

WilliamPennFoundation

Request for Proposals

Improvement of Public Spaces in Greater Philadelphia

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Photo credit: Bartram's Garden

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 existing public spaces in ways that strengthen their ability to serve as places of community gathering, civic engagement, social connection, and democratic participation whereby the average citizen can publicly participate and shape the development of their communities.

Projects may include capital investments, organizational operations that will directly lead to physical improvements, or advocacy for policy or system changes that result in measurable improvements to public space infrastructure. Proposals may seek to implement improvements at specific public spaces or facilitate improvements across multiple existing public spaces.

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 advance the objective above. The specific criteria that will be used to assess all proposals can be found on pages 8 and 9 of this document.

This RFP seeks project proposals that will improve public spaces in Camden and Philadelphia and make those spaces sites of civic engagement and democratic participation.

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.

Background

The William Penn Foundation has a long history of making grants to support public spaces that have played a defining role in Philadelphia’s civic life.

From Independence National Historical Park and City Hall to neighborhood parks, recreation centers, and community plazas across Philadelphia and Camden, public spaces have served as sites of assembly, protest, celebration, dialogue, and collective decision-making. They are not only community amenities, but important settings where democracy and community engagement are manifest.

As the nation celebrates its Semiquincentennial in 2026, and at a time when democracy, civic trust, and social cohesion face real strain, the role of public space takes on renewed importance. The accessibility, safety, and design of public spaces shape who participates in public life, whose voices are heard, and whether communities gather across differences.

However, many public spaces face deferred maintenance, safety concerns, and infrastructure barriers that limit their use and diminish their ability to serve as welcoming venues for civic participation. Strengthening public spaces through thoughtful capital investment is essential to ensuring that they continue to function as places that reflect and support our communities.

In recognition of this moment, the William Penn Foundation, joined by the Knight Foundation, is committing funding to improve existing public spaces so they can continue to serve as shared civic assets for neighborhoods across Philadelphia and Camden. We seek to strengthen places where differences can be navigated constructively, helping to bridge divides, strengthen civic culture, and reinforce democracy in action at the community level.

A recent systematic review of studies found that public spaces serve as important opportunities for everyday engagement and social interactions, and that the *co-presence of diverse groups and activities in public space is an important building block of social cohesion.*¹



Photo Credit: Todd Mason, Halkin Mason Photography

¹ Qi, J., Mazumdar, S. & Vasconcelos, A.C. Understanding the Relationship between Urban Public Space and Social Cohesion: A Systematic Review. *Int. Journal of Com. WB* 7, 155–212 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42413-024-00204-5>

Opportunity Overview

This Request for Proposals (RFP), issued jointly by WPF and the Knight Foundation, seeks capital projects that strengthen and ignite existing public spaces in Philadelphia and Camden as centers of community gathering, social connection, and civic life.

Together WPF and the Knight Foundation are making a total of **\$5 million** available to support improvements to public spaces that strengthen democracy. At least 70% of funding in this RFP will support capital projects.

Eligible projects must focus on physical improvements to existing public spaces that are managed, free, and open to the public. These include, but are not limited to, parks, open plazas, urban gardens, urban farms, recreation centers, libraries, public health centers, and community centers. Public rights-of-way, such as sidewalks, streets, and bus shelters, are not considered public spaces in and of themselves. However, infrastructure elements contiguous to and functionally connected to eligible public spaces may be funded if improvements clearly enhance access, safety, or usability of the adjacent public space.

Programming and public art are eligible only if they are clearly and directly integrated with the proposed physical improvement. Such elements must demonstrably enhance the long-term function of the space as a place that strengthens civic life as defined in this RFP.

Proposals that include programming and/or public art must reflect the following:

- Programming and public art may not exceed 20% of the total project budget.
- Programming and public art must be directly related to a physical improvement proposed for funding through this grant and may not be proposed as standalone activities.
- Preference will be given to permanent or durable installations and recurring civic uses that extend beyond a single event or short-term activation.
- Temporary events, festivals, performances, or short-duration activations will not be prioritized for funding.

