

WilliamPennFoundation

Request for Proposals

Expanding the Circuit Trails Network

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Photo: Thom Carroll for the Circuit Trails

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, add 75 miles to the Circuit Trails network.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many ways that organizations and communities can contribute to advancing this objective. With that understanding, this RFP imposes only a few limitations on the approach that applicants may take (see page 6 for ineligible project types). Projects must directly or indirectly support the expansion of the Circuit Trails network. See pages 5-6 for examples of eligible projects.

Regardless of the approach, all applicants should provide a compelling explanation for how their proposed work will advance the objective. The specific criteria that will be used to assess all proposals can be found on pages 7-8 of this document.

This RFP seeks project proposals that will help to equitably and sustainably expand the Circuit Trails network.

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).

Background

Trails offer wide-ranging benefits to communities, supporting health, active transportation, and economic development. Trails connect people to the outdoors and each other, enhancing physical and mental health, strengthening communities, and improving overall quality of life. In addition to their recreational value, trails function as vital infrastructure for non-motorized transportation, providing safe and sustainable travel options. They also contribute to local economies, making neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work.

Greater Philadelphia is home to the Circuit Trails, a regional network of hundreds of miles of multi-use trails that continues to grow each year. Since its launch in 2012, the Circuit Trails has become one of the largest trail systems of its kind in the country. With more than 850 miles planned and about half already complete, the network is an essential public asset for the region.

Building trails is only part of the work; trails also need to be maintained, stewarded, and sustained for long-term use. And, critically, they should be safe, accessible, welcoming, and responsive to the needs of all people – especially communities that are underserved or populations that have historically found trails to be unwelcoming or inaccessible.

Individuals who report that they have easy access to parks and trails are nearly twice as likely to meet recommended physical activity guidelines.¹



Photo: Thom Carroll for the Circuit Trails

¹ [The Role of Built Environments in Physical Activity, Obesity, and CVD - PMC](#)

Opportunity Overview

The Foundation seeks to support efforts that will help to expand the Circuit Trails network by 75 miles in the next 10 years.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many different tactics or approaches that could be used to advance the objective stated above. However, in this RFP we will **not** be considering proposals for acquisition, planning, design, engineering, or construction of a trail segment. Projects in those categories will be funded through a different vehicle. All other proposals that meet the criteria described below are encouraged.

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 encourages organizations to include partnerships that leverage complementary strengths, resources, and expertise to reach proposed goals.

To date, a key driver of the progress made on developing the Circuit Trails has been the Circuit Trails Coalition, a collaborative of more than 50 nonprofit organizations and government agencies committed to the equitable development and use of the trail network. The Coalition has established a 5-year [strategic plan](#) to guide its efforts and ensure that the system serves and benefits all of the communities it connects. This plan identifies “Priority Projects” where trail development can provide the most benefit to people, based on population density; race/ethnicity; income; access to transportation, employment, and natural assets; and other factors. We are especially eager to see proposals that will advance these Priority Projects.

In general, proposed projects may focus on advocacy, technical assistance, outreach, community engagement, communications, stewardship, programming, or other ways to expand the Circuit Trails network. Examples of eligible project types include, but are not limited to:

- advocating for Circuit Trails development or maintenance to be prioritized at the state, regional, or local level, including growing grassroots support for “Priority Projects” in the Circuit Trails Coalition’s strategic plan;
- providing technical assistance to an entity seeking to construct a Circuit Trail by 2035;
- providing services that directly support the Circuit Trails Coalition’s work to accelerate equitable trail development, such as applied research, database management, or other services;
- conducting marketing and communications that elevates the importance of the Circuit Trails among influential constituencies;
- supporting trail stewardship or maintenance to grow community or city support for [specific](#) additional trails; and
- providing programs that demonstrate a strong potential to advance a [specific](#) trail, such as guided walks to or along a trail “gap,” or a youth development initiative integrated with advocacy training. (Applicants seeking support for programming that is not linked to a specific trail development opportunity should consider applying to the next William Penn Foundation Outdoor Programming RFP.)

While this RFP invites proposals that support the user experience, as these examples indicate, the proposals should articulate a clear connection between the proposed activities and the Foundation’s objective of adding 75 miles to the Circuit Trails network by 2035.

