



**TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
LAND™**



Preserve Pennsylvania

Local, State and Federal Funding for Parks and Open Space

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction



Chester County, PA, Wilson Farm Park, PA

Trust for Public Land envisions a future where every community has safe, equitable access to a high-quality park within a 10-minute walk of home. The **10-Minute Walk Program** is one way we work – in collaboration with cities and partners – to address the most pressing questions and challenges to park equity. Launched in 2017, we are an award-winning national effort to improve safe, easy access to parks and green spaces.

Who We Are

Trust for Public Land (TPL) works to protect the places people care about and to create places that protect community health, resilience, and equity. Since 1972, the Trust for Public Land has worked hand-in-hand with communities to protect more than 3.7 million acres and completed close to 5,000 park and conservation projects.

Our goal is to help close the park equity gap for the 100 million people - including 28 million children - who lack access to a close-to-home park or greenspace. We conserve working farms, ranches, and forests; lands and buildings of historical and cultural importance; rivers, streams, coasts, and watersheds; trails and other special places.

Our Work in Pennsylvania

Since 1996, TPL has brought its expertise to support Pennsylvania municipalities, counties, and community partners, including:

- **Land Protection:** Helped protect over 3700 acres in the state of Pennsylvania.
- **Conservation Finance:** Successfully passed all thirteen conservation finance measures that we assisted in Pennsylvania, generating over \$630 million for parks, trails, and open space conservation.
- **State Funding:** Involved in efforts to preserve and increase funding for the Growing Greener program and Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund.
- **Growing Greener 2 Bond:** In May 2005 voters approved a \$625 million Growing Greener 2 bond, which included \$300 million for open space and farmland preservation, as well as brownfield redevelopment. The measure passed statewide with 61 percent support. TPL is currently working as part of the Growing Greener III Coalition to increase state funding for conservation in Pennsylvania.
- **Carbon County:** Assisted in the passage of a \$10 million bond in Carbon County with 83 percent support in November 2022. The funds will be used for open space, farmland, and watershed protection.
- **Westtown Township (Chester):** Assisted in the passage of conservation funding to preserve a 206-acre historical farm.
- **Finance Feasibility Studies:** Completed conservation finance feasibility studies for Monroe, Lackawanna, and Lehigh Counties, Upper Saucon Township in Lehigh County, the Sand Hills Area in Dauphin County and the Conewago Mountains Area in York County.

Partnership with DCNR

The State of Pennsylvania, through the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), has established the vision that enjoyable outdoor recreation is welcoming to all and accessible in every Pennsylvania community.

One way DCNR advances this mission is through the work of its Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. The bureau's mission is to be a leader in establishing community conservation partnerships for advancing the greening of Pennsylvania, for protecting the commonwealth's natural and heritage resources, and for providing recreational opportunities for all Pennsylvanians and visitors to enjoy. The bureau provides grants and technical assistance for local recreation projects, trails and greenways, heritage areas, open space protection, river conservation, and environmental education programs.

To further support the achievement of Pennsylvania's outdoor recreation vision, TPL's 10-Minute Walk program has undertaken research for DCNR to explore public funding options to preserve Pennsylvania's land, water, and natural character, to develop parks for current and future residents, or meet closely related county needs. This report is not intended to be encyclopedic, but rather to outline a wide range of available funding tools. For additional resources, see the [Pennsylvania Municipal Leaders Funding and Resource Guide](#).

State of Parks & Funding

Park Equity

Parks play an essential role in helping communities thrive across the country because they promote healthy, livable futures. Parks and green spaces have a multitude of benefits, including:

- Improve mental and physical health
- Increase climate resilience by reducing extreme heat, mitigating floods and storm water pollution
- Stimulate economic development
- Provide communities with a place for social gathering and belonging, among other uses

The importance of parks has only become more visible in our everyday lives. The unique time of isolation and physical distancing experienced by society during the COVID-19 global pandemic led many people to seek safe ways to be active and social outdoors.

Approximately [83% of adults](#) found that exercising at local parks, trails, and open spaces was essential to maintaining their physical health during the pandemic. According to a 2019 analysis conducted by the National League of Cities, [63% of U.S. mayors](#) had outlined specific plans or goals related to parks and recreation in their “state of the city” speeches, compared to just 28% in 2017.

In Pennsylvania, **two out of five residents** do not live within a 10-minute walk of a park. For many Pennsylvanians, nearby parks and green spaces are the only place to access and experience nature, serving as critical third spaces outside of work and home.

As just one example, during the pandemic, Pennsylvania state parks experienced a high number of visitors at the start of COVID-19, and that trend has continued. [Pennsylvania state parks saw a 29 percent increase](#) in visitors in 2020 compared to March 2019. There was also a [spike in trail use, with a 52 percent increase in visitors](#) in 2020 compared to 2019, and a 97 percent increase compared to 2018.

Despite what we know about the benefits of parks and green spaces, nation-wide approximately 100 million people—including 28 million children—do not have access to these spaces within a 10-minute walk from home.

The park equity divide in the U.S. is even more glaring when examining low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. In the 100 most populated cities, neighborhoods where most residents identify as Black, Hispanic, Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Asian American and Pacific Islander have access to an average of **44 percent less park acreage** than predominantly white neighborhoods. A similar inequity is found in low-income neighborhoods.



100 million people—including 28 million children—do not have access to these spaces within a 10-minute walk from home.

William Cramp Elementary Schoolyard, Philadelphia, PA

Funding for Parks

Funding is a key challenge in addressing these park equity gaps. Parks departments across the country face financial challenges that make it difficult to ensure that everyone has access to a high-quality park. Historically, in times of financial hardship, parks and natural areas are one of the first amenities to be cut from a city's budget.

- In the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, compared to all other public services, local expenditures on parks and recreation decreased the most from 2008 – 2013 (21%).ⁱ
- Parks and recreation also had the single largest year to year decrease in expenditures. From 2009 to 2010, local parks and recreation experienced an 8% decrease in expenditures.ⁱⁱ
- In findings from the [2020 Menino Survey of Mayors](#), two-thirds of mayors stated that parks were one of the first services to be cut during the COVID-19 pandemic.

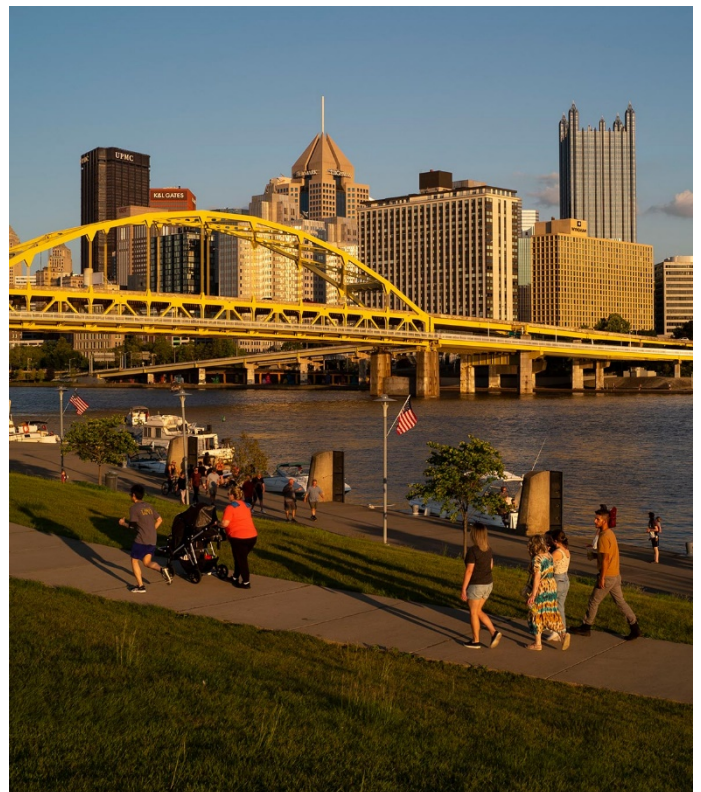
Many opportunities exist to create parks and protect natural areas in municipalities and counties in Pennsylvania, and to fund park development and improvements. At the heart of the most successful parks funding programs is a substantial, long-term, dedicated source of local revenue. With a reliable source of public funds, local governments can establish meaningful parks and conservation priorities that protect the most valuable resources, are geographically distributed, and otherwise meet important goals and values.

