

Parks Levy Grants Advisory Committee Recommendations Report

July 2026



King County

Summary

This report is developed in accordance with King County Budget Ordinance 20023, Section 94, Proviso 4, which requires the Executive to submit a Parks Levy Grants Advisory Committee Recommendations Report and an ordinance for the 2026-2031 Parks Levy competitive grant programs enacted by Ordinance 19922 and Motion 16797. This report outlines King County Parks Division's (Parks) proposed approach to Advisory Committee processes, including:

- Advisory Committee nomination process;
- subcommittee structures;
- project selection criteria;
- conflict-of-interest (COI) policies; and
- the final approval process for grant awards.

In preparing this report, Parks conducted extensive outreach. Parks engaged the Open Space Equity Cabinet (OSEC) and community partners through five forums between January and March 2026, as well as conducting an online public survey. Recommendations from that community engagement, as well as feedback from previous Parks Grant Advisory Committee members, informed the proposed structure of the Advisory Committee (AC) and related procedures.

King County Parks proposes establishing a single AC to oversee each of its three competitive grant programs included in the 2026-2031 Parks levy: the Aquatic Facilities, Ballfield Access and Preservation, and Healthy Communities and Parks. The AC would consist of up to 18 members, nine of whom will be selected by Parks and nine of whom may be appointed by King County Council. Parks appointees shall be selected through an open, transparent process to represent geographic and organizational diversity, as well as expertise in equity, parks planning, public health, community well-being, and/or capital project development. An additional nine members may be appointed by King County Council, with each King County Councilmember having the opportunity to appoint one member from their Council District for a two-year term. The nine members chosen by the Council shall be confirmed by Council by January 1 of 2027, 2029, and 2031 to ensure adequate time to train members prior to the biennial Parks Levy Grants Request For Proposal process. The AC must have a minimum of nine of the 18 members to conduct business.

The report also details a structured, four-step grant project selection process: eligibility review conducted by Parks staff; independent scoring by trained, community-based grant evaluators; Advisory Committee funding recommendations, incorporating both staff analysis and evaluator scoring; with final funding decisions made by the Director of the Department of Natural Resources and Parks after consultation with the King County Executive.

The report documents the existing Conflict of Interest (COI) process and outlines potential refinements, including expanded disclosure requirements and additional safeguards against bias. Parks staff, the Prosecuting Attorney Office, and the Ethics Program have jointly reviewed the COI framework and identified opportunities to strengthen disclosures and bias safeguards.

Final funding decisions will be made by the DNRP Director, with the County Council receiving a briefing prior to a public announcement to support transparency. These processes are also reflected in a proposed ordinance establishing the Advisory Committee's structure and responsibilities.

The Advisory Committee structure, project selection process, COI process, and final approval pathways form the basis for the proposed ordinance accompanying this report. Together, they aim to ensure the 2026–2031 Parks Levy is administered in a transparent, equitable, and community-responsive manner consistent with County values and expectations.

Report Requirements

The text of Proviso 4 of Ordinance 20023 (2026-2027 Biennial Budget) is included as “Appendix B – Proviso Requirements” at the end of this report. The report responds to each requirement.

A. 2026-2031 Advisory Committee Nomination Process

The Advisory Committee will be composed of both recruited and appointed members. Parks will recruit nine AC members through an open, transparent process to represent geographic and organizational diversity, as well as expertise in equity, parks planning, public health, community well-being, and/or capital project development. In addition, each King County Councilmember will have the opportunity to appoint one AC member from their council district for a two-year term. Council appointments shall be confirmed by Council by January 1 of 2027, 2029, and 2031. The Parks Levy Grants Advisory Committee will recommend awards for the competitive grant programs authorized in Ordinance 19922 and Motion 16797. This approach is informed by recommendations from the Open Space Equity Cabinet and extensive community engagement conducted between January and April 2026. A summary of that engagement effort is in Appendix A.

