increase access to everyday destinations, especially parks and greenspace. It includes programs that focus on active transportation, economic development, and the environment, all of which can support Safe Routes to Parks. Use this resource to understand the basics of these programs, learn how other communities have used them, and identify the next steps to learn more and apply.



Transportation

Looking to make it easier to walk or bicycle to parks in your community? Or improve safety for kids walking from school to afterschool activities at a neighborhood rec center? Consider **the Transportation Alternatives Set Aside, also known as the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)**. Every state receives funding, and it is awarded to local communities through a competitive process.

Transportation Alternatives is a 10 percent set aside of the Federal Surface Transportation Block Grant program (which will increase annually from 2022-2026).¹ Projects and activities eligible for this funding include bike and pedestrian projects such as Safe Routes to School, recreational trails, stormwater management, and projects that support compliance with the vulnerable road user safety assessment required for the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP). Each state receives funding based on its population and other factors. Competitions

for this funding are run by state departments of transportation (DOTs) for projects throughout the state as well as projects in small and mid-sized communities. In large urban areas, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional transportation authorities, run a competition just for projects within their region. The DOT and the MPO each decide their application timeline, criteria, and process for choosing projects but they are both newly required to define and prioritize “high need” communities in project selection.² Most TAP projects require a 20 percent match from the local project sponsor, although in certain states, the local match is lower, and states have more flexibility to make those changes under the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. A few states, like Illinois and Florida, have identified other state resources to supply the matching dollars for communities with demonstrated need or specific project types such as Safe Routes to School.

FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

2020 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities grantee, Central Arkansas Library District, in Little Rock, Arkansas, helped the city attain about \$1 million in Transportation Alternatives funding from their Metropolitan Planning Organization to fund permanent walking and biking improvements where they did a Safe Routes to Parks demonstration project. In August 2020, the library and parks department created a month-long, temporary “walk and roll” lane connecting War Memorial park to the Arkansas Children’s Library in a neighborhood south of I-630 to physically bridge the racial divide of the interstate and provide a safe walking and biking route to the park. The coalition-building they did before and during the demonstration project and their Safe Routes to Parks action plan made it easy for the director of public works at the city to say “yes” to the permanent project and support a funding application.⁴



Photo Credit: Central Arkansas Library System

FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

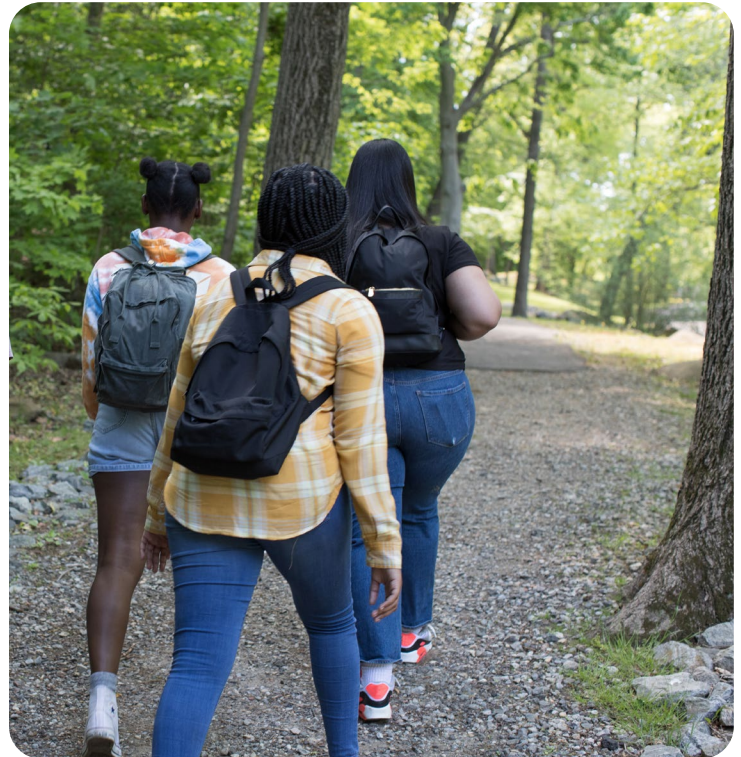
Salem, Oregon used TAP funding to help develop the Peter Courtney Minto Island Bicycle and Pedestrian Bridge and Trail, which connects 1,200 acres of parks and more than 20 miles of off-street trails across the state’s capital city. The bridge adjoins three downtown riverfront parks and includes a bicycle and pedestrian counter. The dream of a bicycle-pedestrian bridge in Salem had been decades in the works. The city approved plans for the project in 2010 and finished construction in 2017, with a dedication from longtime Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney, the bridge’s namesake.⁵ The total project cost reached \$10 million, which was covered in part by the city’s TAP funding awarded through state and MPO grants. The project was also supported by Urban Renewal Agency funding and grants from the Oregon Parks and Recreation District and Business Oregon.⁶