Local and state governments with dedicated funds are much better positioned to secure and leverage funding from federal governments and attract other local and state government or private philanthropic partners. Communities in Pennsylvania have traditionally been able to rely on a mix of funding due to the availability of state grant funds and local conservation funding measures. Because of the need to leverage funds, this report describes some local, state and federal funding sources that may be available for park acquisition, development, operations and maintenance, and programming.

One PGH, Pittsburgh, PA

The City of Pittsburgh has made parks a priority. Former Mayor Bill Peduto made the 10-Minute Walk Commitment in 2018, and established the goal of every resident living within a 10-minute walk of a park by 2030.

Pittsburgh embedded the 10-minute walk goal into OnePGH, the city's first comprehensive resiliency strategy. Leveraging public dollars and other funding sources, OnePGH funds parks to achieve the city's larger goal of providing all Pittsburghers access to equitable, economically thriving, safe, and healthy spaces.



Local Funding

Background

Most funding for parks and land conservation in the United States comes from local governments. A dedicated funding source of local revenue often serves as the foundation to long-term efforts to conserve and maintain land and water and is key to leveraging grants offered by state and federal programs.

The term “dedicated funding” refers to any consistent and stable funding stream for land acquisition and operations, programming, and maintenance for open space, parks, wildlife habitat, farmland, trails and other recreational amenities whether that funding is in perpetuity or is provided with sunset provisions.

Since 1988, over 130 county and municipal ballot measures that support the acquisition of land for open space, farmland, and recreational purposes have been approved by Pennsylvania voters, generating nearly \$1.2 billion.

The overall passage rate for local ballot measures in Pennsylvania is 80 percent. Pennsylvania voters have approved 90 percent of 63 bond measures, 72 percent of 89 earned income tax measures, and 88 percent of 16 property tax measures.ⁱⁱⁱ Of the twelve county conservation finance measures (all bonds) since 1988, only one (Delaware County, 1996) has failed. See a map and list of local conservation measures in Pennsylvania from 2008-2002 below.

[In this report](#), WeConservePA reviews the voting outcomes of and monies generated by these open space tax and bond referendums. In providing analysis, the report draws heavily on data accessed from The Trust for Public Land’s LandVote database through December 2021.

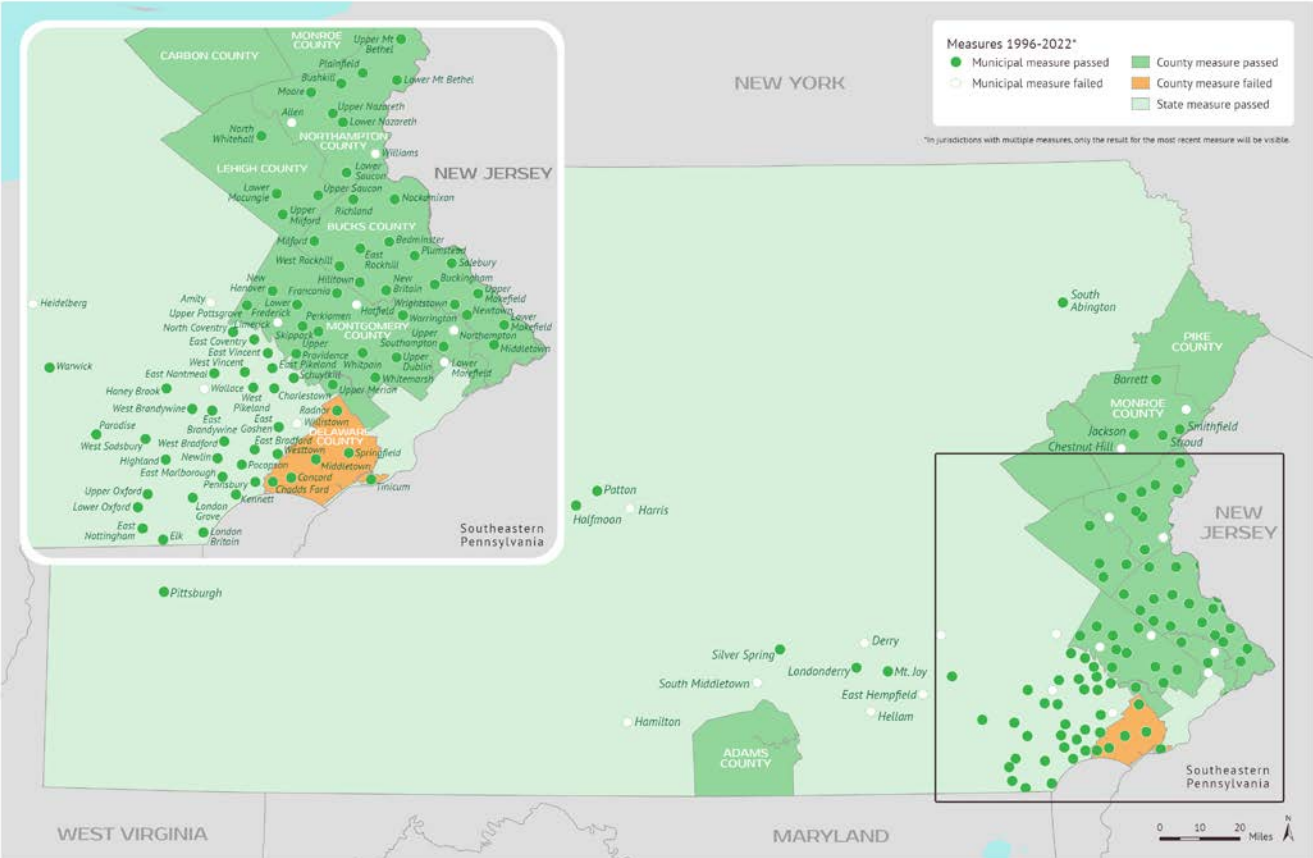
Local Funding for Parks and Conservation

Generally, there are five primary types of local revenue sources available to municipalities and counties in Pennsylvania to pay for parks and land conservation. Municipalities can use discretionary annual spending, electoral and non-electoral debt financing, a voter-approved property tax, or the earned income tax. Counties can use discretionary annual spending, electoral debt financing, and non-electoral debt financing.

The financing options a community uses will depend on a variety of factors, such as taxing capacity, budgetary resources, voter preferences and political will. The ability of local governments to establish dedicated funding sources depends upon state enabling authority. These funding options are not mutually exclusive and can be used in combination—for example, bonds can be issued supported by revenues from a property tax increase.

In 1996, Act 153 was enacted as an amendment to Act 442 of 1967, Pennsylvania’s Conservation and Land Development Act. This law broadened the ability of local governments to acquire interests in real property, including development rights. The purposes include the provision of recreation land, as well as the conservation of scenic resources, historic resources, natural resources, farmland, forestlands, and areas for pure and adequate water supply. Local governments were also allowed to levy a tax on real estate or earned income above the existing limits of the Commonwealth’s laws, but they must first receive referendum approval.^{iv}

Land Vote Measures (1996-2022) Passed in Pennsylvania



Pennsylvania
MEASURES (1996-2022)

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PA Local Conservation Measures 2008-2022

