



Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant Program Guidelines

2026-2027

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1.0 Mini-Grant Program Overview

2.0 Program Purpose

3.0 Eligibility

- 3.1 Eligible Applicants
- 3.2 Project Eligibility
- 3.3 Ineligible Projects

4.0 Funding, Match Requirements, and Grant Reimbursement

- 4.1 Funding
- 4.2 Match Requirements
- 4.3 Grant Reimbursement

5.0 Grant Application

- 5.1 Application Submission
- 5.2 Application Contents
- 5.3 Scoring Criteria
- 5.4 Award Decisions

6.0 Consultant Selection

7.0 Awarded Projects – Contractual Requirements

- 7.1 Contract Development
- 7.2 Grant Monitoring
- 7.3 Amendments to an Executed Grant Contract
- 7.4 Termination of Grant Contract
- 7.5 Review of Completed Project
- 7.6 Project Adoption and Acceptance
- 7.7 Grant Reimbursement

8.0 Implementation Support from Chester County Planning Commission Staff

Appendices

- A. Grant Application Form
- B. Municipal Project Scope Template
- C. Grant Reimbursement Form
- D. Nondiscrimination-Sexual Harassment Clause
- E. Consultant Request for Qualifications

Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant Program 2026-2027 Rolling Application Manual

1.0 Open Space Accelerator Overview

The Chester County Planning Commission's Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant program assists municipalities in achieving their open space goals by funding a planning process focused on implementation for priority initiatives. Aligned with the Preserve and Protect goals of Landscapes3, the program covers 50% of the costs for municipalities to assess key open space priorities and develop actionable plans to implement these projects. These plans activate priorities from local comprehensive plans, existing Open Space, Recreation, and Environmental Resource Plans, and other publicly vetted documents through a streamlined process and ongoing support.

How it Works:

The Open Space Accelerator matches a municipality with a consultant pre-qualified by Chester County to complete a set scope of work that is tailored to a municipality's context and priorities. The scope of work includes:

1. Establishment of a project advisory committee
2. A brief assessment of a municipality's existing planning documents, codes, and organizational capacity
3. An open space-centered community event led by the municipality
4. Selection of 1 or 2 priority initiatives
5. Development of an Action Plan for implementing these priorities
6. Plan acceptance by the governing body
7. Ongoing implementation guidance and support from CCPC for one year

The estimated cost to complete this scope of work is \$20,000. Numbers 3 and 7 above are not included in this cost (for more information, see Section 4 of this manual).

This manual provides the guidelines and procedures for successfully applying for, obtaining, and completing an Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant, which has a cash award value of 50% of the total project cost up to \$10,000. If the municipality fails to adhere to the provisions of this manual, the County reserves the right to deny an application, rescind a grant, or deny reimbursement.

2.0 Program Purpose

The Chester County Planning Commission developed this program to shorten the cycle between planning and implementation. The purpose of the Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant program is to support municipalities in advancing their open space priorities through a quick, cost-effective, and implementation-focused planning process. By assessing key open space features and creating an Action Plan for prioritized initiatives, the program enables communities to take immediate and concrete steps toward preserving and enhancing their natural, recreational, and agricultural resources. The planning process is designed to elevate the importance of open space in our local communities and ultimately will expedite the pace of preserving priority land throughout the county.

3.0 Eligibility

Meeting eligibility requirements is not a guarantee of grant funding under the Open Space Accelerator program. Receiving grant funding will depend on fund availability, the project's impact on implementing open space initiatives, the project's likelihood of success, and compliance with all program requirements.

3.1 Eligible Applicants

The Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant program is open to all Chester County municipalities that have endorsed or acknowledged Landscapes3. This program is only open for single municipal projects, not multi-municipal projects.

This program is most appropriate for municipalities that have previously adopted policies, goals and/or objectives related to open space, recreation, agriculture, or related open space topics. This planning process is designed to jumpstart the implementation of priority actions to achieve previously adopted goals rather than establish new policies and goals.