Operational expenses may be included if they are directly tied to the implementation of capital improvements.

Proposals should describe how improvements to a public space will advance at least one of the following:

1. **Social cohesion:** Strengthen trust, connection, and a shared sense of belonging among community members through sustained, positive interaction in public space.
2. **Relationship-building across lines of difference:** Create opportunities for interaction and mutual understanding among people of different backgrounds, identities, perspectives, or lived experiences.
3. **Sharing diverse ideas and perspectives:** Support environments in which a range of viewpoints, experiences, and forms of expression can be encountered respectfully in public space.

4. **Participation in democratic processes:** Enhance the ability of residents to gather, deliberate, express viewpoints, and engage in civic life within public space.

Eligible examples include but are not limited to the following types of improvements:

1. **Safety and Risk Mitigation:** Improvements that reduce physical or environmental hazards and enhance safety for public space users. Examples include improved lighting, repairs to uneven surfaces, traffic-calming measures, safer pedestrian crossings, and heat- or flood-mitigation features.
2. **Access and Orientation:** Physical accessibility and navigation improvements that enhance a public space's ability to function as a venue for public gathering and civic activity. Examples include multi-language signage, tactile or audible wayfinding systems, improved pathways and entrances, and reconfigured open-space layouts that better support public use.
3. **Dignity, Comfort, and Basic Amenities:** Amenities that support comfortable, safe use of public spaces by people of all genders, ages, and abilities. Examples include gender-inclusive restrooms, accessible seating, shade, and weather protection.
4. **Cultural Relevance and Belonging:** Physical design improvements that reflect the history and identity of the surrounding community and reinforce the public space as a shared gathering place. Note, murals and public art displays will not be eligible for funding through this RFP.
5. **Inclusive Recreation and Physical Activity:** Infrastructure designed to support participation by users of all abilities. Examples include adaptive playground equipment and accessible fitness infrastructure.

These categories are examples only. The Foundation recognizes that there are many different tactics or approaches that could be used to advance the objective stated above. Applicants are encouraged to propose other capital improvements that clearly strengthen a public space's role as a place of community gathering and strongly demonstrate alignment with the below criteria.

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.

There is no minimum or maximum grant amount that organizations may request but it is unlikely any individual grant would exceed \$500,000. 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 committed funding sources are likely to be more competitive.

Proposals should have **project terms of 1 - 3 years**. Project plans should be largely complete at the time of application, though applicants can propose up to three months to finalize those plans. The proposed project, inclusive of all physical improvements, must be completed within the term of the grant.

Applicants requesting funding for capital improvements have an opportunity to receive technical assistance in addition to grant funding, if selected through this RFP. If you are interested in the opportunity below, please indicate it via a checked box in the application.

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.

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**.

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.

Key Questions

	YES	NO
Is the proposed project focused on physical improvements to an existing public space in Philadelphia or Camden?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the public space where improvements will be made free and open to the public on a regular basis on weekdays or weekends?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the project strengthen the existing public space’s ability to serve as a place of community gathering and civic life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If the proposal includes programming or public art, do those components constitute no more than 20% of the total project budget and clearly reinforce democracy-strengthening uses enabled by capital improvements?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please also review all of the criteria below and make sure that your program aligns with those.

