

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

MEMO: Agenda Item #6

DATE: December 3, 2015

SUBJECT: ML2017/FY2018 Review of the Call for Funding Request and Criteria

PRESENTER: LSOHC Staff

Background

In preparation for the ML2017/FY2018 Call for Funding Request, the council has an opportunity to consider reviewing the Call so that changes or improvements can be incorporated prior to publication in the spring of 2016. At the November 5th meeting, staff were directed to seek feedback regarding the Call from members and project managers. Attached are comments from members and feedback collected anonymously from program managers.

Should the council wish to review the criteria, potential options to consider are:

- The full council reviews the Call and evaluation criteria at the January meeting to discuss and adopt (with or without a facilitator)
- A work group or subset of the council membership reviews and reports back to the full council for discussion and adoption (2 citizens and 1 legislative members would represent the make-up of the full council).
- Staff consults with a professional(s) in the field of evaluation criteria to determine new evaluation method and options to present to the council for discussion and adoption.

Suggested Procedure

Staff is asking for council direction on a process to change or improve the Call and its various components prior to publishing the Call.

Attachments: A) Council Member Comments, B) Project Manager Comments, C) Criteria from the FY 17 Call

A) Council Member Comments

David Hartwell

1. Does the Call currently reflect the priorities and vision of the Council?

I am sure we could tweak it but I think the call is fairly accurate in identifying issues in the various regions of the state that we would want proposals to deal with.

2. Do Council members feel they receive enough information from proposals to effectively evaluate the proposals?

I think if I was going to add anything it would be a section on past projects and how the activities lined up against the past stated objectives. If they proposed protection of 1000 acres and protected 300 is it very different than 1500. And some evaluation of the past projects other than self attestation would not be all bad.

3. Does the proposal scoring process adequately evaluate the proposals in such a way that members utilize the scores to help in their decision making process for recommending funding allocations?

I think scoring is good enough to do two things. Help each member think through the proposal and identify the critical elements of it and provide a rough comparison of the projects to allow for an intelligent discussion. I actually think the comments are as important as the scoring but see that not all members use this.

4. Do the scoring criteria/questions reflect the priorities and vision of the council?

Yes

5. Any other thoughts for improving the process / general comments.
(I added E to my list from yesterday)

- A) Add in the criteria – Bang for the buck
- B) Add a question on the budget section that asks how a reduction of 25%, 50% and 75% would affect administrative costs on a percentage basis.
- C) Breakout the contracts and professional services into three categories
 - i. fees for contracts related to restoration and enhancement
 - ii. fees for work related to acquisitions (like appraisals)
 - iii. Fees for administrative costs – more overhead in nature
- D) Break out travel into two categories
 - i. Traditional travel costs
 - ii. Equipment costs
- E) Ask if the request requires us to think of it as an all or nothing request

Julie Blackburn

I think that the discussion on screening project that gets us to identify our priorities with clarity – and not pet issues – is the biggest challenge we have. I also believe that there's a bigger question regarding whether or not we revisit the priorities. For instance, these priority actions and examples of outcomes are not in order of preference or priority. Maybe we should ask the proposers to rank how their proposal addresses these in priority order. I believe that there has been a tremendous amount of discussion amongst this year's proposers in the forest area that they are going to make acquisitions to make land-locked properties accessible (yellow highlight). I can tell you that is very low on my list of concerns. If I was to choose between two projects and one was for that vs one for the green outcome, I would choose the green. Having more information about what their intentions/priorities are would provide me with more information to rank according to my priorities.

Priority Actions for the Northern Forest Section with Examples of Outcome Measures

Priorities actions are not in order of preference or importance.