3.2 Project Eligibility

- A. The project must advance *Landscapes3* goals and objectives and implement one or more *Landscapes3* recommendations at the municipal level.
- B. The following list provides examples of eligible open space-related projects that could be explored and defined through the Open Space Accelerator process. **This list is for illustrative purposes only and is not exhaustive.** Projects not specifically listed will be considered for funding based on their consistency with and implementation of *Landscapes3*, and based on the consultant's expertise.
 - **Planning and Prioritization**
 - Develop an open space prioritization system.
 - Create a land preservation plan.
 - Study potential land acquisition for future parks or park expansion.
 - Develop an approach and evaluate feasibility for an open space referendum or funding program.
 - Identify areas with limited park access and opportunities for new parkland.
 - Inventory lands prone to flooding or forested areas for preservation to promote climate resiliency.
 - Feasibility Study/Conceptual Design for passive recreation and natural and cultural resource protection
 - **Connectivity and Greenways**
 - Conduct a connectivity analysis to identify gaps in sidewalks and trails.
 - Conduct a trail segment feasibility study
 - Establish greenways and trails through permanent open spaces or easements.
 - Create walking and biking networks providing access to open space from a key destination.
 - **Environmental Conservation and Green Infrastructure**
 - Develop strategies for conserving significant landscapes, such as woodlands, floodplains, and natural habitats.
 - Identify open space opportunities for green infrastructure to mitigate flooding and urban heat islands.
 - Assess urban heat island areas and recommend mitigating improvements.
 - Identify potential green infrastructure opportunities to improve water quality and manage stormwater.

- **Zoning and Regulations**
 - Prepare/Update a conservation subdivision ordinance or environmental protection regulations
 - Strengthen conservation and open space regulations in zoning and subdivision codes.
 - Implement zoning amendments for cluster zoning or transfer of development rights.
 - Support ag-friendly municipalities with zoning for farm uses or agritainment activities.
 - Create or update an Official Map to identify open space preservation priorities.

- **Stewardship and Management**
 - Prepare a stewardship action plan for municipal parks or open space properties addressing invasive species management, afforestation/reforestation with climate-adapted species, lawn-to-meadow conversions, or similar best management practices.
 - Support native vegetation plantings, including pollinator-friendly plants and meadow grasses.

- **Community Engagement and Education**
 - Plan and implement education or engagement campaigns focused on open space, natural resources, agriculture, or stewardship.
 - Enhance interpretive and wayfinding signage across trail networks, parks, and water trails.
 - Provide educational opportunities through programs or events.

- **Recreational and Cultural Resources**
 - Preserve sites and features with historic or cultural significance
 - Conceptual plans for park enhancements like trailheads, parking, signage, or recreational facilities.
 - Improve water access and plan for water trails.

- **Sustainability Assessments and Improvements**
 - Assess stormwater and flooding issues.
 - Evaluate tree canopy and forested riparian buffer coverage, including in urban areas.
 - Plan for infrastructure supporting climate adaptation and resilience, such as shade, cooling, and stormwater infiltration systems.

3.3 Ineligible Projects

Funding through this program is not intended for land acquisition, projects undertaken by municipal staff, equipment purchase or other capital expenses. The following list provides additional examples of projects that are **not** eligible:

- A. Plans, ordinances and studies that are inconsistent with the goals, objectives, recommendations, or map of *Landscapes3*;
- B. Recreation needs assessments and recreation studies;
- C. Preliminary and final park designs / engineering drawings;
- D. Engineering;
- E. Building feasibility studies/designs;
- F. Geographic Information System hardware or software purchases;
- G. Capital improvements;
- H. Land acquisitions;
- I. Projects commenced prior to an Open Space Accelerator contract; and
- J. Municipal staff time or salary reimbursement

4.0 Funding, Match Requirements, and Grant Reimbursement

4.1 Funding

- A. The Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant Program is funded through a grant awarded to Chester County from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). This funding is expected to be available through 2027. The Chester County Planning Commission reserves the right to determine how much of the total funding will be available each year.
- B. The defined scope of work for Open Space Accelerator projects shall be completed by a pre-qualified consultant selected by Chester County for a fee of approximately \$20,000. Municipalities awarded funding through the program will be awarded 50% of the project cost, up to \$10,000, whichever is less. The final project scope of work and cost will be agreed upon between the municipality and the consultant, and a detailed project budget will be provided within the project contract. If the project budget exceeds \$20,000 the municipality must agree to fund any costs beyond \$20,000, otherwise the consultant shall reduce the scope of work to accommodate the \$20,000 budget.
- C. The total project cost includes consultant fees and associated reimbursable expenses only: the follow-up support and guidance from the Chester County Planning Commission staff is provided as an in-kind service at no cost to the municipality. **Additionally, the cost of the required community event is not included in the project cost, and any associated costs must be funded by the municipality.**

4.2 Required Matching Funds

- A. The required local match shall be fifty (50) percent of the total eligible project cost. The total eligible project cost for reimbursement purposes under this grant shall not exceed \$20,000.
- B. Non-municipal funds are permitted to cover part of or all of the local match.
- C. Matching funds shall be secured at the time of application.
- D. Any costs associated with the required public event are borne at the municipality's expense and may not be included in the local match requirement. Municipalities are welcome to seek sponsorship to cover event costs.
- E. The municipal match requirement may not be met through in-kind municipal services.
- F. Should non-municipal funds be proposed as part of the local match, documentation of the financial commitment from the entity providing the funds shall be provided.

