



Santa Clara Valley Water District

File No.: 18-0771

Agenda Date: 10/9/2018

Item No.: 7.1.

BOARD AGENDA MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT:

Approval for Staff to Continue Implementation of the Safe, Clean Water Priority D3 Mini-Grants Program.

RECOMMENDATION:

- A. Review and discuss staff's report and recommendations for the Safe, Clean Water Priority D3 Mini-Grants Program;
- B. Reauthorize the District to continue implementing the Mini-Grants Program for the duration of the Safe, Clean Water and Natural Flood Protection Program; and
- C. Reauthorize the Mini-Grant Program budget not to exceed \$200,000 per fiscal year.

SUMMARY:

On March 14, 2017, the Board authorized the District to implement the pilot Mini-Grants Program in FY18 through June 30, 2018 or until \$200,000 of grant funding was awarded; at which point staff would evaluate the program's pilot year and report back to the Board with recommendations for next steps (Attachment 1).

Background

Staff released applications for the pilot Mini-Grants Program on August 4, 2017 using an online grants application system. Grant seekers submitted their applications, scopes of work, and budgets through the online system. Staff received a total of 22 mini-grant applications. The funding limit for each mini-grant is \$5,000.

Outreach

Staff utilized several outreach methods to spread the word about the mini-grants program, including the following:

- Notifications to distribution list of current and past grantees;
- Posted on District's website, social media, and eNews;
- Announcements at various community meetings, including Creek Connection Action Group, Santa Clara Valley Urban Runoff Pollution Prevention Program, and San Jose Creek Partners;
- Issued press releases on August 11, 2017 and November 1, 2017;
- Promoted through other District programs such as Adopt-A-Creek and Government Relations

Local Program;

- Direct outreach to teachers in the classrooms through our Education Outreach Program;
- Direct staff outreach to local non-profits (Girl Scouts, San Jose Conservation Corp, local charter schools, SOMOS Mayfair, Asian American for Community Involvement, etc.); and
- Passed out collateral materials to all Coastal Cleanup Day coordinators on September 7, 2017.

Pre- and Post-Award Process

After an applicant submits their mini-grant application and scope of work, which includes a proposed budget and timeline for the project, staff reviews to ensure that the proposed project meets the eligibility and minimum requirements for the program. Staff evaluates the project scope and proposed measurable outcomes to ensure that they are aligned with the objectives of the Safe, Clean Water Priority D3 Restore Wildlife Habitat Program. Additionally, staff submits a request to the Environmental Services Planning Unit to perform a CEQA review. For grant projects that the District act as a lead agency under CEQA, the District must evaluate the potential environmental impact of proposed actions for projects as definite under CEQA Guidelines section 15378.

Once all the reviews are complete, funding recommendations are moved up to the Chief level for approval. If funding is approved, staff notifies the applicant of their successful grant application and begins developing the agreement language with District Counsel. After the grant agreement is fully executed (signed by the grantee and the District), the grantee can then invoice the District for the first half of their grant award to begin their project. Upon completion of the project, the grantee must provide a project completion report identifying how the proposed outcomes were met. Grantees are also asked to provide photos and testimonials from participants of their activities. Once staff receives the necessary completion documents, the grantee submits their final invoice and the project can be closed out.

In the pilot year, staff received a total of 22 mini-grant applications. All 22 projects were approved for funding and a total of \$105,975 was awarded in FY18. Funded projects ranged from the development of watershed curriculum to engage primary school students on the importance of sustaining native species for the ecosystems, planting riparian plants to support California tiger salamander, to engaging the senior community in watershed stewardship through volunteering to remove invasive plants in the Don Edwards Wildlife Refuge. A list of all the projects funded in FY18 are available in Attachment 2.

Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

The Board's goal in creating the Mini-Grants Program was to develop a program that could expeditiously direct resources into the community for small scale projects that fulfills the goals of the Safe, Clean Water Priority D3 Restore Wildlife Habitat Program, which includes providing grants for wetland, riparian and tidal marsh habitat and access to trails. Staff developed streamlined administrative processes to ensure the mini-grant program meets the Board's expectations for an expeditious and effective program. However, in the first year of implementation, staff met some challenges in implementing the program.