Recruitment and Selection Process

Parks will conduct an open call for Advisory Committee members to recruit nine seats. The recruitment process will include:

- Public posting and broad outreach through community networks, partner organizations, and county communication channels
- A standardized application process with clearly defined qualifications and expectations

The Parks Division Director will select AC members based on transparent criteria, including:

- Relevant subject matter expertise;
- Demonstrated commitment to equity;
- Experience with and ability to represent underserved communities; and
- Capacity to participate consistently over a two-year term.

King County Councilmembers may appoint one representative from their district to the Advisory Committee for each two-year term. All AC members may serve up to three consecutive terms.

The AC will oversee three levy-funded competitive grant programs, including Aquatic Facilities, Ballfield Access and Preservation, and Healthy Communities and Parks. This will help to ensure consistent, equitable program administration across the three programs and incorporate community feedback that the AC be able to critically review individual grant proposals against community needs and County priorities. The previous levy mandated separate advisory committees for each grant program, with specific requirements for who could serve as a member and how many members were included on each committee. However, this approach created some challenges, including difficulty recruiting and retaining a full roster of qualified members.

The proposed approach will address these challenges by broadening the pool of eligible and interested candidates and ensure funding recommendations are made with full visibility across programs, as well as improve transparency in decision-making.

Compensation for Advisory Committee members will be based on the recently updated DNRP Community Compensation policy. This approach is intended to reduce barriers to participation, support a diverse and representative group of Advisory Committee members, encourage full participation of the Advisory Committee in important meetings, and recognize that participation requires a meaningful commitment beyond existing professional responsibilities.

B. Advisory Committee Responsibilities and Structure

Responsibilities of the Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee will:

1. Review and provide recommendations on Parks grant program administration and application processes
2. Review aggregated grant application scores and staff analyses
3. Develop recommendations for grant awards across the three levy-funded competitive grant programs
4. Commit to a two-year term, with the ability to serve up to three consecutive terms

The AC will consist of up to 18 members, with a minimum of 9 active members. This ensures a group large enough to reflect diverse lived experiences and subject-matter expertise across King County while remaining an environment that supports thoughtful collaboration and cohesive, well-reasoned decision-making. Membership will reflect:

- Geographic diversity across King County, including rural, suburban, and urban communities
- Representation from a range of organization types, including community-based organizations and local governments
- Demonstrated expertise in one or more of the following areas:
 - Equity and social justice
 - Parks, recreation, and open space planning
 - Public health and community wellbeing
 - Capital project development and/or recreation programming delivery

This structure reflects community feedback, emphasizing the importance of balanced representation and lived experiences of the AC members. No subcommittees are recommended.

C. Grant Project Selection Process

Parks proposes a structured, four-step project selection process for the competitive grant programs designed for consistency, transparency, and alignment with levy priorities. This process is supported by feedback from previous Advisory Committees and the community to train evaluators deeply on the intricacies of the grant application and process. Full details of the process, including scoring criteria and evaluation materials, will be published publicly in advance of each Request for Applications (RFA).

Step 1: Eligibility Review

All submitted applications will undergo an initial technical review conducted by Parks staff for alignment with the purposes of Ordinance 19922 and Motion 16797. This review will confirm applicant eligibility based on program requirements, completeness of the application, and project alignment with the specific goals and eligible project types of the grant program.

Applications that do not meet minimum eligibility requirements will not advance to scoring.

Step 2: Application Scoring

Eligible applications will be evaluated and scored by trained Grant Reviewers. Reviewers will be recruited, selected through a fair and transparent application process, and trained by Parks staff to ensure consistency and fairness in scoring. This process, which has been used for Parks' Youth and Amateur Sports Grant program for several grant cycles, will help ensure a sufficient number of reviews and consistent treatment of applications. In line with the DNRP's Community Compensation policy, reviewers will be eligible for compensation for their time. Approximately 50 per RFA will be recruited to ensure each application is scored a minimum of three times.

Scoring will be based solely on the information provided within the application materials and will follow standardized criteria published in advance of the application process. Criteria will be tailored to each grant program for that year's grant cycle, and are expected to include:

- Project alignment to the grant program's goals
- Project readiness and feasibility
- Demonstrated community need and benefit
- Alignment with equity goals and service to historically underserved communities
- Organizational capacity to successfully implement the project

Reviewer scores and comments will be compiled by Parks staff and shared with the AC.