4.3 Grant Reimbursement

- A. The Open Space Accelerator mini-grant is a reimbursement grant. The municipality shall be responsible for the payment of project invoices during the course of project development and completion.
- B. Ordinance amendments and official maps developed under the provisions of the Municipalities Planning Code must be formally adopted by the municipality to receive reimbursement. Action Plans may either be formally adopted or accepted by the municipality to receive reimbursement.

- C. Reimbursement for the portion of the project funded by the Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant occurs after the project has been adopted or accepted, as applicable, and a reimbursement application with required documentation has been submitted. The reimbursement form is provided in **Appendix C**.

5.0 Grant Application

5.1 Application Submission

Municipalities shall comply with the following requirements when preparing an application:

- A. The municipality shall submit an application through the Chester County Planning Commission’s website: www.chescoplanning.org.
- B. Applications may be submitted at any time.
- C. Prospective applicants are strongly encouraged to discuss their project with the Open Space Accelerator Grant Administrator prior to applying.

5.2 Application Contents

The online application process consists of the following primary components:

- A. Municipal Contact Information
- B. Project Information
 - 1. Project Name
 - 2. Project Type
 - 3. Project Description
 - 4. Consistency with the PA Municipal Planning Code (MPC), if applicable
- C. Project Details
 - 1. Demonstrated Need and Impact
 - 2. Advancement of Community Priorities
 - 3. Consistency with Chester County Plans and Policies
 - 4. Administrative Capacity and Feasibility
- D. Community Engagement
- E. Funding
 - 1. Match source
- F. Project Consultant (Pre-Selected)
- G. Signature of Designated Official

5.3 Application Scoring Criteria

Applications will be evaluated based on the **scoring criteria** outlined below and as described in detail Section C (Project Details) in the Grant Application, which is provided at the County Planning Commission website at: www.chescoplanning.org. Each criterion will be assessed to determine the project’s alignment with program goals, potential impact, and feasibility.

- A. Demonstrated Need and Impact (30 Points)
- B. Advancement of Community Priorities (30 Points)

- C. Consistency with Chester County Plans and Policies (20 Points)
- D. Administrative Capacity and Feasibility (20 Points)
- E. Bonus Points (10 Points)
 - 1. Projects located in or containing “potentially disadvantaged” areas as defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) or designated as “Environmental Justice Areas” as defined by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC).

Applications shall be reviewed by a Selection Committee consisting of Chester County Planning Commission staff and a staff member from the PA DCNR. Funding recommendations shall be made by the Chester County Planning Commission, and contracts shall be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners for final approval.

Proposals that do not adequately address the criteria listed below may be denied a grant and/or asked to amend their application and reapply. Municipalities not selected for an award will be contacted by the Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant Administrator at the Chester County Planning Commission who will provide feedback as to how their grant application was scored and how a future application could be improved.

5.4 Award Decisions

Award decisions will be made on a rolling basis. Applications will be scored based on the scoring criteria provided in Section 5.3. Applicants will be notified of an open space accelerator grant award decision as soon as possible, and no more than 90 days after submitting their application.

6.0 Consultant Selection and Assignment

- A. One or more qualified professional consulting firm(s) will be retained by the County to complete projects awarded under the mini-grant program.
- B. The selected professional consulting firm(s) will comply with the DCNR Community Conservation Partnerships Program guidelines as set forth in the Consultant Qualifications for Planning Projects.
- C. The professional consulting firm(s) will be selected using a competitive process following the Competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) Procedures outlined in DCNR Competitive Bidding/Purchasing Policy document (#2300-011).
- D. The County will assign a qualified consulting firm after a grant is awarded based on consultant qualifications and availability. Municipal preferences will be considered but cannot be guaranteed.

7.0 Awarded Projects – Contractual Requirements

7.1 Contract Development

- A. Following the review of the Selection Committee, all applicants will be notified of the status of their application within 60 days of applying.
- B. Awarded applicants will be matched with a pre-selected consultant in accordance with Section 6.0.
- D. The Open Space Accelerator Mini-Grant Program has a predetermined scope of work that may be tailored and refined with the assigned consultant during contract development. The

consultant shall prepare a project budget that corresponds with the tailored scope of work. If the project budget exceeds \$20,000 the municipality must agree to fund any costs beyond \$20,000, otherwise the consultant shall reduce the scope of work to accommodate the \$20,000 budget. See **Appendix B Scope of Work Template**. The Grant Administrator shall have final approval of the refined scope of work.