Jurisdiction	Date	Finance Mechanism	Conservation and Parks Funds Approved	Status	% Yes
Carbon County	11-08-2022	Bond	\$ 10,000,000	Pass	83%
Limerick Township	11-08-2022	Income tax		Fail	48%
West Sadsbury Township	11-08-2022	Income tax		Fail	39%
Westtown Township	11-08-2022	Prop/Income tax	\$ 13,620,000	Pass	68%
Whitpain Township	05-17-2022	Income tax	\$ 12,800,000	Pass	63%
Lower Macungie Township	11-02-2021	Income tax	\$ 36,600,000	Pass	60%
Upper Saucon Township	11-02-2021	Income tax	\$ 16,600,000	Pass	51%
Lower Frederick Township	11-03-2020	Income tax	\$ 1,600,000	Pass	52%
Lower Nazareth Township	05-21-2019	Income tax	\$ 14,000,000	Pass	63%
Middletown Township	05-21-2019	Bond	\$ 8,000,000	Pass	76%
North Whitehall Township	05-21-2019	Property tax	\$ 2,800,000	Pass	65%
Pittsburgh	11-05-2019	Property tax	\$ 200,000,000	Pass	52%
Solebury Township	11-05-2019	Bond	\$ 12,000,000	Pass	75%
Upper Nazareth Township	11-05-2019	Income tax	\$ 4,000,000	Pass	56%
West Bradford Township	11-07-2017	Income tax	\$ 22,000,000	Pass	67%
Lower Moreland Township	11-08-2016	Income tax		Fail	35%
Lower Saucon Township	11-08-2016	Income tax	\$ 5,000,000	Pass	58%
Newlin Township	11-08-2016	Property tax	\$ 380,000	Pass	60%
Richland Township	11-08-2016	Income tax	\$ 1,600,000	Pass	76%
Smithfield Township	11-08-2016	Bond	\$ 2,000,000	Pass	76%
Upper Milford Township	11-08-2016	Income tax	\$ 7,200,000	Pass	59%
East Nottingham Township	11-03-2015	Income tax	\$ 14,000,000	Pass	56%
Patton Township	11-04-2014	Bond	\$ 3,500,000	Pass	64%
Williams Township	11-04-2014	Income tax		Fail	50%
Silver Spring Township	11-05-2013	Income tax	\$ 4,800,000	Pass	60%
Allen Township	11-06-2012	Income tax		Fail	44%
Harris Township	11-06-2012	Income tax		Fail	49%
Warrington Township	11-06-2012	Bond	\$ 3,000,000	Pass	66%
Allen Township	11-08-2011	Income tax		Fail	44%
Franklin Township	05-17-2011	Income tax		Fail	48%
Franklin Township	11-08-2011	Income tax		Fail	41%
Lower Saucon Township	11-08-2011	Income tax	\$ 4,125,000	Pass	57%
East Coventry Township	11-02-2010	Income tax	\$ 7,650,000	Pass	53%
Pennsbury Township	11-03-2009	Property tax	\$ 5,000,000	Pass	62%
Plumstead Township	11-03-2009	Bond	\$ 4,500,000	Pass	51%
Adams County	11-04-2008	Bond	\$ 10,000,000	Pass	75%
Buckingham Township	04-22-2008	Bond	\$ 20,000,000	Pass	82%
Charlestown Township	04-22-2008	Income tax	\$ 20,000,000	Pass	77%
Hatfield Township	11-04-2008	Income tax		Fail	43%
Lower Makefield Township	11-04-2008	Bond	\$ 15,000,000	Pass	69%
Newtown Township	11-04-2008	Income tax	\$ 13,600,000	Pass	61%
Upper Dublin Township	11-04-2008	Bond	\$ 30,000,000	Pass	67%
Upper Saucon Township	11-04-2008	Income tax		Fail	50%

Voter-Approved Property Tax for Municipalities

The property tax is a familiar revenue source for local governments. Property taxes are usually measured in “mills,” where 1 mill equals \$1 of tax for every \$1,000 of assessed property value. Property taxes provide a steady annual source of revenue regardless of changes in the economy. They are relatively easy to administer at the local level, and the burden is broadly distributed across the tax base. Generally, local property tax rates have limits, requiring voter approval if these limits are exceeded. Statutory rate limitations on property taxes have been established for all classes of taxing jurisdictions in Pennsylvania, except the cities of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Scranton and the Philadelphia School District.^v Jurisdictions which have adopted home rule charters under the Home Rule Charter and Optional Plans Law are no longer subject to property tax limits imposed by the state legislature in the various local government codes.^{vi} Voters of individual home rule municipalities may establish their own property tax rate limits in their local charters.^{vii}

Voters in many communities in Pennsylvania have been willing to approve a property tax increase when revenues are specifically earmarked for parks and open space protection.^{viii} Under Act 153 of 1996 (32 P.S. Sections 5001 to 5013), the majority of the funds may only be used for the purposes of acquiring land, including development rights, for open space benefits.^{ix} Funds from a voter-approved property-tax increase can also be used to finance revenue bonds for these purposes.

Voter-Approved Income Tax for Municipalities

The earned income tax (EIT) is an important source of revenue for local governments.^x The EIT may be more acceptable than the property tax in communities with a large population of retired seniors, since the tax is only applied to earned income, not to real estate assets or pensions. Pennsylvania law caps the EIT at 1.0 percent, and in most jurisdictions the local school district claims half of this amount. Act 153 of 1996 authorized municipalities to place a question before voters to approve the levy of an increased earned income tax beyond the 1.0 percent limit, exclusively for the purpose of financing purchases of land or development rights for open space uses which includes existing and planned park, recreation and conservation sites. Funds can also be used to finance revenue bonds for these purposes. The amount of the additional tax is set by the voters in a referendum.^{xi}

Referring Tax Measures to the Ballot

The method for placing an earned income or property tax referendum question on the ballot is set forth in the Pennsylvania Election Code (P.L. 1333, No. 320). First, the governing body must pass an ordinance to have the question placed on the ballot. For property and earned income tax measures, the ordinance is then filed with the County Board of Elections at least 13 Tuesdays before the next primary or general election. The question for approval of a dedicated tax must be phrased in the following words:

“Do you favor the imposition of a [describe the tax in millage or rate] by [local government unit] to be used to [purpose]?”^{xii}



Bonds for Municipalities and Counties

Electoral and Non-Electoral Debt

Non-electoral debt is bonding the municipality issues directly, without voter approval, and is limited by law. The Local Government Unit Debt Act establishes the limits for non-electoral debt by type of local unit. The amount of non-voted debt that can be issued by a municipality is limited to 250 percent of their borrowing base.^{xiii} The amount of non-voted debt that can be issued by a county is up to 300 percent of their borrowing base.^{xiv} The Act defines the borrowing base as the average annual revenue taken over the last three years.^{xv}

Though non-electoral debt is an option for parks and land conservation, it is not ideal, as it must adhere to debt limits and receive majority approval from elected officials. The alternative, voter-approved general obligation bonds, do not have a debt limit, and have enjoyed good support for municipal and county land conservation in the Commonwealth.

Referring Bond Measures to the Ballot^{xvi xvii}

Except for statewide questions, the county board of elections is responsible for determining the wording of all questions. On voting machines, the question must not exceed 75 words.^{xviii} The ballot question must be phrased substantially as follows:

“Shall debt in the sum of [amount] dollars for the purpose of financing [insert brief description of project] be authorized to be incurred as debt approved by the electors?”

Approval for non-voted debt requires a majority approval by the County Commissioners.^{xix}

Approval for electoral debt requires that the governing body of the jurisdiction first adopt a resolution signifying its intent to issue electoral debt. A copy of the resolution and the form of the question to authorize the debt must be certified to the county board of elections at least 45 days before the election.^{xx}

Bonds are usually not issued in the full amount authorized by voters; they are typically issued in one or more series.^{xxi} In addition, on the tenth anniversary of the bond approval by voters, if those bonds, all or in part, have not been issued, the debt would need to be reauthorized electorally, or could become non-electoral debt.^{xxii}

The governing body of any local government unit may by resolution, without the assent of the electors, rescind or cancel, in whole or in part, the authorization to incur electoral debt for any reason stated in the resolution, and thereupon the assent of the electors shall be of no further effect. A certified copy of the resolution with proof of the due publication thereof shall be filed with the department.

Funding for Park Development, Operations and Maintenance for Municipalities

Act 153 of 1996 contemplates the acquisition of real estate interests for open space uses, which includes park sites. However, that law was amended by Act 115 of 2013 to expand the use of open space property taxes for the development, design, improvement, and maintenance of acquired open spaces. Act 115 of 2013 (32 P.S. § 5007.1) provides that the open space property tax or income tax may be used to develop, design, improve, and maintain open space.^{xxiii} The amendment provides greater flexibility and clarity to local municipalities in managing their open space programs.^{xxiv}

The amendment provides that in addition to acquiring land and easements, dedicated open space taxes may now be used to:

- Develop, improve, design, engineer and maintain open space acquired with dedicated open space taxes in order to provide open space benefits. (Up to 25% of open space taxes may be used for this purpose.)
- Prepare the resource, recreation or land use plan needed to acquire open space under the law.