Step 3: Advisory Committee Review and Recommendations

The AC will review scored applications, reviewer comments, and staff analyses to develop funding recommendations. Parks staff will facilitate this process to ensure consistency with program guidelines and applicable policies.

As part of its review, the AC may, at its discretion:

- Request clarification or additional information from applicants through a fair and consistent process
- Consider factors that may not be fully captured through application scoring alone, including:
 - Alignment with King County priorities and levy goals
 - Geographic distribution of funding
 - Multiple applications supporting the same project
 - Project-specific risks or opportunities
 - Organizational capacity and long-term sustainability

This step is intended to provide a qualitative review that complements the quantitative scoring process. Based on this process, the Advisory Committee will develop a list of recommended projects for funding.

Step 4: Final Decision

Final funding decisions will be made by the DNRP Director and shared with the County Council in advance of public announcement. The department will brief the Executive on the grant recommendations prior to finalizing decisions. The Director's decision will reflect consideration of the AC's recommendations, program objectives, and applicable County policies.

D. 2020-2025 Advisory Committee Conflict of Interest Process

The Parks and Recreation Division implemented a structured, multi-step conflict of interest (COI) process for Advisory Committee members and Grant Evaluators during each funding cycle of the 2020–2025 Parks Levy. The purpose of this process was to encourage impartiality, maintain public trust, and uphold the integrity of funding decisions.

The COI process followed a consistent sequence during each grant cycle:

1. **Application Submission and Compilation:** After applications closed, Parks staff compiled a complete list of eligible applicants for each grant program.
2. **Initial COI Attestation Prior to Assignment:** Advisory Committee members and evaluators reviewed the full list of applicants and completed an initial COI disclosure before applications were assigned for scoring. This step ensured that known conflicts were identified early and that assignments avoided reviewers with conflicts.
3. **Application-Level COI Confirmation:** A second COI attestation was required within the evaluation system prior to an Advisory Committee member or evaluator accessing and scoring each individual application. This step served as an additional safeguard in case new or previously unrecognized conflicts were identified.
4. **Recusal from Discussion and Recommendation:** Individuals with a confirmed or potential identified conflict were removed from discussions and recommendations related to the affected application during all Advisory Committee meetings.

Definition of Conflict of Interest

For the 2020–2025 parks levy, a “conflict of interest” was defined as any situation in which an individual, or a member of their immediate family (spouse, child, domestic partner, parents, or dependent relatives), had a financial, personal, or legal relationship with a potential applicant within the previous calendar year. A “potential applicant” included any eligible entity under the grant program, such as cities, towns, park districts, school districts, King County agencies, special purpose districts, nonprofit organizations, fiscally sponsored organizations, tribal organizations, salmon recovery forums, or other public entities.

Examples of COI included:

- Serving as a staff member or board member of an applicant organization;
- Receiving compensation, gifts, or other items of value exceeding \$50 from an applicant;
- Holding a financial interest in property associated with the applicant’s project;
- Providing a letter of support for an applicant; and
- Participating in a formal or informal partnership with an applicant.

E. Discussions of 2020-2025 Conflict of Interest Process

In 2025, after grant award decisions were finalized, a concern was raised by an Aquatics Facilities grant applicant regarding a potential COI from an Advisory Committee member, which they believed led to the project not receiving an award. Since the inception of the Parks Levy grant programs, this has been the only concern Parks has received regarding a potential COI related to the Advisory Committee or Grant Evaluator process. Parks worked with King County’s Prosecuting Attorney’s office to review the information shared by this applicant and it was found that there was no COI as defined. Nonetheless, Parks worked with the Ethics Program in spring 2026 to further

refine the COI definition and process, with the intention of strengthening transparency and public trust in the grant process.

F. Recommended changes to the Conflict of Interest Process

Parks reviewed and expanded the COI process, in collaboration with King County's Ethics Program, which had not been involved in creating the existing process for the previous levy.