- C. After a full scope of work and associated project budget is provided to the Grant Administrator and approved, a contract will be developed by the Grant Administrator and forwarded to the grant recipient and assigned consultant for signature.
- D. Following signature of the contracts by the municipality and their consultant, all copies shall be returned to the County Planning Commission for placement on the next available Board of County Commissioners' agenda for final approval.
- E. The Contract Term shall be for a period of 18 months unless otherwise approved in writing by the Grant Administrator. This 18-month period does not include the one-year period of technical assistance provided by CCPC staff following adoption/acceptance of the Action Plan(s).
- F. The Grant Administrator reserves the right to change the Contract Term (start and end dates of the project) if necessary, before the contract is executed by the Chester County Board of Commissioners. Changing the Contract Term may be done administratively and does not require approval from the municipality.
- G. Upon final execution of the contract, the Grant Administrator shall send an executed contract to the municipality.
- H. The County Planning Commission reserves the right to use and share the products prepared under the Grant Contract with other municipalities, planning agencies, and the public.

7.2 Grant Monitoring

- A. County Monitoring: The County Planning Commission shall assign a County Planning Commission staff member as a Grant Monitor. Grant monitors provide review and oversight to facilitate compliance with the grant contract, scope of work, and grant manual provisions and shall provide feedback to the municipality regarding any issues as they arise. The Grant Monitor will also connect the assigned consultant with other CCPC staff to assist with mapping, graphic production, or other support services as needed.

7.3 Amendments to an Executed Grant Contract

- A. Amendments to executed grant contracts may be permitted to accommodate time extensions or revisions to the scope of work or consultant. Amendments shall only be considered when the municipality has demonstrated good faith in completing the approved scope of work and the work to date has demonstrated consistency with the Grant Contract.
 - 1. Time Extension: The municipality may request an extension of time to the grant contract with no change to the scope of work as follows:
 - a. The municipality shall submit a letter to the Grant Administrator requesting the contract extension, detailing the reasons why the contract extension is needed, and detailing the revised schedule;
 - b. Requests for an extension shall be filed with the Planning Commission no less than sixty (60) days prior to the contract end date; and

- c. The time extension shall not exceed six (6) months.
 - d. If the funded project cannot be completed and adopted or accepted within the time frame described by the Grant Contract and approved extension, the contract shall be terminated, and the grant funds shall be forfeited.
 - e. The time extension shall not impact the County's ability to comply with the Grant Terms and Conditions of the PA DCNR Community Conservation Partnership Program.
2. Revision to Scope of Work: After the project is underway, the municipality may request a revision to the scope of work as follows.
- a. The municipality shall submit a letter to the Grant Administrator requesting the contract revision. Requests shall be filed with the Planning Commission no less than sixty (60) days prior to the contract end date.
 - b. The request shall provide the following:
 - i. A specific and detailed scope of work with any revisions from the original scope of work identified, including detail on the associated costs and an explanation of how the revisions relate to *Landscapes3*;
 - ii. An updated project schedule; and
 - B. A declaration that any new costs associated with the scope change will be covered by the municipality.
 - C. All parties shall sign the grant contract amendment.

7.4 Termination of Grant Contract

Upon written thirty (30) day notice, any party shall have the right to terminate the grant contract. The County shall not be responsible for any grant reimbursement in such an event.

7.5 Review of Completed Project

- A. **Final Accelerator Review.** Upon completion of the project but prior to adoption or acceptance, the completed product shall be submitted to the Grant Administrator, who will review the product and make the final determination of whether a project has fully met the requirements of the Grant Contract and scope of work. Upon completing the review, the Grant Administrator will issue a letter to the municipality stating the project's compliance/non-compliance with the scope and consistency/inconsistency with *Landscapes3*.
- B. **Projects Requiring Municipal Acceptance (Planning Studies/Implementation Plans).** Following submission of the Accelerator product(s) and a written request for review by the municipality to the County Planning Commission, the Grant Monitor and Grant Administrator shall complete a Final Accelerator Review. The County Planning Commission shall provide the Final Accelerator Review letter to the municipality within thirty (30) days of receipt of the study and request for review. If deficiencies are identified in the Final Accelerator Review, the municipality shall appropriately address identified deficiencies prior to project acceptance and request for reimbursement
- C. **Action Plan Projects Requiring Municipal Adoption under the MPC.** If an Action Plan includes a project type that requires Municipal Adoption under the Municipalities Planning