Photo Credit: Salem Winter-Maple Greenway

Take Action: Visit your state's TAP website or contact the MPO or state DOT to see when TAP competitions are happening, what kinds of projects are eligible for funding, and what resources are available to support applicants. [Click here](#) for state-specific fact sheets with competition details and contact information.

- **Find support:** Most states provide the scoring rubric for how they will evaluate applications, so you can use that to make your application more competitive. Some states host pre-application workshops or can waive the matching requirement for low-income communities.
- **Consider eligibility and partner up:** Eligible sponsors include local governments, regional transportation authorities, transit agencies, natural resource or public land agencies, school districts and local education agencies, tribal governments, other local and government entities with oversight of transportation or recreational trails, nonprofit organizations*, small MPOs*, and the state if a local government requests their help* (*new in the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure law).⁷ If you are not an eligible sponsor for TAP funds, identify an eligible community partner and begin working with them early on to craft a strong proposal.
- **Get the pre-work done:** Many states favorably evaluate projects that have come from a community engagement process and have strong community support. Similarly, many states like to see projects identified in at least one planning document. Both of those processes take time, so it is best to start now. Additionally, some states do not allow for TAP funds to pay for preliminary engineering, so either agency staff or a consultant needs to complete the preliminary engineering for a proposed project. Sometimes consultants are willing to provide this initial service with the understanding that they will be the ones to work on the project if it is funded.⁸



Does your community desire greenways and trails? Linear parks that help people get across the community? Look into the **Recreational Trails Program**.

The **Recreational Trails Program (RTP)** is a set-aside of the Transportation Alternatives Program that provides funding to build and maintain recreational trails and support facilities that can be used by nonmotorized and motorized trail users. Each state has a specific amount of Transportation Alternatives Program funds taken off the top dedicated to the Recreational Trails Program, although a few do opt out. You can see your state's funding levels [here](#).⁹ Every state runs its own program, but generally, funding can be used for the following: trailside and trailhead facilities (such as restrooms, signage, and access ramps), equipment for construction and maintenance (such as grooming and restoration), construction of new recreational trails, acquisition of trail corridors, assessment of trail conditions, education for safety and environmental protection, and administration.¹⁰



FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In 2017, the City of Decatur, Alabama used RTP funding to construct a new shared-use path along Wilson Street NW to connect to the Dr. Bill Sims Biking and Running/Walking Trail.¹¹ This new trail runs past a middle school and a local sports complex and connects people to miles of trail that run through the city.¹²

Take Action: The Recreational Trails Program is run through state departments of natural resources rather than departments of transportation. Contact your state's RTP coordinator to learn about grant timelines and application requirements. You can find their contact information on this [FHWA-maintained website](#). Find opportunities to align your application with existing local, regional, and state plans to show support for your project.



Economic Development

Is your community interested in park access improvements that could help with economic development in your community? Do they want to make areas around parks feel safer? Explore the opportunities of **Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)**.

Community Development Block Grants are federal grants awarded to spur community development through projects like community centers, improved sewer systems, public parks, and other economic development projects. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awards funds to 49 states and Puerto Rico which then administer their own programs. HUD directly administers funding for counties in Hawaii. Of note, CDBG grants are one of the few federal grants that can be used as match for the Transportation Alternatives Program and the Land Water Conservation Fund, so communities may braid together these funds to implement projects entirely using federal funds.

FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In Indio, California, the city allocates about 60 percent of its annual CDBG funding to the Better Neighborhoods Program (BNP). This program provides funds for the design and construction of infrastructure needs prioritized by the community such as streets, sidewalks, and parks. Residents then support the work through volunteer days to do activities like community cleanup, tree planting, and graffiti removal. This combination of community-identified infrastructure improvements and community involvement builds connections and community pride.¹³



FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In Athens-Clarke County, Georgia, the department of Leisure Services (Arts, Nature, and Recreation) secured a \$90,000 Community Development Block Grant to build a sidewalk in place of a worn-down “social trail” that is traveled by more than 100 people a day connecting people from a local public housing development to the East Athens Community Center.

Take Action: Search for your state’s CDBG program to explore past projects, eligibility, and the current application timeline. This program is often managed by departments focused on economic development. Many states provide assistance to communities interested in applying through workshops or opportunities to discuss a potential proposal with staff. Take advantage of those opportunities to craft a competitive application.

Environment

Is your community trying to buy park land for public use or make existing parks more enjoyable by adding a restroom, playground, or system of wayfinding signage? Check out your state's **Land Water Conservation Funding (LWCF)**.

The **Land and Water Conservation Fund** is a federal grant program that provides matching grants to states and local governments for up to 50 percent of the cost of either acquiring land for public outdoor recreation or developing basic outdoor recreation facilities. States receive an allocation of grant funding based on population as well as other factors. To be eligible, states have to prepare a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) and updated it every five years. These plans are meant to address current needs and goals identified by residents and elected leaders. In many states, such as Oregon and Pennsylvania, this plan acts as a guide for outdoor recreation projects throughout the state.¹⁴ All applications must align with the priorities in the SCORP.¹⁵ Of note, although the match cannot typically use federal funding, Community Development Block Grants and Recreational Trails Program funding may be used as funding for the required match.¹⁶

FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In Harrah, Oklahoma, the city used [LWCF funding](#) to build a water spray park and enhance existing features like restrooms, walking trails, picnic facilities, and the playground in Heritage Park. The city took on this project with significant support from the community because they wanted a safe place for children to play, get physical activity, and cool down from the summer heat.¹⁷

Take Action: Find your state's SCORP on the state environmental agency's website. States have different names for this agency; you can look up the agency in your state here. Look for opportunities to align your community's needs with priorities and projects mentioned in the SCORP. If you can nest your proposal within an existing priority, your project may be more competitive. Contact your state office for application deadlines, priorities, and selection criteria.



Is your community making water infrastructure upgrades along routes that connect people to parks? Look at opportunities to connect to the **Clean Drinking Water State Revolving Fund**.

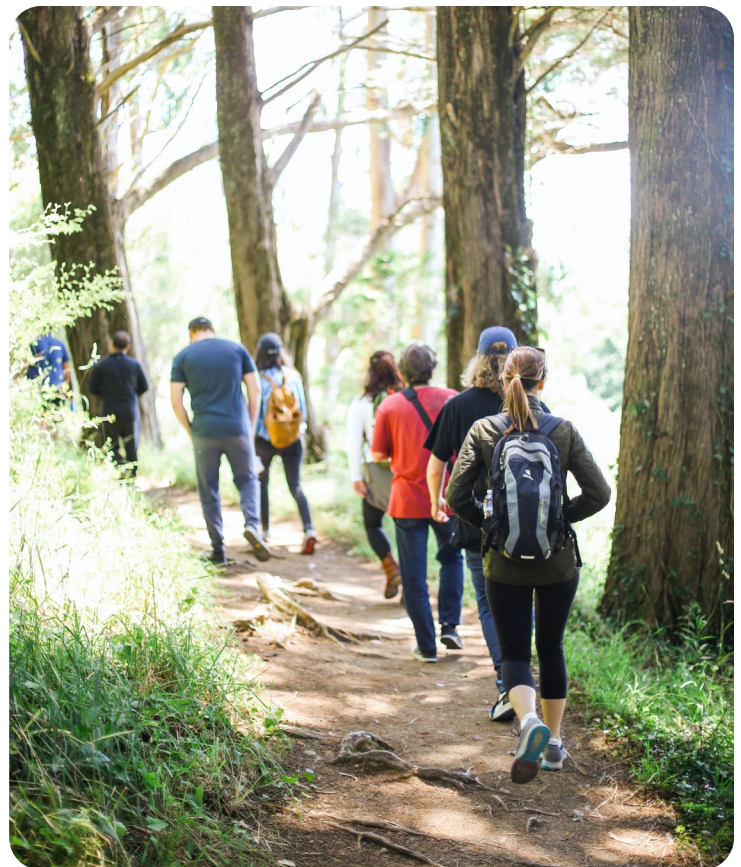
The **Clean Drinking Water State Revolving Fund** is a program that supports water infrastructure projects. The Environmental Protection Agency provides grants to every state to which the state adds 20 percent to match the federal contribution. This money is then loaned out at a low interest rate to support water infrastructure projects across the state. Money is paid back into the state's revolving loan fund where it will then be loaned out again (revolving) to other priority projects.¹⁸ Managing stormwater and flooding is an important part of accessing parks, and green stormwater features can help create safer streets for walking and biking. The Clean Drinking Water State Revolving Fund can be used to invest in [Green Streets](#), an EPA-backed approach incorporating trees, other greenery, and permeable surfaces to help filter and capture rainwater. These additional trees and greenspaces can work double duty to narrow travel lanes, calm traffic, and create more safe and pleasant routes for walking and biking.¹⁹



FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In Spokane, Washington, the state's clean water revolving fund supported stormwater improvements to a high-traffic road to avoid possible contamination of a major aquifer. These stormwater improvements were scheduled to coincide with Spokane county-funded road resurfacing to reduce costs for both projects.²⁰

Take Action: Connect with your local public works department to understand their stormwater priorities and identify potential areas to overlap those improvements with creating safer and more pleasant routes for walking and biking. Even if there is no significant funding to make big changes repaving the road after stormwater changes can be an opportunity for low-cost changes to the road striping.



Is your community interested in opportunities to educate people about the connection between Safe Routes to Parks, active transportation, and environmental stewardship? Check for updates on **Environmental Education Grants**.

Environmental Education (EE) Grants are run by the Environmental Protection Agency to support projects that promote environmental awareness and build the skills for people to protect the environment. Since 1992, this program has provided \$2 million-\$3.5 million in grant funding per year. The following groups are eligible to apply: local education agencies, state education or environmental agencies, colleges or universities, 501(c)(3) nonprofits, noncommercial broadcasting entities, and tribal education agencies.²¹ This program requires a 25 percent non-federal match which can be met through donated time and services. In addition, 25 percent of the EPA funding must go toward subawards of \$5000 or less to eligible subrecipients such as community-based organizations that can help with engagement or school districts that will help implement a project.²²

FEDERAL FUNDING IN ACTION

In 2010 in Kentfield, California, Cool the Earth, Inc, a climate change education program, used an EE grant to bring together Safe Routes to School and climate education. They focused on climate change by educating students and their families about the topic and walking through actions they can take to reduce greenhouse gasses, such as walking instead of driving to nearby destinations. They trained volunteer coordinators at Kindergarten through 8th grade schools to run a short-term campaign with the motto “Every Action Counts.” This program was recognized by the California Air Resource Board for excellence.²³



Take Action: Consider how you can highlight the connection between environmental stewardship and Safe Routes to Parks. Consider holding educational events to activate your local park, combine environmental education on plant identification or pollinators with maps showing safe routes to everyday destinations, or work with kids to understand the environmental impact of walking or biking instead of driving. Get creative and partner up to increase your impact. The EPA releases a request for applications with application guidance, and the final application is submitted through www.grants.gov. Look at their application info page, subscribe to email updates, and find your regional contact [here](#).

These federal programs can provide significant funding for infrastructure that increases safe access to parks. Taking the time early on to familiarize yourself with these programs and the nuances of your state’s specific guidance can set you up for more successful funding applications. Don’t be intimidated by these big programs, they are designed to support local work, you just have to research to ensure you have a competitive application. With enough preparation, you could win money to make major physical improvements for equitable park access.

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