- Protect shoreland and watersheds to restore or enhance critical habitat on wild rice lakes, shallow lakes, cold water lakes, streams and rivers, and spawning areas.
- Forestlands are protected from development and fragmentation (acres protected from development and fragmentation; average size protected complex; acres of forestlands with high connectivity to other forestlands protected)
- Healthy populations of endangered, threatened, or special concern species, species in greatest conservation need, and more common species – emphasis on unique species (Population levels of focal forest game species, focal species in greatest conservation need; number and acreage of native plant communities with high biodiversity significance)
- Provide access to manage habitat on landlocked public properties or protect forest land from parcelization and fragmentation through fee acquisition, conservation or access easement.
- Greater public access for wildlife and outdoors-related recreation (# of access points, % population with access within distance)
- Landlocked public properties are accessible with increased access for land managers (# of landlocked properties accessed, % decrease in landlocked properties)
- Restore and enhance habitat on existing protected properties, with preference to habitat for rare, endangered or threatened species identified by the Minnesota County Biological Survey.
- Increased availability and improved condition of riparian forests and other habitat corridors (acres, habitat connectivity)
- Restore forest-based wildlife habitat that has experienced substantial decline in aerial extent in recent decades.
- Improved aquatic habitat indicators (index of biotic integrity and other aquatic habitat indicators)
- Increased availability and improved condition of habitats that have experienced substantial decline (e.g., acres of pine and brushland)
- Protect from long term or permanent endangerment from invasive species.

Additionally, I think that the questions such as 'does this move the needle forward' need a qualitative and/or quantitative measure to it. Currently it functions as a yes/no answer because I believe that technically they all do move the needle forward. The question is to what degree. The Wild Rice Watershed District proposal this year barely moved it forward, but it may have moved it forward more dramatically after 7-10 years of purchasing property. We need to evaluate whether we think that wait period is acceptable for the potential outcome.

I think there has to be something done with the points for threatened and endangered species questions. If you are restoring from a pure ag use there won't be any there. This is harmful to the majority of projects in the prairie region.

Believe it or not, I will most likely have more comments. I will work hard to get the rest of my comments back to you by Monday, but to be honest with you I find this incredibly complex and I don't think that compiling a list of recommended changes will necessary present a clear forward direction. I think we will need discussions – maybe more than possible at a council meeting.

Jane Kingston

Here are my thoughts on Call/Criteria going forward.

Please note I have first included **A) my input from the last review of same** (which provides background), followed by **B) my specific recommendations for the next set of Criteria going into 2016**.

I've reduced existing Criteria to a total of 10, and added the possibility of 3 more.

A) my input from the last review of same

To: Charlie Peterson, Bill Becker, Heather Koop, Susan Olson, Scott Rall

From: Jane Kingston

Date: January 5, 2014

Subject: Thoughts and Notes on Call & Criteria

At our meeting December 11, I mentioned other project scoring systems in place in Minnesota, and that I'd been working on criteria and scoring informally over the past year. This is offered as a follow-up with more specific information.

An example in state government of scoring projects we might look at is the system for scoring storm water and wastewater treatment projects administered by MPCA and Public Facilities Authority (PFA). Being more technical, water projects are probably easier to rate using a points system, but it might be worth at least looking at the way they do this.

There are several worksheets for these projects, called Project Priority List (PPL) Scoring Worksheets (see <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/index.php/water/water-types-and-programs/wastewater/wastewater-financial-assistance/wastewater-and-stormwater-financial-assistance.html#apps>).

Also at our previous meeting, we separated some of the screening into very objective data (to be scored by staff, such as leverage and demonstrated technical expertise) as opposed to more subjective (such as urgency, likelihood of success), to be ranked by Council members, which I think makes sense.

Opportunity for wide-variation within any one criterion should be lessened by making specific guidelines for how points are allocated. The evaluation should be more objective within these criteria, which will also lessen the amount of time that LSOHC members must spend trying to evaluate the proposals.

In addition to other non-monetary resources, leverage may also include expertise in a certain geography or conservation technique.

Applicants should describe their successful track record in completion of projects of scope and complexity similar to that proposed.

Proponents must be mandated to document and present the veracity of their conservation science and how precisely the proposal forwards goals of applicable conservation plans.

They must describe the willingness and likelihood of landowners to sell their land or place in easement. Individual project/program components should be rated/ranked within the application as to urgency or readiness.

Applicants should list funding history from all public funds (bonding, LCCMR, federal, etc.). But does that give priority to NGOs with fewer resources and, by definition, less likelihood of success with the project? Should this be a criterion and how should it be weighted?

Expenses and per acre costs should be included but it should be weighted less than resource value. Evaluation and acquisition process followed correctly should ensure the state is getting value.

Supplemental letters of support are generally not terrible useful.

Narrative responses should have a **word limit**.