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.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Beneficiaries			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Does not identify expected beneficiaries of the project.	Identified beneficiaries of the project do not include prioritized communities.	Identified beneficiaries of the project include prioritized communities.	Prioritized communities will receive significant benefits from the project.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Meaningful Community Awareness of Proposed Work			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No meaningful evidence of community awareness of, interest in, or demand for proposed work.	Minimal evidence of community awareness of, interest in, and/or demand for proposed work.	Meaningful evidence of community awareness of, interest in, and/or demand for proposed work.	Specific involvement of community members and/or community-based organizations in development of proposal.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Meaningful Community Engagement in Proposed Work			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No meaningful community engagement included in implementation plan for proposed work.	Limited community engagement in implementation plan for proposed work.	Significant community engagement as audience for proposed work (e.g. outreach and education).	Substantial community engagement as both audience for and also implementers of proposed work.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
Partnership and Collaboration			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Does not address partnerships that will be necessary for success.	Explains the partnerships that will be necessary for success, but does not identify specific partners or describe the role that partners will play in the proposed work.	Identifies specific partners, provides at least a general description of the role that they will play in the work, and includes letters of support from at least some of them.	Identifies specific partners, provides a detailed description of the role that they will play in the work, and includes letters of support from each of them.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	

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.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	
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, successful outcomes are defined and achievable, and the proposal includes a sound project design and feasible implementation plan.
		← Developing or Strong Required →	

Additional expectations:

Democracy Building	The proposal must explain how the proposed improvement will enable the public space to increase community connections, facilitate the sharing of ideas, bring together diverse communities, and/or encourage civic participation.
Site Selection	The proposal should provide a compelling rationale for why the selected site is particularly effective at building democracy, including consideration of visibility, accessibility, historical or cultural relevance, and patterns of public use. Preference will be given to public spaces that have an established history of serving as places of community gathering, bridging cultural divides, facilitating social connection and cohesion, and drawing diverse usership. Applicants should provide evidence of past use, attendance patterns, or community recognition of the space’s civic role.
Maintenance	Proposals that include strategies for ongoing maintenance and operations of proposed physical and capital 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 and best practices 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 26, 2026 at 1:00 PM ET.**

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

Budget

Project budgets should cover up to three years of funding and may include up to three months for planning. Organizations are encouraged to build-on their existing programs, 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 a participating organization's operating budget.

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

Proposals that Include Advocacy and Lobbying

The Foundation recognizes that advocacy can sometimes be a useful tactic to advance certain objectives. Advocacy takes many forms and sometimes includes activities that the Internal Revenue Service defines as lobbying. (See [Application Guidelines for Advocacy Projects](#) for general information on the IRS lobbying rules.) The Foundation is open to proposals that include advocacy and/or lobbying as part of the project and may fund projects that include lobbying so long as certain requirements are met.

Applications that include advocacy or lobbying must:

1. Show in the budget submitted by the applicant that the amount requested from the Foundation is less than 80% of the total project budget.
2. Identify the proportion of the total project budget, if any, that may support activities defined as lobbying under the IRS rules (the “lobbying percentage”). (You will see a specific question about this on the budget template.)
3. Show that the applicant has funding commitments that will cover a minimum of 20% of the total project budget for at least the first year of the proposed grant period. In-kind contributions cannot be counted toward this portion of the budget. (Organizations will be expected to demonstrate funding commitments for at least 20% of the budget for all years of the grant period, but we recognize that it may take additional time to secure those commitments.)
4. If the lobbying percentage is more than 20% of the project budget, the applicant must show that they have committed funds that exceed that lobbying percentage.

In no cases can WPF earmark funds for lobbying activities, nor can Foundation funds be used to support or oppose any candidate for public office, for voter registration efforts, or for any partisan purposes.

Application Process

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions in the eligibility section above and meet the stated criteria, the application process begins by completing a proposal on our online submission system at <https://wfpf.my.site.com/grantee>.

Submit your application by 5:00PM ET on **April 23, 2026**. 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, Jazmine da Costa at jdacosta@williampennfoundation.org.

Timeline

March 18, 2026

Proposal submission period opens.

March 26, 2026

Informational Webinar (see page 10).

April 23, 2026

Proposals due by 5:00 PM ET.

May 7-11, 2026

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 11-June 12, 2026

Site visits conducted by WPF staff with selected applicants.

July 31, 2026

WPF Board review selected proposals.

August 2026

Project implementation can begin.