Highlighted changes to the COI process:

- Process considers a period of potential conflict beyond one year
- Remove reference to specific dollar amount regarding compensation or gifts
- Use King County Code for the definition of "close relative" or "immediate family"
- Request disclosure for possible perceived COI

As such, the following language has been reviewed by the King County Ethics Program and will be used to identify potential COI for Advisory Committee members and Grant Evaluators during the COI process for the 2026-2031 levy:

For the 2026–2031 levy, a "conflict of interest" will be defined as any situation in which an individual, or that individual's "close relative" had a financial, personal, or legal relationship with an applicant within the past three years. "Close relative" includes: spouse, domestic partner, parent, child, child of domestic partner, sibling, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, grandparent, grandchild, father-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, or relatives of a domestic partner who would be included in this list if the subject and the domestic partner were married - KCC 3.04.017(J).

Applicants may include any entity eligible under the grant program guidelines, such as cities, towns, park districts, school districts, special purpose districts, nonprofit organizations, fiscally sponsored organizations, tribes, or other public entities

Examples of COI include, but are not limited to:

- Serving as a staff member or board member of an applicant organization;
- Receiving compensation, gifts, or other items of value from an applicant;
- Holding a financial interest in property associated with the applicant's project;
- Providing a letter of support for an applicant;
- Participating in a formal or informal partnership with an applicant;
- Demonstrating previous bias or partiality for or against the applicant organization or project through personal or professional conduct; and
- Other possible perceptions of COI.

Using this updated COI definition in the 2026-2031 levy, Parks will continue to administer a multistep process where potential COI are disclosed by Advisory Committee Members and Grant Evaluators, and individuals with a confirmed or potential conflict will be removed from scoring, discussions, and recommendations related to the affected application.

G. Approval of Grant Projects

As outlined in Section C, Parks proposes a clear, structured final approval process for individual grant awards that builds on technical review, independent scoring, and an AC's recommendation, culminating in a final decision by the DNRP Director after consultation with the King County Executive.

Parks staff will conduct a technical review of all submissions to confirm eligibility and alignment with the specific grant program criteria. Only applications that meet these requirements will advance to the scoring phase. Eligible applications will then be independently scored by trained Grant Evaluators. Scorers will apply standardized scoring criteria, and their assessments will be based solely on the information provided within each application. Scores and comments will be compiled by Parks staff and presented in aggregate form.

The AC will review the compiled scores, scorer feedback, and supporting staff analysis to develop a recommended list of projects for funding. In doing so, the AC will consider both quantitative scores and qualitative factors, including alignment with grant program goals, equity considerations, and the overall balance of investments across communities and project types. This level of review aligns to community feedback for AC discretion.

Based primarily, but not exclusively, on these recommendations, the DNRP Director will make the final decision on grant awards. The department will brief the Executive on grants recommendations prior to finalizing decisions. The Director's decision will reflect consideration of the AC's recommendations, program objectives, and applicable County policies.

The County Council will be notified of the proposed awards prior to public announcement. This step supports transparency and ensures Council awareness of funding decisions in advance of formal communication to applicants and the public.

Conclusion

The proposed improvements highlighted in this report to the AC processes create clearer expectations, stronger safeguards, and greater transparency, which together reinforce public trust in Advisory Committee decisions. The updated COI framework for the 2026–2031 Parks Levy strengthens the integrity of the grantmaking process by expanding disclosure requirements, lengthening the review period for potential conflicts, and incorporating guidance from the King County Ethics Program.

The structured four-step grant project selection process, which includes eligibility review, independent scoring by trained community evaluators, Advisory Committee review, and final funding decisions by the DNRP Director, provides a consistent and equitable approach to recommending projects. Combined with the single, centralized Advisory Committee model, this structure improves alignment across programs, strengthens recruitment and retention of qualified members, and supports clear and accountable decision-making.

The updates to the Advisory Committee structure, project selection process, and conflict-of-interest framework are directly aligned with the community input gathered through Parks' extensive engagement with OSEC and community partners in spring 2026. These changes

reflect the priorities, themes, and recommendations consistently raised during those forums and the public survey.

These updates support fair, transparent, and community-centered administration of the next levy cycle and help ensure that funding recommendations reflect community priorities and uphold public confidence in the process.