The new flexibility to use a portion of the taxes for development and maintenance enables municipalities with well-established open space protection programs to better steward their protected lands and build trails and other recreational facilities that provide open space benefits. This flexibility allows municipalities to hold referenda to establish open space programs, knowing that they can use a portion of the revenue to care for and create recreational opportunities on the open space.

Successful Ballot Language

Carbon County, PA

Election Date

November 8, 2022

Ballot Language

Carbon County Water Quality, Working Farms, and Wildlife Habitat Protection

“Shall debt in a sum up to 10 million dollars for the purpose of financing land conservation, including protection of drinking water sources; water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams; working farms; wildlife habitat; natural areas be authorized to be incurred as debt approved by the voters, requiring that the funds only be used for these purposes, with consideration of recommendations by an advisory board and public disclosure of project spending through annual public audits?”

Results

Bond passed 83% yes.

Upper Milford Township, PA

Election Date

November 8, 2016

Ballot Language

Carbon County Water Quality, Working Farms, and Wildlife Habitat Protection

“Do you favor the imposition by Upper Milford Township of an additional Earned Income Tax at the rate of 0.1385 (%) percent on an annual basis beginning January 1, 2017, to be used for the purposes of financing the acquisition, protection, conservation or preservation of undeveloped open spaces or areas; forests and farmlands; natural and scenic resources; and recreational or historic lands; and payment of the attendant costs associated with such actions?”

Results

Passed 59% yes.

Generated \$7,200,000 in conservation funds.

Smithfield Township, Monroe County, PA

Election Date

November 8, 2016

Ballot Language

Smithfield Township Water Quality, Forest and Wildlife Habitat Fund

“Shall debt in the sum of Two Million Dollars (\$2,000,000.00) for the purpose of financing the acquisition of land, development rights and/or conservation easements in the township for the protection of drinking water supplies; water quality in lakes and streams; wetlands that provide flood protection; forest and wildlife habitat be authorized to be incurred as debt approved by the electors?”

Results

Bond passed 76% yes

State Funding

Pennsylvania State Parks and Conservation Programs

Nationwide support for parks and outdoor spaces as tools to improve public health, address the climate crisis, and unite communities has catalyzed historic funding at the federal level. While funding triumphs in Washington have captured national attention, states like Pennsylvania have mobilized to amplify this moment by creating and growing sources of state conservation capital. Pennsylvania has taken an active role in administering federal programs at the state level and is working to funnel support to the communities with the greatest need.

DCNR Community Conservation Partnerships Program Grants

DCNR administers the Community Conservation Partnership Program ([C2P2](#)), which houses multiple competitive grant processes funded by sources as diverse as the projects they fund. Projects across Pennsylvania that help promote conservation, recreation, and stewardship of the state's natural resources may be considered for funding.

Local units of government, nonprofits, and community-based organizations are all encouraged to submit a proposal for the annual grant cycle, which accepts applications from mid-January through early April.

In 2022 the C2P2 grant cycle awarded approximately \$90 million to more than 330 local and community projects statewide. Those awards would help build or renovate more than 140 local parks, 54 miles of trails, and permanently protect more than 7,000 acres of land for public recreation. Successful projects should address an identified need in a community and engage the public in the project planning phase.

Community Conservation Partnerships Program Grants are divided into nine subprograms, each with its own set of priorities and project goals. The following set of C2P2 programs address non-motorized recreation, conservation, and building the capacity of local park and recreation agencies:

1. **Community and Watershed Forestry-** Provides financial assistance to identify locations in need of riparian forest buffers, lawn conversion, and community tree planting and to then design, implement, and establish those practices. Award amounts can vary widely based on geographic and ecological scope as well as organizational capacity of grantees and partners.
2. **Community Recreation and Conservation Planning-** Planning projects "lay the groundwork" for future land acquisition, development and/or management of parks, recreational facilities, critical habitat, open space, natural areas, greenways, and river/watershed corridors.
3. **Land Acquisition and Conservation-** These projects involve the purchase and/or donation of land for park and recreation areas, greenways, critical habitat areas and/or open space. DCNR prioritizes projects that will address climate impacts and increase outdoor recreation access.
4. **Non-Motorized Trails-** Trail projects include the acquisition, planning, development, rehabilitation, or maintenance of designated routes on land or water for non-motorized recreation activities. Additionally, the trails program can support the development and operation of educational programs that promote safety and environmental protection as they may relate to the use of recreational trails.
5. **Peer and Circuit Rider-** Funds projects that help local governments to increase local capacity for recreation, parks, and conservation. Prioritizes collaborative projects that focus on a specific need identified by the grantee and its partners. The program can aid in the hiring of full-time professionals whose services are shared by the members of a partnership, commission, or authority. This is the only program which receives grants on a rolling basis year-round.

(Continue to next page)

6. **Park Rehabilitation and Development-** These projects can involve the rehabilitation of existing or development of new public parks, recreation facilities, greenways and river conservation projects. While most projects will require 1:1 match, municipalities with a population of 5,000 or less are eligible to receive between \$60,000 and \$100,000 in grant funds with a lower match requirement.
7. **State and Regional Partnerships-** Partnerships projects are collaborative statewide or regional initiatives that help build local, county, regional and statewide capacity to better develop and manage recreation and park facilities and to promote the conservation of natural and heritage resources through plan implementation, education, and training.
8. **ATV and Snowmobile-** These grants are unique in that they have two application periods annually. The fall and spring deadlines run independently of the shared C2P2 deadlines. Funding available for planning, acquisition, development, rehabilitation, or equipment purchase for ATV and/or snowmobile trails and facilities.
9. **Motorized Trails-** Trail projects include the acquisition, planning, development, rehabilitation, or maintenance of designated routes on land for motorized recreation activities. Additionally, motorized trail grants support the development and operation of educational programs that promote safety and environmental protection as they may relate to the use of trails.

Keystone Recreation, Park, and Conservation Fund

Pennsylvania's Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund is a critical dedicated funding source for recreation and conservation projects that can also be used to assist cultural and historical preservation initiatives.

Funded by the state real estate transfer tax, administration of the fund is a collaborative effort between multiple state agencies.

Keystone Funds are distributed to PA DCNR, the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC), Pennsylvania Department of Education, and State System of Higher Education. DCNR and PHMC are allocated 65% and 13% respectively for recreation and conservation programs.

- **DCNR-** About half of DCNR's allocation goes primarily to rehabilitate and upgrade state park and forestry infrastructure. However, up to 10% of this amount may be directed towards rails-to-trails projects, and up to 10% may also be directed towards rivers protection and conservation projects. 25% is provided as grants for local recreation initiatives, such as ballparks and playgrounds administered in the C2P2 program. No less than 10% is to be provided to regional land trusts in the state for natural areas and open space planning and acquisition. Land trust support is largely awarded by C2P2 programs, and trusts may apply directly for support acquiring land for state inventories.
- **PHMC-** Approximately 20-25% of the Keystone Fund money that [PHMC](#) receives is distributed in the form of grants. Keystone Historic Preservation Construction Grants support the rehabilitation, restoration, or preservation of historic resources listed or eligible of being listed in The National Register of Historic Places. Award amounts range from \$5,000 to \$100,000 with a required 1:1 cash match. Keystone Planning Grants support projects which identify, preserve, promote, and protect historic and archaeological resources of Pennsylvania for both the benefit of the public and revitalization of communities. Planning awards range from \$5,000 to \$25,000 and also require a 1:1 cash match.

Environmental Stewardship Fund

The Environmental Stewardship Fund (ESF) was established to secure a dedicated funding source for investing directly in vital efforts to preserve farmland, conserve open space, restore water quality, promote outdoor recreation, and revitalize communities.

