



Arapahoe County

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Board Summary Report

File #: 23-650

Agenda Date: 11/14/2023

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To: Board of County Commissioners

Through: Shannon Carter, Director, Open Spaces

Prepared By:
Michele Frishman, Grants and Acquisitions Manager, Open Spaces

Presenter: Michele Frishman, Grants and Acquisitions Manager, Open Spaces

Subject:
2:00 PM *Pilot Grant Program for High Line Canal Projects

Purpose and Request:

Open Spaces staff will request BOCC approval to allocate \$1 million from the Open Spaces Grants Fund for a pilot grant program in 2024 to support stewardship projects along the High Line Canal corridor.

Background and Discussion: The County is working with Denver Water, the High Line Canal Conservancy, and the other counties in which the High Line Canal is located to take ownership of portions of the 71-mile canal corridor in early 2024. The timing of this acquisition will coincide with our regular open space grant cycle, for which staff has determined that projects on County-owned portions of the property will no longer be eligible. Therefore, staff would like to offer a separate, pilot grant program to eligible grantees beginning in 2024 that would fund High Line Canal improvement projects.

The parties involved in the canal acquisition, as well as the municipalities and recreation districts that care for the canal property, recognize the need to improve the condition of the canal in the coming years. Therefore, staff recommends focusing the 2024 pilot grant program on stewardship and environmental restoration work. This may include tree pruning, hazard tree and invasive species removals, tree and shrub planting, seeding for native plants and wildflowers, and trail resurfacing and replacement projects. Similar to regular open space grants, these pilot grants would not support maintenance work.

Staff would develop a new, streamlined grant application for these grants. Furthermore, because this would be a new opportunity that our grantees could not have anticipated in time for their 2024 budgets, we would not require that they provide match funding for their proposed projects.

The \$1 million commitment for this pilot grant program would be in addition to the five-year, \$4 million pledge the County made earlier this year from the Acquisition and Development Fund. That larger pledge is intended to support the High Line Canal Collaborative and capital improvements and planning projects identified in its five-year work plan.

In consultation with the High Line Canal Conservancy, which facilitates the Canal Collaborative, we have developed the following timeline for this pilot grant program in 2024, which would not interfere with the

regular open space grant cycle:

- June 2024: Canal Collaborative approves five-year work plan and identifies priority projects for which Collaborative members can seek grants
- Early August: Collaborative members submit grant applications to Open Spaces
- Mid- to late August: Open Spaces screens applications for eligibility and sends them to Collaborative for consideration
- September: Collaborative reviews applications and provides funding recommendations to Open Spaces
- October: Staff presents funding recommendations to OSTAB
- November/December: Staff presents OSTAB's funding recommendations to BOCC
- January 2025: Two-year grant agreements begin

Since 2012, Open Spaces has funded more than \$11 million in High Line Canal improvement projects, in addition to our own work benefitting the canal in unincorporated Arapahoe County. Additionally, we have served as a founder and leading member of the High Line Canal Collaborative (formerly High Line Canal Working Group). As the future owner of portions of the canal and a funding partner of many jurisdictions along the canal, we recognize the need to continue supporting projects that enhance the canal and its natural resources and improve the user experience.

In previous years, High Line Canal improvements have been eligible for open space grant funding. However, once the County owns portions of the canal, we believe it would not be appropriate for projects on County property to compete for funding with other projects in our regular grant program.

The proposed pilot would enable us to continue making grants for impactful High Line Canal projects. Further, it would supplement the stewardship funding to be provided by Denver Water (\$5 million) and raised by the High Line Canal Conservancy (\$10 million) by December 31, 2025.

Twelve percent of the revenue from the open space sales and use tax is dedicated to the Grants Fund, which currently carries a balance of more than \$3 million that has not yet been committed to grant projects. Staff believes this new pilot grant opportunity would be a valuable use of that excess funding. If the 2024 pilot is successful, we would expect to return to OSTAB and the BOCC for additional funding in future years.

The High Line Canal Conservancy supports this new grant opportunity.

Fiscal Impact: \$1 million from the Open Spaces Grants Fund. The fund balance exceeds this amount.

Alternatives: Approve, modify, or deny the funding request.

Alignment with Strategic Plan:

- ☐ Be fiscally sustainable
- ☐ Provide essential and mandated service
- ☒ Be community focused

Staff Recommendation: Staff recommends allocating \$1 million from the Open Spaces Grants Fund for a pilot grant program in 2024 to support High Line Canal stewardship projects.

Concurrence: On October 23, 2023, the Open Space and Trails Advisory Board (OSTAB) recommended for BOCC approval allocation of \$1 million from the Open Space Grants Fund for a 2024 pilot grant program to support High Line Canal stewardship projects, with the condition that staff will return to OSTAB in early 2024 with the criteria proposed to evaluate grant projects.