Code (MPC), the municipality must submit the project to the County Planning Commission with an Act 247 referral form. In this case, the Grant Monitor and Grant Administrator shall complete the simultaneous MPC review and Final Accelerator Review. The County Planning Commission shall provide the MPC Review/Final Accelerator Review letter to the municipality within the timeframe required by the applicable MPC section. If deficiencies are identified in the Final Accelerator Review, the project shall undergo a second MPC review prior to adoption. The municipality shall appropriately address identified deficiencies prior to the adoption and request for reimbursement.

7.6 Project Adoption and Acceptance

- A. Following issuance of a **Final Accelerator Review** letter that finds the project to be consistent with *Landscapes3* and to have fulfilled the contract requirements (including compliance with the MPC, if applicable), or a determination from the Grant Administrator that any deficiencies identified in the **Final Accelerator Review** have been appropriately addressed, the municipality can move to adoption or acceptance.
- B. Projects Requiring Municipal Adoption under the MPC: The municipality shall adopt the final ordinance by resolution.
- C. Projects Requiring Municipal Acceptance (Planning Studies/Implementation Plans): The municipality shall adopt or accept the study as having fulfilled the contract and scope of work by action of the governing body. Such action shall be by motion at a public meeting or by resolution.

7.7 Grant Reimbursement

- A. Timing of Reimbursement Requests: A municipality shall file for reimbursement within one hundred twenty (120) days of adoption or acceptance of the project or risk loss of reimbursement.
- B. Request for Reimbursement: The municipality shall provide the following information to the Grant Administrator prior to the reimbursement of funds:
 - 1. Completed Request for Reimbursement Form: Reimbursement forms may be obtained through the County Planning Commission website at: www.chescoplanning.org
 - 2. Proof of Adoption or Acceptance: A copy of the signed and certified municipal resolution adopting the project, or a letter signed by a member of the governing body or municipal manager or secretary with supporting documentation of the acceptance of the Open Space Action Plan by the governing body (such as a resolution or meeting minutes).
 - 2. Completed Open Space Action Plan: One (1) digital file of final plans formally accepted or adopted shall be forwarded to the Grant Administrator.
 - 4. Consultant Invoicing: A copy of all consultant invoices pertaining to the project. If the invoices contain items not related to the project, they shall not be reimbursed. In such cases, the project-related items eligible for reimbursement shall be specifically identified on the invoices.
 - 5. Municipal Payment: A copy of the municipal canceled check(s) in payment of eligible project expenses shall be provided. In lieu of canceled checks, bank statements, or other documentation which clearly indicates proof of payment related to the project may be submitted.
 - 6. Additional Information: The County reserves the right to request additional documentation prior to processing the municipal reimbursement request.

C. Grant Reimbursement

The following shall govern the reimbursement of funds:

1. Issuance of a Final Accelerator Review that finds the project to be consistent with *Landscapes3* and to have fulfilled the contract;
2. Only eligible costs incurred within the contract term shall be eligible for reimbursement;
3. The County shall review the final reimbursement request package, and upon verifying its completeness, send the qualifying funds to the municipality; and
4. Maximum reimbursement through the Accelerator mini-grant program shall be \$10,000 or 50% of the total project cost, whichever is less.

D. Noncompliance

When a municipality has not complied with the terms of the Grant Contract, scope of work, or the provisions of this manual, the County shall have the right to terminate the contract and deny grant reimbursement. Such determination shall be made in writing to the municipality.

8.0 Implementation Support from Chester County Planning Commission Staff

- A. Following adoption/acceptance of the project, the Chester County Planning Commission will execute a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Municipality for technical assistance from CCPC planning staff. The term of this MOU shall be one year and will include up to 20 hours of the assigned planner's time assisting the municipality in implementing the Action Plan(s) developed through the Open Space Accelerator mini-grant Program.
- B. The Chester County Planning Commission will assign one planner to provide guidance and up to 20 hours of implementation support to the municipality for a period of one year. This implementation support can include but is not limited to: attending meetings and/or site visits, providing mapping assistance, conducting research, and supporting grant application development for non-county grants. The CCPC Planner assigned is subject to staff availability and is not guaranteed to be the project Grant Monitor.

All projects, related costs, and funding must conform to all DCNR Grant Terms and Conditions of the [PA DCNR Community Conservation Partnership Program](#).