ESF was created by Act 68 of 1999 with bipartisan support from Pennsylvania legislators. A significant portion of revenue comes from Oil and Gas Lease Funds transferred to ESF which have been capped at \$20 million annually. Combined with impact fee revenue (generally \$6–\$8 million), tipping fee revenue (generally \$60–\$65 million), and interest, the ESF has received \$100–\$110 million annually over the last ten years.

Environmental Stewardship funds are administered by DCNR, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Agriculture, and Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PENNVEST) through a number of agency funding programs.

1. The ESF is one source of funding for DCNR's C2P2 program, highlighted at length above.
2. PA DEP administers the Growing Greener Watershed Restoration and Protection, Surface Mining Conservation and Reclamation Act, and the Abandoned Mine Drainage Set-Aside grants ([link to programs](#)) using ESF funds. Each program can provide funding for design, construction, and planning activities that restore Pennsylvania's impaired waters and protect waterways from pollution. SMCRA and AMD grants emphasize treatment facilities on legacy pollution sites, but can also fund land reclamation projects that restore water quality.
3. The Department of Agriculture administers [farmland preservation grants](#). This program enables state and county governments to purchase conservation easements from farmers to preserve prime farmland. Farm owners apply to the program at the county level where applications are ranked and sent to the state program board for approval. More than 545,000 acres have been preserved for farmland in Pennsylvania, more than any other state.
4. PENNVEST uses ESF funding to award [Drinking Water, Stormwater and Sewer Infrastructure grants](#) to projects improving the stewardship of Pennsylvania's waterways. This is not a competitive grant program, any municipality, authority, or private entity that is eligible under an existing PENNVEST project will be considered for the Growing Greener grant funds automatically.

Coastal Resources Management Program

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has two coastal areas identified by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) that may receive funding under the Coastal Resources Management ([CRM](#)) Program:

- 112 miles of coastline along the Delaware Estuary – Located within Bucks, Philadelphia and Delaware counties in the Southeast of the state. The coastal zone contains islands, marshes and shorelands of both the Delaware River and tributary streams that are tidally influenced. The combined facilities of the Delaware Estuary comprise the largest freshwater port in the world.
- 77 miles of coastline along Lake Erie – Located within Erie County and includes the shorelines of major tributaries. The coastal zone extends to the middle of the lake, to the boundary with Canada and inland an average of 1.4 miles. The Lake's coastline also contains Presque Isle Bay.

In order to safeguard these valuable natural resources, NOAA distributes federal funding to PA DEP to implement the Pennsylvania Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP). A portion of these funds are used to support eligible projects that address one or more of the priority areas of the CRM program.

Program focus areas encompass a wide range of priorities within these zones, including fisheries, wetlands, recreation access, historical or cultural preservation, coastal hazard areas, port activities, ocean resources, and energy facilities. Entities operating within one of PA's coastal zones can apply to fund planning, design, engineering, education, outreach, construction, acquisition, and research projects. A \$75,000 grant limit is generally imposed on any single project with a required 1:1 non-federal match. The Coastal Zone solicitation period generally opens in August with a grant application deadline sometime in October.

Federal Funding

Federal Parks and Conservation Programs

Through a variety of conservation programs, the federal government has long been an important partner for state and local governments, parks and conservation organizations, and community advocates. Recent investment in federal conservation programs through the passage of landmark laws and government-wide initiatives have created an historic opportunity to increase conservation and outdoor recreation impacts.

This scale of funding will transform our environment, from the way we renew or rebuild transportation systems and housing, to protecting our environment and future generations by reducing greenhouse gasses and building resilience to storms, wildfire, and other events. From our cities to rural communities, the way we seek to invest this funding is a representation of our priorities – as communities and a nation.

The abundance of new programs and heightened investment in others through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) have made navigating this frontier challenging. This section of the report highlights the federal conservation programs that have been or are more likely to provide funding to Pennsylvania for park and open space acquisition or the development and construction of parks, trails, schoolyards, and greenspaces.

Connell Park, Scranton, PA

Nearly 4,000 residents live within a 10-minute walk of Connell Park in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The deteriorating park is a central community feature that is no longer equipped to serve as a gathering place and point of pride for community members. A proposed park revitalization effort partially funded through a \$381,594 ORLP grant will bring a new wellness loop trail, progressive bike/hiking trails, playground, and a dog park to a neighborhood lacking sufficient access to high quality outdoor spaces. The project will also update the sports venue concessions stand and make infrastructure and ADA accessibility improvements necessary to ensure the park serves all members of the community equitably

U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park Service (NPS)

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Stateside Grants

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is the largest source of federal money for parks, wildlife, and open space. Specifically, LWCF provides funding to assist in the acquisition, renovation, preservation, development of outdoor recreation resources, including but not limited to open space, parks, trails, wildlife lands and other lands and facilities desirable for outdoor active participation. Under the LWCF Stateside Program, a portion of LWCF funds is directed to states through formula grants for land protection and park development projects.

Program details and prioritization of projects are highly variable from state to state, allowing flexibility in the allocation of funds. In Pennsylvania LWCF Stateside grants are distributed as part of DCNR's C2P2 grants.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP)

ORLP is a nationally competitive grant program that delivers funding to urban areas defined as incorporated cities (or towns) of at least 30,000 people. Programmatic priority is given to projects located in economically disadvantaged areas, particularly those with a poverty rate of at least 20% based on census tract data, and communities that are considered “park deserts,” lacking in access to outdoor recreation opportunities. These awards help underserved communities address outdoor recreation deficits by supporting projects that create new outdoor recreation spaces, renovate or expand existing parks, and foster connections between people and the outdoors. The record \$192 million available in round six of the program is distributed in grants ranging in size from \$300,000 to \$10 million.



U.S. Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Under the Agricultural Land Easements component, NRCS helps Tribes, state and local governments, and non-governmental organizations administer the program to protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses. Eligible land for agricultural easements includes cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and nonindustrial private forest land. NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement. Under the Wetlands Reserve Easements component, NRCS helps to restore, protect and enhance enrolled wetlands by covering up to 100 percent of the cost to restore.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program is a flexible program that provides communities with resources to address a wide range of unique community development needs. CDBG funds can be used for constructing and improving public infrastructure, providing public services, activities related to energy conservation and renewable energy resources, and providing economic development. Projects must either benefit low- and moderate-income persons or address urgent community development needs because existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the health or welfare of the community for which other funding is not available. \$3.475 billion was allocated to the program in 2022, with a \$250 million increase expected in FY2023.

U.S. Forest Service

Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is administered in partnership with State agencies to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases. Protection of private forests through the FLP is meant to maintain public benefits to surrounding communities including:

1. Opportunities to hunt, fish, and camp
2. Clean and abundant drinking water
3. Habitat for fish and wildlife
4. Timber, fuel wood, and other forest products.

Proposals must demonstrate these public benefits by responding to three considerations of successful projects. This includes the importance of the land ecologically, culturally, or economically; the threat of development the forest area is under; the strategic value of the tract of land to the larger landscape and regional priorities. The Forest Legacy Program has awarded as much as \$15 million to landmark projects, with most projects receiving between \$1-7 million.

Case Example—The Northeast Connection in Pike County, Pennsylvania conserves forest land in a county with a growth rate more than double that of the national average. The 3,683 acres fall within the Delaware River Watershed and provide important wildlife and recreation connectivity between the Delaware State Forest and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. The project contains diverse natural resources including 14 miles of state-designated Exceptional Value Stream that support many state-designated Species of Special Concern. Development pressures and the land's connective values align squarely with the goals of the FLP. The land conserved in December 2019 received \$3,333,000 of its \$4,444,000 price tag from the Forest Legacy Program.

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

Federal Highway Administration

Transportation Alternatives Program

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law continues the Transportation Alternatives set-aside from the Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) program. Eligible uses of the Transportation Alternatives funds include all projects and activities that were previously eligible under the Transportation Alternatives Program under the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21). This encompasses a variety of smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, recreational trails, safe routes to school projects, community improvements such as historic preservation and vegetation management, and environmental mitigation related to stormwater and habitat connectivity. The BIL has authorized \$1.4 billion to the program for each of the next four years, an increase of \$550 million over 2021 levels.