For successful applicants, staff tracked the number of days it took from the point of submitting their

mini-grant application to the District fully executing the grant agreement, which allows the grantee to commence their project. The quickest turnaround time was 28 days and the longest was 142, giving the District an average of approximately 80-days to fully execute Mini-Grant Agreements. Staff met with a few challenges in quickly turning around the grant agreements for successful applicants, which included:

- Delayed correspondence between the District and applicant/grantee to follow-up questions regarding the application, grant agreement language, budget (matching funds), and/or insurance requirements, etc.;
- Negotiating revisions to the terms and conditions of the District's standard mini-grant agreement; and
- Evaluating grantees' proposed scope of work for CEQA requirements.

Participants Feedback

Staff developed and sent a survey to all mini-grant applicants to collect feedback on their experience with the program in the pilot year. Questions were asked regarding the ease of the application process, the overall grant program, as well as recommendations for improvement.

In terms of the ease of the application process, out of eight survey respondents:

- Five felt it was either easy or very easy
- Two were neutral
- One felt it was somewhat difficult

The respondents asked for more structure to be provided in the scope of work template; clearer expectations as to what qualifies for a mini-grant; more clarification on the process after the application is submitted; and allow for an applicant to submit for more than one project under the same account. Currently the online application system does not allow for applicants to submit more than one mini-grant application, however, staff is currently working to implement a new online grants management system that will address that issue.

In terms of the overall program, out of the eight survey respondents:

- Four rated the overall program as excellent
- Two rated it as good
- One was neutral
- One was poor

Many of the respondents felt that it was an excellent way to allow smaller non-profits to access resources for their projects; many appreciated the simple reporting and administrative post award process; one respondent appreciated that applications were not outright denied funding and was given an opportunity to talk through their project idea to revise their proposal to meet the mini-grant program objectives. One respondent felt there was preferential treatment to some applicants over others. It should be noted that no applicants were denied funding in the pilot year.

When asked if participants would like to see the program continue, 7 out of the 8 respondents said yes. Some of the comments included were:

- *“They [mini-grants] are great and very useful.”*
- *“It’s wonderful for an organization like ours that have lots of projects that can be accomplished entirely or largely through \$5,000 grants. Please keep it!!!”*
- *“This funding helps us with our programs and as a small organization, all funding has a big impact on our sustainability. Thank you!”*
- *“We would love to continue working together. One of our goals is to teach many more hands-on storm rain catchment systems workshops. We hope to get a matching grant for this soon, as we have a list of folks and organizations interested in this. More than ever we need to collaborate on effort like this. Thank you from the Smart Yards Education Board of Directors.”*

Only one respondent did not want to see the program continued but did not provide an explanation. A complete list of the survey results can be found in Attachment 3.

Despite some of the challenges in the pilot implementation year, staff strongly believes that, if the Board approves the continuation of the program, improvements can be implemented to streamline the administrative and approval processes and provide applicants a better overall experience. These improvements include:

- Ensure all required documents, including agreement template and other forms are standardized and up to date, for a quicker approval process;
- Submit for CEQA review immediately when grant applications are received so the project scope can be evaluated for environmental impacts at the same time as the review for programmatic outcomes;
- Develop more collateral materials to clarify District’s expectations of what projects qualifies for mini-grant funding and expectations around project outcomes; and
- Set standard metrics for staff to turnaround funding notifications to applicants/grantees.

Next Steps

Should the Board approve staff’s recommendation, staff will implement the improvements to the program and re-open the mini-grants application on November 1, 2018.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The total amount for the Mini-Grants Program is \$200,000 per fiscal year. Funds would come from Safe, Clean Water Fund 26. There are adequate funds in Project No. 26061007 (Grants to Restore Habitat and Provide Access to Trails) to support this program.

CEQA:

The recommended action does not constitute a project under CEQA (per CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(a)) because it does not commit the District to a definite course of action, and therefore has no potential to result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect environmental impact. Specifically, it is a government fiscal activity which is not a project because it does not involve commitment to any specific project that may result in a potentially significant environmental impact, per CEQA Guidelines

Section 15378(b)(4). The CEO will execute project-specific funding agreements only after District CEQA compliance is completed. For public agency projects, the grantee will be the lead agency and must submit evidence of CEQA compliance (adopted Negative Declaration, certified EIR, or Notice of Exemption) to the District, which will serve as Responsible Agency. For non-government grantees, the District will serve as lead agency.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1: 031417 SCVWD Board Agenda Item 6.2

Attachment 2: FY2018 Mini-Grants Project List

Attachment 3: Mini-Grant Participant Survey Results

UNCLASSIFIED MANAGER:

Rick L. Callender, 408-630-2017