Further, "broad distribution" geographically isn't necessarily helpful to conservation efforts, and may actually dilute that effort. Any given project proposal should address issues within the Section strategically that will lead to long-term and wide-ranging success over time, and should vie only with others within that Section, as opposed to comparing forestry projects with prairie projects.

Meaningful evaluative data should perhaps not be a criterion, but, if it is, should not have the weight of other criteria such as addressing critical conservation need. Obviously, it must be a project requirement to state how success will be measured, and it's up to LSOHC and staff to judge that success. This is actually an aspect of clear, effective strategy being a criterion.

Specific items could add points to a proposal, such as:

1. Does the project add to a contiguous existing protected area (describe, including maps)? Does it provide a corridor link or other unique value?
2. Does the project help prevent conversion of existing habitat to another use (describe alternative)?
3. Does the project preserve the most threatened habitats such as native prairie or old growth forest?
4. Does the project protect an area identified by the County Biological survey (if so, cite the survey)? Is it consistent with USFWS data? What species are likely to benefit?

The laundry list of relevant plans should be replaced with a concise statement of how the project advances LSOHC goals.

You already know my opinion is that all criteria should not be worth an equal score. Most important are whether the project addresses an urgent conservation need, whether it addresses that need using best conservation science and methodology, and what the likelihood of success may be. Criteria could be prioritized.

B) my specific recommendations for the next set of Criteria going into 2016

Make the PROPOSAL track in order of the CRITERIA, or vice versa.

Rework CRITERIA as follows:

1. Priority actions and outcomes of one or more ecological sections clearly described and addressed.
2. Habitats of wildlife species of greatest conservation need - including rare, threatened, or endangered species - clearly targeted. MN County Biological Survey data included.
3. Nature of urgency clearly explained.
4. Clearly defined science-based strategic planning and evaluation model explained and utilized.
5. Leverage clearly described - including effort, other funds, cash, in-kind contributions such as proposal evaluations or planning, or personnel. Local outreach, education, or community engagement may also be considered advantageous.
6. Clear description and quantification of how funding supplements - and does not substitute - customary or usual funding sources.
7. Full explanation of how outcomes will be maintained.
8. DELETE
9. DELETE
10. Performance measures clearly identified, and specific measurement / evaluation / public reporting plan provided.
11. Significant and permanent conservation benefits and/or habitat outcomes highly likely.
12. Budget is within norms or otherwise adequate to accomplish goals and objectives.

OPTIONAL and NEW:

13. Successful track record of similar projects completed and fully described. (Don't want to disadvantage first-time applicants, though)
14. Landowner willingness and/or shovel-readiness fully described.
15. Project adds to contiguous existing protected area, or provides corridor link or other unique value.

Sen. Tom Saxhaug

I think it is o.k.

Elizabeth Wilkens

Many concerns were addressed during the last review – 2 years ago.

Ron Schara

I think we need an executive summary of proposal. Who, what, why, where and when.

We need a system for modifying the call request. I don't remember voting on or approving the addition of food plots as a question on the proposal. I propose to remove it.

I would eliminate much of the call information as it is all the same. Need to discuss what should go at next meeting.

B) Project Manager Comments

There were 7 responses to the survey, but not everyone responded to every question.

Do you have any suggestions or edits for the Current Funding Criteria (listed below) that should be considered?

- Impact of construction on the environment, what construction practices will be used to minimize negative impact on the environment.
- 2c. MCBS LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE (MCBS data can include 'below threshold'). 2d. rare, POPULATIONS. 3. Define or prompt 'urgency': conversion threat, leverage opportunity, declining species, landowner willingness. 6. Regarding 'supplements', some guidance is needed here on how to determine that.
- It seems as though several criteria could be bundled together, others removed, and others added to improve the focus of the criteria on habitat and habitat outcomes, the central reason for the fund. A. Criteria 6,8, and 9 are questions on Eligibility, and should really be yes/no (if no, then proposal should be out completely) instead of scored. They might be removed altogether. B. Criteria 5 and 12 might be combined into a single Budget/Financial criterion. C. Criteria 4, 10, and 11 are focused on Outcomes, and might be combined into a single criterion. D. It seems that there could be more habitat-focused criteria. A few possibilities include: connectivity, completes a landscape plan, especially high quality habitat, etc.
- In criteria 1 project proposers should be able to select more than one ecological section, large programs often work across multiple ecological sections. The Council should review the current priorities in each ecological section to see if they are still relevant. 2) The leverage concept needs significant clarification and definitions. What is leverage? Is it money spent on the same acre? Within the project area? In kind? What about money leveraged that will be spent with or without OHF match? Is that still leverage? There are many issues regarding how leverage is reported within budget and output tables for accomplishment plans and status updates.
- I feel the LSOHC staff and MnDNR staff that manage the funds did a great job in assisting our office staff to assure all paperwork was completed in a timely manner. The process used in invoicing was very easy to use and I commend those who not only developed the funding criteria but also assuring we understood them.
- See #3.
- Each criteria should be directly linked to fields or questions in the application, so there's no ambiguity on how well the proposal meets it. At times, members have scored projects low which do not meet particular criteria - probably because they have to search through too much verbiage on too many proposals to find the answers.