PennDOT Safe Routes to School

The nationwide Safe Routes to School (SRTS) initiative aims to encourage children to walk and bicycle to school, helping to reverse an alarming decrease in students' physical activity and an associated increase in childhood obesity. Beyond immediate public health benefits, by getting more children to walk and bicycle to school, communities are alleviating traffic congestion, improving connectivity and access to parks, and improving air quality. SRTS programs are built on collaborative partnerships among many stakeholders including educators, students, elected officials, engineers, city planners, community leaders, health officials, and bicycle and pedestrian advocates. The state of Pennsylvania calls upon multiple funding sources to facilitate SRTS activities, including federal programs managed at the state level such as Community Development Block Grants, the Transportation Alternatives program, and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) also administers Discretionary Multimodal Transportation Funding for projects that enhance communities, pedestrian safety, and transit revitalization. The statewide program provides financial assistance to county/local governments, agencies, and transit authorities for eligible improvement projects. The MTF program awards up to \$3 million to projects, prioritizing those which align with the improved pedestrian and bicycle safety goals of the SRTS initiative.

Recreational Trails Program

The Pennsylvania Recreational Trails Program (RTP) is an assistance program of DOT's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). FHWA provides funds to states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for motorized and non-motorized recreational trail uses. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has been designated as the state agency responsible for administering this federal program in Pennsylvania. BIL has re-implemented the program through 2026 with the amount of federal funds set aside for each state equal to the state's FY 2009 RTP apportionment. Pennsylvania RTP grants range from \$2,500 to a maximum of \$100,000.

RAISE Discretionary Grants

Since 2021, the grant program previously known as BUILD and TIGER has been renamed the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program. Grants are awarded to surface transportation infrastructure projects aimed at improving safety, environmental sustainability, quality of life, mobility and community connectivity, economic competitiveness and opportunity including tourism, state of good repair, partnership and collaboration, and innovation. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and FY2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act have unlocked \$2.275 billion in funding for RAISE discretionary grants in FY2023, an increase of more than \$1 billion over 2021 levels. Urban projects can receive between \$5-25 million per grant while rural project grants range between \$1-25 million.

Case Example – Having been both physically and economically isolated from each other for more than 60 years, Pittsburgh's Frankie Pace Park has reconnected the historic Hill District neighborhood to Pittsburgh's downtown core. A 1960s urban renewal project sent the historically Black section of the city into a decades long economic decline after being cut off by a major highway and arena project. The innovative park, built as an overpass "cap" of I-579, was funded in large part by a \$19 million DOT TIGER grant awarded in 2018 for projects contributing to significant economic recovery regionally. The greenspace is a multi-modal community asset featuring local art, historical and cultural interpretation, green infrastructure, and pedestrian mobility corridors.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) **Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (C/DWSRF)**

The Environmental Protection Agency is charged with implementing both the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act, two landmark pieces of legislation whose respective goals are to clean up America's waterways and to ensure safe drinking water. Both the Clean and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF & DWSRF) programs utilize "State Revolving Funds" (SRFs) to fund projects that improve water quality and enhance drinking water supplies. Conservation is an eligible activity under both the CWSRF and DWSRF programs, and the CWSRF can fund green infrastructure projects. Every year, Congress appropriates funds that are apportioned out to the states on a formula basis to fund the SRFs. The Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PENNVEST) administers both the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund.

Brownfields Program

If a property identified for acquisition or redevelopment is or might be a "brownfield" site, many programs and other benefits at the local, state, and federal levels encourage its redevelopment. The EPA defines brownfields as properties with which "the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant." The EPA's Brownfields Program provides direct funding to eligible entities for brownfields assessment, cleanup, revolving loans, and environmental job training. As an EPA priority, the Brownfields Program provides several types of grants and is flexible in allowing access and collaboration with other agency programs to ensure resources are available to the projects that need them most. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has funneled \$1.5 billion to the program over the next four years.

Environmental Justice Small Grants Program ***(note, program specifically available to non-profits)***

The Environmental Justice (EJ) Small Grants Program supports and empowers underserved communities working on solutions to local environmental and public health issues. The term "underserved community" refers to a community with environmental justice concerns and/or vulnerable populations, including people of color, low income, rural, tribal, indigenous, and homeless populations. The long-term goals of the program are to support these communities in their efforts to build their overall capacity and create self-sustaining, community-based partnerships that will improve local environments in the future. Environmental Justice Small Grants fund projects up to \$100,000, depending on the availability of funds in a given year.

Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement Program ***(note, program specifically available to non-profits)***

EPA's EJCPSC Cooperative Agreement Program provides funding for eligible applicants for projects that address local environmental and public health issues within an affected community. The EJCPSC Program assists recipients in building collaborative partnerships to help them understand and address environmental and public health concerns in their communities. \$25 million is available to community-based organizations for awards of up to \$500,000. A total of \$5 million has been set aside for \$100,000 grants to smaller community organizations with five or fewer full-time employees.

Environmental Justice Government to Government Program

The Environmental Justice Government-to-Government (EJG2G) program provides funding at the state, local, territorial, and tribal level to support government activities that lead to measurable environmental or public health impacts in communities disproportionately burdened by environmental harms. Government recipients must have a community-based organization as a partner and build robust collaborative processes throughout the duration of the project. \$20 million is reserved for states, \$20 million for local governments, \$20 million for tribes, and \$10 million for unaffiliated state-like entities without reasonable access to a community-based organization.



EM Stanton Elementary School in South Philadelphia

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)

[NEA Our Town Grants](#)

Our Town is the NEA's creative placemaking grants program. Through project-based funding, the program supports activities that integrate arts, culture, and design into local efforts that strengthen communities. Our Town projects advance local economic, physical, or social outcomes in communities, ultimately laying the groundwork for systems change and centering equity. Program funds have been utilized in many outdoor recreation settings, providing aesthetic, cultural, and practical installations to parks. These projects require a partnership between a nonprofit organization and a local government entity, with one of the partners being a cultural organization. Grants range from \$25,000 to \$150,000, with a minimum 1:1 match.



Trust for Public Land's Heat Capture display at the 2021 PHS Flower Show at FDR Park in South Philadelphia

Trust for Public Land's project, Heat Response, pairs artists with residents in Grays Ferry, Southeast Philadelphia, and Fairhill to drive change through arts activism.

New and Evolving Federal Programs

[Urban & Community Forestry Program](#)

The Urban & Community Forestry Program (UCFP) is a technical, financial, and educational assistance program dedicated to urban forestry. Reworked as a result of the Inflation Reduction Act, UCFP is now funded at \$32 million annually and will provide project implementation grants. The program takes aim at delivering both nature-based solutions for climate issues, environmental justice, and green jobs.

[Carbon Reduction Program](#)

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established the Carbon Reduction Program (CRP), which provides funds for projects designed to reduce transportation emissions, defined as carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from on-road highway sources. One form of eligible project is a transportation alternative (as defined under the Moving Ahead for Progress under the 21st Century Act), including, but not limited to, the construction, planning, and design of on-road and off-road trail facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized forms of transportation. Nearly \$1.3 billion has been authorized for use in 2023.

[Environmental and Climate Justice Block Grants](#)

The Inflation Reduction Act provided \$3 billion to an EPA program which will empower community efforts to confront and overcome persistent pollution challenges in underserved communities that have often led to worse health and economic outcomes over decades. This new program will aggressively advance environmental justice and support projects like community-led air pollution monitoring, prevention and remediation; mitigating climate and health risks from extreme heat and wildfires; climate resilience and adaptation; and reducing indoor air pollution.

Conclusion: Multi-Benefits of Parks

Climate Resilience

As damage from climate change escalates in the form of extreme weather, parks and natural areas have an outsized role to play in making cities safe and more livable. Green space has the power to lower air temperature and absorb flood water, and can be designed in such a way as to significantly enhance those climate benefits.

Residents of towns and cities that have a lot of green space are most likely to experience the full benefits of heat relief. A study conducted by [Trust for Public Land \(TPL\) in 2020](#) revealed that communities with nearby parks are often cooler than those in “park deserts.” The temperature variability within a given city can in fact be quite extreme. Research funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that during heatwaves in [Baltimore](#), [Washington](#), and [Boulder](#), areas with parks and dense vegetation were as much as 17 degrees cooler than nearby neighborhoods that lacked adequate greenspace.