In describing the proposed work, all submitted proposals should, as applicable:

- identify the trail segment(s) that the proposed work is intended to advance;
- identify the funding or policy opportunities the proposed work is intended to advance;
- articulate how the proposed work seeks to advance or complement specific element(s) of the Circuit Trails Coalition’s strategic plan;
- project (to the maximum extent possible) the number of miles of trails that will be developed because of the work, and the anticipated timeframe.

The following types of projects **will not be funded** through this RFP:

- right-of-way acquisition, planning, design, engineering, or construction of a trail segment;
- planning, design, engineering, or construction of a community asset adjacent to a trail (e.g., boat launch, benches, etc.).
- any project that does not make a clear contribution to expanding the number of miles in the Circuit Trails network.

We are requesting proposals for **up to three years of funding**. After reviewing proposals, WPF will conduct site visits and gather additional information from a limited number of organizations. WPF has **\$6 million** available to advance this objective through this RFP.

WPF values diverse approaches from various organizations and communities to address the objective, and we aim to attract and fund a range of projects – including those led by smaller organizations and by people who have historically faced discrimination or exclusion. There is no minimum or maximum amount of funding that projects may request. The grant amount requested should be commensurate with the contribution that the project will make to the overall objective.

Eligibility

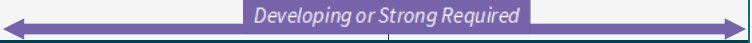
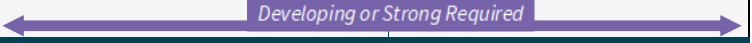
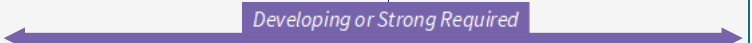
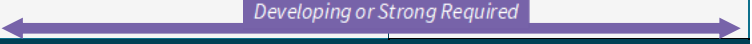
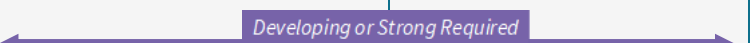
Applicants must be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)3 public charities or operate under a public charity fiduciary. Public charities include community-based organizations, schools and educational institutions, and other types of public-serving groups. Government entities are also eligible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

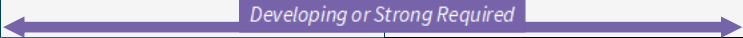
Organizations do **not** need to be members of the Circuit Trails Coalition to apply to this RFP.

Proposed projects must demonstrate likelihood of adding trail segments that are currently part of, or are likely to be added to, the defined Circuit Trails network in Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties in Pennsylvania and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Mercer Counties in New Jersey. See www.circuittrails.org and www.dvrpc.org/webmaps/thecircuit/ for more information.

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:

Equity	Proposals are likely to be more competitive if they support trail expansion in ways that also increase trail access and benefits to communities that are underserved or populations that have historically found trails to be unwelcoming or inaccessible.
Budget	The requested budget must be reasonable for the proposed activities and the stated results.

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 **Tuesday, June 24, 2025 at 11:00 AM ET.**

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

Budget

Project budgets should cover up to three years of funding.

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.

Except as otherwise indicated in this RFP, all aspects of project development and execution are eligible for funding, including project planning (excluding planning and design of trail segments), materials and equipment, community engagement, staffing, and implementation.

Application Process

Before you apply, please review the three 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
Does the project demonstrably contribute to completing 75 miles of Circuit Trails by 2035?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the project exclude right-of-way acquisition, trail planning, design, engineering, and construction?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is your organization a non-profit organization or government agency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Please also review all of the criteria on pages 7 and 8 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://wpf.my.site.com/grantee>. Submit your application by **5:00PM ET on July 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 Michele Perch at mperch@williampennfoundation.org.

Timeline

June 18, 2025

Proposal submission period opens.

June 24, 2025

Informational Webinar (see page 9)

July 25, 2025

Proposals due by 5:00PM ET

August 6-11, 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.

August 11-September 5, 2025

Site visits conducted by WPF staff with selected applicants.

October 24, 2025

WPF Board review selected proposals.

November 2025

Project implementation can begin.