

Issues and Ideas Related to Establishment of a Conservation Partners Grant Program by the Lessard Outdoor Heritage Council

(DNR staff presentation to Lessard Outdoor Heritage Council: January 26, 2009)

The Lessard Outdoor Heritage Council (LOHC) is established in MN Stat. 97A.056. Subdivision 3(b) states:

(b) To encourage and support local conservation efforts, the council shall establish a conservation partners program. Local, regional, state or national organizations may apply for matching grants for restoration, protection, and enhancement of wetlands, prairies, forests, and habitat for fish, game, and wildlife, prevention of forest fragmentation, encouragement of forest consolidation, and expansion of restored native prairie.

The executive branch has a long history of administering a wide variety of grant programs. The purpose of this presentation is to provide suggestions based on this experience that may help the LOHC establish a grant program. The summary includes options for implementation of a grant program, as well as administrative lessons learned through administration of existing grant programs.

Principles and Program Elements Related to Establishment of a State Grant Program:

The LOHC is required by statute to “establish” a conservation partners program, which includes a grant function. There are numerous options to implementing the grant program. The Council has the option to develop the specific eligibility requirements, evaluation and ranking process, and related guidelines for the grant program. Alternatively, it could establish some guidelines for the program and leave development of the more detailed elements to an organization or agency, which would implement the program.

The LOHC will make recommendations to the legislature regarding the grants program, while the legislature will appropriate funds for this program. Since the LOHC was created in the legislative branch, constitutional requirements may require assistance from the state administrative branch to distribute appropriations made for the purposes of the grant program. The legislature can delegate some responsibility for oversight of the program to the LOHC.

- I. General Principles:
 - The grant program must comply with the state constitution, laws and statutes related to use of the Outdoor Heritage Fund dollars specifically and the distribution of state funds via grants generally.

- If administered within a state agency, the grant program must comply with the Minnesota Department of Administration, Office of Grants Management, policies related to state grant making.
- If administered outside of a state agency, the grant program should meet similar standards for accountability (established criteria and objectives; awards based on merit of meeting objectives through equitable evaluation; use of contracts to mitigate risk; and the ability of the grantee to demonstrate measurable outcomes).
- Administrative costs for running the grant program should be provided to ensure that the requirements listed above are met. These administrative costs are necessary to safeguard use of state dollars and to ensure the program is successful.

II. Grant Program Elements:

- Define eligibility requirements of recipients
- Define eligible project categories (a well designed program can evaluate project details the full Council does not have time to review)
- Determine match requirements (Pros/cons of varying match requirements)
- Determine maximum/minimum grant amounts (discuss the value of awarding fewer larger grants or issuing block grants)
- Establish grant program schedule (annual, quarterly, open, etc.)
- Develop an application process (web based, available to all interested parties, transparent)
- Develop a fair, transparent, equitable, and defensible evaluation and selection process
- Check compatibility of grant projects proposed with existing state and federal laws, policies, requirements, ecological guidelines, etc.
- Develop a grant contract, landowner agreement document or easement requirements for landowners receiving grant funds
- Establish a period for completion of the project
- Establish a reporting requirement
- Develop a policy for using only native plant materials (use latest generally accepted definitions and standards)
- Develop procedures for payment (reimbursement grants recommended; based on specific deliverables, costs incurred, etc.)
- Develop requirements for monitoring, auditing, accountability
- Develop a data base and report capabilities

Link to DNR grants program information: Go to the DNR web site at mndnr.gov. Click on "Grants". Find the category and grant program from the list.