Parks are critical to buffering the effects of climate change and protecting communities most vulnerable to its deleterious impacts, yet there are [serious disparities](#) in access to the outdoors. Parks serving a majority people of color are, on average, half as large and serve nearly five times more people as parks that serve a majority white population. With [temperatures rising from coast to coast](#), that disparity means that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial populations, as well as those with lower incomes, may be at heightened risk. These environmental inequities and the scarcity of green spaces exacerbate chronic diseases like asthma and diabetes and increase community vulnerability to a wide array of climate hazards.

Funding for Green Infrastructure

Severe heat waves and heavier rainfalls are becoming more frequent. Municipalities and counties can design parks with abundant tree canopy and shade structures that keep residents cool in summer and with rain gardens, bioswales, retention ponds, and other nature-inspired solutions that capture stormwater to reduce flooding and improve water quality. While important, these types of design features can increase total project costs. However, designing parks to serve as climate solutions can unlock additional local, federal and state funding available to cities and counties as they strive to protect residents from the impacts of climate change, especially in vulnerable communities.

For example, in Philadelphia, the Water Department offers stormwater grants to help fund green infrastructure retrofits. TPL has used these funds to help transform barren schoolyards into publicly accessible and vibrant play spaces that are cooler, reduce flooding, and improve water quality.

The state also has funds available for these types of projects through their Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF). In fiscal year 2022-23, Pennsylvania DEP set aside at least [10% for green infrastructure projects](#).

There are even larger pots of funding available from the federal government. Navigating federal funding can be daunting, however the National Wildlife Federation developed a useful searchable [Nature-based Solutions Funding Database](#) where you can filter funding sources by purpose, eligibility, cost sharing requirements and more. Lastly, the [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#) has multiple grant programs that can support park, conservation, restoration, and green infrastructure projects.

Jose Manuel Collazo Park, Philadelphia

As cities struggle with extreme heat, parks are one of the best ways for residents to find relief.



Pathways for Health and Well-being

Access to parks and green space can have a huge impact on communities. People who live near parks and natural areas not only derive the many health benefits of physical activity and time spent in nature, they also forge strong social connections, which studies show are key to longevity.

Spending time in nature can lead to [positive health effects](#) including a lower heart rate, reduced stress, increased physical activity, [lower health care costs](#), and [improved cognitive function](#). In addition to supporting individual well-being, access to greenspace can also bolster community health and safety; studies suggest that areas with greenspace are associated with [reduced violence and decreased mortality](#).

Where urban greenspace does exist, access is often not shared equally — with significant health equity implications. **In Pennsylvania, only 61 percent of residents** have outdoor recreation access within a 10-minute walk of their home, and on average, urban areas had higher levels of access than suburban and rural areas. Areas that lack greenspace are shown to have elevated levels of [air](#) and [noise](#) pollution, increased [air temperatures](#), and other environmental hazards.

Decades of systemic racism and the lingering effects of [restrictive policies](#) continue to [impact communities of color](#). In areas that were historically subjected to redlining and other exclusionary policies, residents are even less likely to have [access to greenspace](#). These neighborhoods tend to have significantly less tree cover and [experience hotter temperatures](#) than non-redlined neighborhoods — increasing the risk of heat-related illness and worsening health outcomes for residents, particularly as global temperatures rise. By making equitable investments in greenspace, local leaders can tackle these long-standing disparities and improve health for everyone in their communities.



Funding for Community Health

Municipalities that implement equitable greenspace policies and practices show a commitment to improving the health of their residents and the environment. The myriad benefits from these solutions range from promoting environmental health to improving mental health to saving lives.

Greenspace's impact on mental health has been heavily documented, leading to outcomes such as improving [attention span](#) and helping to mitigate symptoms of [depression](#) and [anxiety](#). And one [study](#) found that a \$100 increase in county-level per capita operational investment in parks and recreation was associated with 3.4 fewer deaths per year per 100,000 people, from 1980-2010.

Funding improvements for parks and green spaces can have positive impacts on neighborhood health outcomes. Communities in neighborhoods afflicted by violence experience mental health issues and poor physical health because of barriers to participating in physical activity due to concerns around safety. One way to combat community-wide violence is cleaning and greening spaces. For example, [research](#) around green space to reduce violence demonstrates a causal relationship between neglected green spaces and crime.

A landmark city-wide randomly controlled trial of 'cleaning and greening' interventions in Philadelphia found that vacant lot greening reduced perceptions of crime overall by 37%, as well as safety concerns about going outside by 58%. These interventions transformed vacant lots to green spaces to reduce crime and improve perceptions of safety, increasing people's use of outside space by 76%. This research highlights that green spaces improve mental and physical health, not only by reducing violent crimes and improving perceptions of public safety, but also by creating areas for communities to gather and activate green spaces.

*During the pandemic, Pennsylvania state parks experienced a high number of visitors at the start of COVID-19, and that trend has continued. Pennsylvania state parks saw a **29 percent increase** in visitors in 2020 compared to March 2019.*

Centering Community

It's the vision of the [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan \(SCORP\)](#) that everyone in Pennsylvania lives within a 10-minute walk of a high quality park. Every resident deserves access to nature, and evidence suggests that strategic investments in park equity can be an integral and capacity-building pathway for communities to access a variety of other resources and benefits.

As is demonstrated in previous sections, parks and natural areas have clear, measurable benefits to our climate resilience and health. However, these benefits can be made even more impactful, scalable, and sustainable when communities have a strong voice over local parks planning, design, maintenance, and stewardship.

Simply providing access to parks does not necessarily deliver social benefits to communities. Yet when parks and green spaces are funded, designed, and programmed in deep collaboration with community members, they lay the foundation for community development. Parks can be platforms for minimizing polarization, reducing loneliness, and promoting greater civic engagement. Communities that are more socially cohesive, connected, and engaged have lower mortality rates, better recovery rates in the face of natural disasters, and higher levels of GDP, among many other social benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic elevated the role of parks for respite and relief during a period when indoor social gatherings were limited and collective stress was heightened. The pandemic led to new (i.e. first time users) and increased use of parks and natural spaces, especially by women, with the majority of survey respondents sharing that experiences of nature contributed to overall mental well-being ([Grima et al., 2020](#); [Morse et al., 2020](#)).



Funding for Community Cohesion

Since 2020, the U.S. has seen the emergence of potential solutions, in the form of unprecedented legislation and funding to support large-scale infrastructure initiatives. These include the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act, the 2021 American Rescue Plan, the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, and the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act. This national investment in nearly all corners of America's physical infrastructure sets the stage for cultivating place-based relationships, identity, and power, and harvesting the considerable social benefits that follow.

Parks can serve as natural containers for the kind of regular community interactions and activities that connect neighbors, combat loneliness, build belonging, and catalyze residents to cooperatively address problems. It is not just parks that have untapped potential but also the thousands of park advocates and professionals who work as part of the conservation, recreation, and park economies. For the resource-strapped park agency, a more active and organized community can help with community-powered programs, maintenance, and stewardship.

Community engagement can maximize the potential connections between parks and community identity. For example, a [study of parks](#) in Philadelphia found that engaging the community in parks planning and management had a major positive effect on psychological ownership, which leads to a greater sense of welcoming and belonging among residents of color, especially with fears of displacement.

This study assessed the outcomes of resident engagement with an urban park nonprofit located in a low-income community of color in Philadelphia. Researchers found that creating a strong presence in its neighborhood through community engagement can help establish a park as a community asset, and potentially set a strong basis with which the community could resist social displacement from the neighborhood. Particularly with fears around green gentrification, community engagement is critical to assessing resident perceptions and enabling the success of a park project.

Community engagement activities, like park clean-ups, can have positive effects on psychological ownership and create a greater sense of welcoming and belong for local residents.



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About Trust for Public Land

Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors. As a leader in equitable access to the outdoors, TPL works with communities to create parks and protect public land where they are needed most. This report was prepared in partnership between TPL's 10-Minute Walk Program, Conservation Finance, and Pennsylvania State Office.