Do you have any suggested changes on the Ranking/Scoring Criteria (listed below)?

Could information be provided on how many points each criteria is worth. Is each criteria worth the same number of points?

- The Council should consider if certain criteria should be weighted more than others when scoring. In other words, are some criteria more important than others?
- Criteria 8 is really an eligibility question and should not be scored. It is either yes or no. There is no range. It is more appropriately placed in the Screening Qualifications section. Criteria 9 is similar to 8 in that it is really an eligibility question and is a yes or no question.
- Although I may not have always agreed with the ranking/scoring criteria, it would be difficult for me to find a better way than what was used.
- See #3.

Are there any of the current criteria that you believe should be changed or deleted?

- No, just would like to know what point value each criteria has
- See #2.
- I feel if possible, the LSOHC should give additional points to participants who have already secured land options or easements for habitat projects. LGU's that have complete this task have shown commitment to the project and should be rewarded.
- Criteria 7 and 8 seem to be yes/no sorts of questions, rather than 0-6 scoring. They ask if the applicant is meeting requirements to use OHF money. Rather than score these, why not just have staff flag proposals that don't meet the criteria so that they aren't considered?
- I'd suggest removing the supplement or substitute question. It's not clearly definable because most protection, restoration & enhancement \$\$ are grant \$\$ or other legislative appropriated \$\$ which are not under the control of the OHF grant applicant.

Suggestions for potential changes in the proposal, different or additional things that need to be asked or deleted?

- Provide a general overview of how the funding works: 1) importance and use of the accomplishment plan 2) administration by DNR grants unit 3) reporting requirements 4) draft grant agreement
- Character limits within boxes in the on-line application are much too small. For example in criteria 2 it is nearly impossible to give a complete answer for a large program within the space provided. This cost our proposal significant points last year because we chose to focus on 2a but were scored on 2b. For statewide programs these questions are nearly impossible to answer succinctly. This is an example but it applies to nearly every question.
- I do not feel the priority actions for each planning sections necessarily represent the most important actions for each part of the state. They represent a subset that was expressed during that planning process, but should not be considered the only favored actions in each section. For example, the Forest/Prairie Transition section has a description of the importance of river, stream and lake habitat in the narrative, but the priority actions focus on waterfowl habitat. This is only a small component of overall aquatic habitat.

General Ideas for improving the funding process.

- Annually there should be a meeting or presentation to explain the application process and the funding program and how it is administrated.

- Emphasize the constitutional mandate by posting it or including it on documents. One councilmember is confused by trying to be pragmatic about passage success, others are squabbling over ownership and not habitat merits.
- It seems now that criteria scoring seem to disappear from the process after proposals are selected for hearing. We recommend using criteria scoring as a component and/or reference of the allocation decision-making process. B. Final allocations can seem to lack prioritization. Proposals that receive high criteria scores, majority members allocating at a high amount often receive a smaller percentage of their request than some much lower rated proposals. For example, in the ML16 process, WA02 and HRE01 each had 12 members allocating and had two of the top criteria scores, but received 37% and 66% of their requests. Meanwhile, FA03 and FA06 had 8 and 5 members allocating and had low criteria scores, and received 50% and 38%. We recommend working toward better prioritization of proposal allocations. C. The current process seems to broadly distribute allocation, and therefore encourages proposers to "pad" their proposals beyond what they need in order to get a smaller percentage that they want. While we're not saying that this is occurring, it's certainly not an approach that should be practiced or encouraged.
- If any new questions are to be added to the Request for Funding applications or Accomplishment Plans, a formal Council action should occur to add a question (including specific wording) and any follow-up questions. Precise definitions need to be provided to ensure consistent responses among applicants. It should also be made clear to Council members the additional time it may take applicants to fill out the information. It should be made clear that this question would not apply to past appropriations-it adds an undue burden of continual reporting on information that may have never been collected.
- The council members seem to take the scoring process very seriously and put a lot of time and effort into their rankings. There seems to be a disconnect when the process then shifts to allocations. Several of the lowest scoring proposals received up to half of their funding request, while some of the top-scoring proposals received similar amounts. The process of allowing individual members to proposal allocating a portion of the money once an initial allocation has been made seems to exacerbate this tendency. I would favor a process that is agreed upon in advance that divides the remaining balance beyond the initial allocation based on the scoring of projects, with higher scoring projects getting a larger percentage.