Report Appendix A – Community Engagement Summary

Report Appendix B – Proviso Requirements:

Proviso 4 of Ordinance 20023 (2026-2027 Biennial Budget) requires the following:

Of this appropriation, \$100,000 shall not be expended or encumbered until the executive transmits a parks levy advisory committee recommendations report and an ordinance that would adopt the proposed recommendations of the report. The report shall include the Parks and Recreation Division's proposed approach for advisory committee processes for the competitive grant programs established in the 2026-2031 Parks levy authorized by Ordinance 19922, including, but not limited to:

- A. The nomination process for advisory committee members;
- B. Any proposed subcommittees, including the subject matter of each subcommittee, the number of members, and entities or organizations represented;
- C. The project selection process, including criteria used for ranking and selecting projects;
- D. The conflict of interest (COI) policy for the 2020-2025 Parks Levy;
- E. Discussion of concerns raised by any party about the COI policy for the 2020-2025 Parks Levy;
- F. Recommendations for any changes proposed to the COI policy for the 2026-2031 Parks Levy, developed in collaboration with the King County board of ethics; and
- G. The final approval process for individual grant awards.

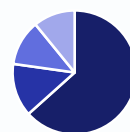
The executive should electronically file the report and the ordinance required by this proviso by March 31, 2026, with the clerk of the council, who shall retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff, and the lead staff for the transportation, economy, and environment committee or its successor.

Grants Community Engagement

Project Background and Community Engagement

In August 2025, King County voters approved a new 6-year King County Parks levy (2026-2031), which includes \$117 million for new and updated grant programs. These grant programs aim to preserve and increase equitable access to public recreation by supporting community investments in parks, trails, open spaces, recreation facilities, and programs. King County Parks conducted community engagement to inform the administration of these grant programs. Participation included:

- An online survey with **233 respondents** across all King County council districts
- **5 community forums** with a total of 52 participants from community organizations, cities, towns, Tribes, and other public grant makers.
- Participants represented the following sectors: 64% nonprofit, 14% other, 12% city or town, 11% local government agency



Results

Equity & Impact

When asked which measures of equity are most important for these grant programs, respondents prioritized projects that

- **Serve historically marginalized communities**, defined as low-income, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, non-English speaking, and/or those experiencing poor health outcomes.
- Are **created in collaboration** with the community they are meant to serve.
- Other measures of equity that emerged as important are those that serve communities with little access to parks and those designed so people of all abilities can participate.

When asked which types of grant projects would have the greatest chance of increasing equitable access to parks, the clear highest priority was **repairing and improving existing parks and recreation facilities**. Acquiring new property for parks and open spaces, constructing new parks and recreational facilities, and increasing recreational programming were nearly tied as the second-highest priority.

Funding Decisions

When asked which attributes are most important when selecting representatives from the community to review grant applications and recommend grant awards, respondents prioritized:

- 1 Geographic diversity – representatives from every King County council district
- 2 Organizational diversity – representatives from different types of organizations

Funding Decisions, cont'd

When asked preferences for how grant funds are distributed, respondents prioritized a tiered funding model, where top-scoring grant applications would be fully funded and lower-scoring projects could receive partial funding. Comments indicated this tiered approach strikes a balance between funding broadly and funding deeply, but that the funding decisions should also take into account the nuances of each grant application.

Assessment

To better measure if grant projects are achieving their goals, King County Parks asked which measurement methods are both **most useful** and **easiest** for organizations.

- Most respondents agreed that the easiest and most valuable data comes from tracking project numbers (e.g., participants, events, usage) and tracking project progress (e.g., on time, on budget), followed by surveying participants.
- Opinions were mixed about the utility and ease of hosting site visits, collecting demographic data, and gathering participant testimonials.
- When asked which outcomes indicate investments made a positive difference in their community, respondents repeatedly mentioned increased usage among historically marginalized communities and improved access to safe, welcoming, and high-quality recreation.

Next Steps ►

King County Parks will use these findings to inform grant guidelines and processes, which will be published in advance of the next grant Request for Applications window, likely open in fall of 2026.

Thank you to everyone who provided feedback! Your opinion is important to us and will help improve King County Parks grants.

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with King County Parks
grant programs?**



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