10-Minute Walk

100 million people in the U.S. - including 28 million children - do not have access to a close-to-home park or green space - and parks are not distributed or created equitably.

The 10-Minute Walk® Program, a Trust for Public Land (TPL) award-winning national program, is engaging city leaders to close the park equity divide so that every resident has access to a quality park or greenspace within a 10-minute walk of home.

What We Do

Capacity building, peer learning & exchange

Through our 10-Minute Walk “Communities of Practice” and roundtables, we bring together mayors, municipal leaders, partners and communities to break down silos and advance learning through webinars, workshops, and discussion.

Test and accelerate action through pilots and direct assistance

We work with cities to provide tailored support to address a wide range of parks-related activities - from assessments and planning, to funding and policy, to measurement of benefits. Through “10-Minute Walk Park Equity Accelerator” projects, we aim to identify high-impact policies, practices, and insights that can be informative and inspirational to other communities.



10-Minute Walk policy recommendations

We conduct research and partner to identify promising policy solutions for expanding quality park access. We synthesize lessons learned into sound, impactful policy recommendations that can more effectively and equitably close the park equity divide.

Partnerships to scale impact

TPL's 10-Minute Walk Program works closely with allied organizations to create alignment around park equity goals across sectors and city departments. We also seek cross-sector partnerships to leverage the multi-benefits of parks as a vital element of sustainable community development.

To learn more about 10-Minute Walk, go to 10minutewalk.org.

Conservation Finance

The national leader in state and local funding for parks and conservation, Trust for Public Land's Conservation Finance program serves as a trusted advisor to state and local governments and community leaders on how to design, pass, and implement ballot and legislative measures to fund parks and conservation. Since 1996 we've helped pass 650 measures – 83 percent of those we've worked on – that generated \$93 billion for parks and conservation.

What We Do

Technical assistance

Trust for Public Land helps elected officials and community groups research and evaluate park and conservation finance options and design ballot and legislative measures that reflect public priorities.

- **Feasibility Research:** Analyzing public finance options and exploring their legal, fiscal, and political constraints.
- **Public Opinion Surveys:** Managing surveys by expert polling firms to gauge voter support for funding mechanisms, uses for funds, and messages.
- **Measure Design:** Recommending optimal funding method, amount, use for funds, ballot language, and election timing.
- **Program Design and Evaluation:** Providing models and recommendations for state and local government conservation programs.

Campaign services

Trust for Public Land and Trust for Public Land Action Fund, our 501(c)(4) lobbying affiliate, offer a comprehensive suite of campaign services on a case-by-case basis. These include campaign planning, management, and fundraising; selecting and directing pollsters and other consultants; writing and producing digital, direct-mail, television, and radio advertisements; overseeing public education and get-out-the-vote programs; and managing compliance with campaign finance and lobbying registration and reporting.



To learn more about our Conservation Finance service, go to tpl.org/resource/fund.

Federal Affairs

The Trust for Public Land's Federal Affairs team works in our nation's capital to provide resources and guidance about federal land conservation policy and funding to an array of interested parties, including Congress, the White House, federal agency staff, local and state land trust activists and government officials, and other conservation groups.

TPL's Federal Affairs program is our link to administration officials, Congress, federal agencies, and national policy organizations, helping to secure land conservation funding and authorizations and maintain partnerships. The Washington D.C. team also assists TPL's regional offices, as well as other local land trusts, community groups, and government offices.



What We Do

Long-Term Partnerships with Underfunded Communities

We work in long-term partnership with cities, federal officials, and historically underfunded communities to lift their visions and leadership and make tangible equity investments in their communities. Leveraging federal funding is not a new landscape for TPL. We've been working hand-in-hand with communities to assemble this "jigsaw puzzle" of funding—combining Federal, state, and local funding and private philanthropy—for decades.

Scaling TPL's Federal Grant Expertise to Support Communities

Our Federal Relations team works with TPL's local field staff to provide in-depth, hands-on support for community-based partners and city agencies to facilitate the entire federal grant cycle. This support includes initial research, community engagement, planning, predevelopment activities, grant applications, project implementation, and final reporting. Coaching local partners to successfully secure and invest federal funding—especially for community-based partners seeking federal funding for the first time—requires a thorough understanding of the entire process. We deploy unmatched expertise regarding a wide array of federal grant programs, decades of experience drafting winning grant proposals, capacity-building skills, and deep relationships within communities to help cities and community partners access funding and grow their capacities for long-term impact.

To learn more about our Conservation Finance service, go to tpl.org/resource/policy-legislation.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Pitas, Nick, Barrett, Austin, Mowen, Andrew, and Roth, Kevin. "Local Park and Recreation Agency Financing and Employment Trends – A National Perspective." 2017 NRPA Congress.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Trust for Public Land. "LandVote database." <http://www.landvote.org> Accessed February 2023. Measures in LandVote record only measures that include some funding for new land acquisitions.
- ^{iv} <http://www.heritageconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/opportunity-knocks.pdf>
- ^v 53 P.S. 12553, 53 P.S. 23104; First Class City Code, Article XVII, Section 3, Second Class City Code, Article XX, Section 3.
- ^{vi} 53 Pa. C.S. 2962.
- ^{vii} [Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development Taxation Manual Updated January 2022.](#)
- ^{viii} Excerpted from the Heritage Conservancy's <http://www.heritageconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/opportunity-knocks.pdf>
- ^{ix} 32 P.S. Section 5002 defines open space benefits as follows:
The benefits to the citizens of the Commonwealth and its local government units which result from the preservation or restriction of the use of selected predominantly undeveloped open spaces or areas, including but not limited to: (i) the protection and conservation of water resources and watersheds, by appropriate means, including but not limited to preserving the natural cover, preventing floods and soil erosion, protecting water quality and replenishing surface and ground water supplies; (ii) the protection and conservation of forests and land being used to produce timber crops; (iii) the protection and conservation of farmland; (iv) the protection of existing or planned park, recreation or conservation sites; (v) the protection and conservation of natural or scenic resources, including but not limited to soils, beaches, streams, flood plains, steep slopes or marshes; (vi) the protection of scenic areas for public visual enjoyment from public rights of way; (vii) the preservation of sites of historic, geologic or botanic interest; (viii) the promotion of sound, cohesive, and efficient land development by preserving open spaces between communities.
- ^x Earned income is defined as salaries, wages, commissions, bonuses, incentive payments, fees, tips and/or other compensation for services rendered, whether in cash or property, and whether paid directly to an individual or through an agent.
- ^{xi} Excerpted from the Heritage Conservancy's <http://www.heritageconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/opportunity-knocks.pdf>.
- ^{xii} <https://www.heritageconservancy.org/images/news/publications/pdf/pub-fin.pdf>.
- ^{xiii} Local Government Unit Debt Act Section 8022 (a)(2) <http://www.newpa.com/get-local-gov-support/technical-assistance/request-assistance/local-government-unit-debt-act/index.aspx>
- ^{xiv} Local Government Unit Debt Act Section 8022 (a)(2) http://www.pabondlawyer.org/media/downloads/lqud_act.pdf
- ^{xv} There are some provisions for the issuance of additional debt for certain purposes.
- ^{xvi} Local Government Unit Debt Act, sections 8041 through 8049 and Center for Local Government Services "Referendum Handbook"
- ^{xvii} Section 8043 Personal Conversation with Bernadette Barattini, Deputy Chief Counsel, PA Dept of Economic and Community Development 6/16/2008
- ^{xviii} 25 P.S. § 3010(b).
- ^{xix} Personal communication with the Deputy Chief Counsel, PA Department of Community & Economic Development, February 2018
- ^{xx} Section 8043 Personal Conversation with Bernadette Barattini, Deputy Chief Counsel, PA Dept. of Economic and Community Development
- ^{xxi} §8046 Local Government Unit Debt Act
- ^{xxii} 53 Pa. C.S. § 8047
- ^{xxiii} <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/li/uconsCheck.cfm?yr=2013&sessInd=0&act=115>
- ^{xxiv} Excerpted from, <https://conservationadvocate.org/2014/01/30/act-115-of-2013-improves-pas-open-space-law/>