General comments to Staff or the Council.

- It would be nice to have the application process take less time. From submittal of application to being able to use money is about 13 months. Other grant funds take less time.
- Staff is doing great. Spicer meeting was not time well spent - Council seemed disinterested in talking to the majority of proposers.
- We encourage you to focus administrative requests and requirements of the fund at a program, and not project, level. OHF primarily funds programs, and having proposal, accomplishment plan, and reporting requirements that have project/site level expectations adds substantially to the administrative work needed to comply with the law, and decreases the amount of on-the-ground habitat work we can do per-dollar appropriated. Certainly many of these requirements have value and should be retained, but it would be helpful to review others to ensure we're being transparent and efficient in our work. Some questions/design of the online system work well for some program/project types, but not others. We encourage you to work with program managers to improve their ability to tell the story of their proposal in a simple way. They can

help find improvements to the online system, such as allowing "I don't know" responses with an explanation box for certain questions. Continuing to improve usability is important.

- Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. I hope there becomes regular opportunity for applicants to provide input on all aspects of LSOHC functions. I ask that you consider that what may seem like a simple question to ask through the application or reporting process can cause significant work for applicants and that this work costs real money and diverts effort away from putting conservation on the ground. Clearly you need good information and documentation and we are happy to provide it but please be cognizant of need to know vs nice to know.
- Just want to thank LSOHC staff for their assistance in our project as we proceeded through construction and now the completion of our "Final Report".
- The council needs to take a hard look at how it is handling the process. The more apparent dysfunction there is, the more likely that the legislature will step in and do the allocations themselves. I see evidence of political leanings being brought into decisions of this body, which is not what the citizens of the state expected when they created this council. The purpose was to remove these decisions from the political process so that habitat needs were the main focus. Drifting from that purpose creates the potential for this body to become irrelevant.

C) FY 17 Call for Funding Criteria

1. Does the proposal address priority actions and outcomes of one or more of the ecological sections?
2. Does the proposal address Minnesota habitats that have:
 - a. historical value to fish and wildlife,
 - b. wildlife species of greatest conservation need,
 - c. Minnesota County Biological Survey data, and/or
 - d. rare, threatened and endangered species inventories?
3. Does the proposal explain the nature of the urgency?
4. Does the proposal use a science-based strategic planning and evaluation model?
5. Does the proposal clearly describe whether it leverages effort and/or other funds to supplement any OHF appropriation? For example, leverage may include cash, in-kind contributions such as proposal evaluations or planning, or personnel. Local outreach, education, and community engagement may also be considered advantageous.
6. Does the proposal fully describe and quantify in detail how the requested funding supplements - and does not substitute - customary or usual funding sources?
7. Does the proposal describe how the program's outcomes will be maintained?
8. Does the proposal meet the applicable criteria set forth in MN Statutes 97A.056 Subdivision 13?
9. Does the proposal restore or enhance habitat on permanently protected land, including tribal lands under federal trust arrangements or will the protection be permanent?
10. Does the proposal clearly identify performance measures, and provide a specific plan for measuring, evaluating and publicly reporting these outcomes over time?
11. Is the proposal likely to produce and demonstrate significant and permanent conservation benefits and/or habitat outcomes?
12. Is the proposal's budget within the norms of this kind of work or otherwise adequate to accomplish all goals and objectives described?