

OSWA/UGCG Grant Survey Results Summary

On April 1, 2021, DEEP invited public comment on the grant programs under the [Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition \(OSWA\)](#) and the [Urban Green and Community Garden \(UGCG\)](#). As demand for OSWA/UGCG grants continues to increase, DEEP is interested in understanding how to better address the increased competition to ensure grants are distributed in an equitable manner.

DEEP sought comments through a survey on four priority areas (Public Access, Environmental Justice and Equity, Climate Change and Grant Timeframes) as well as any other issues related to the grant applications.

The deadlines for the survey submissions closed on April 15, 2021. DEEP received a total of 40 responses from the following cross-section of stakeholders: 10 land trusts, 8 municipalities, 12 other non-profit and 10 individuals. In general, responders appreciated DEEP seeking public input to improve the program and thanked us for the opportunity. One survey stated, "OSWA is a wonderful program that has made possible much conservation. Land Trusts that would otherwise could not even consider buying a parcel with amazing conservation value – can swing it because of OSWA."

The survey questions were the following:

1. How can DEEP strengthen requirements for equitable, transparent public access for all OSWA and UGCG projects?
2. How can DEEP ensure OSWA and UGCG grants are distributed equitably across the state from an environmental justice perspective?
3. How can DEEP better address climate mitigation and adaptation in the OSWA and UGCG grant application and scoring?
4. How can DEEP enhance the UGCG program to include urban forestry improvement projects?
5. How can DEEP best provide accountability for open space projects to be accomplished with 100% of grant funds spent within 2 years?
6. Please provide any other recommendations and comments for 2021 OSWA and UGCG Grant Application and Scoring.

The following is a summary of survey results:

How can DEEP strengthen requirements for equitable, transparent public access for all OSWA and UGCG projects?

DEEP background introduction: Providing for public access and passive recreational use of open space properties is a fundamental, core component of the OSWA program, and continues to become more essential with increased demand for outdoor recreational use. Public access for current and past OSWA grants is an important

eligibility requirement for an applicant to obtain funding. DEEP is interested in strengthening requirements for equity and public transparency of public access. *Recommend review OSWA grant application section 1 eligibility; sections 6 & 7 public access including with disabilities; section 13 past OSWA project compliance; and scoring sheet.*

Survey summary:

- Understand that addressing public access to outdoor recreation areas requires an interdisciplinary, interagency, multi-solving approach – beyond and including OSWA and UGCG projects. See, GC3 Phase I report, TCI - P, Goal 3 in the SCORP 2017-2022: pg.57 - ensure all residents can locate and access all outdoor recreation areas and facilities; Strategy 3A, implement range of public outreach and communication tools; Strategy 3B, including for people with disabilities; Strategy 3C, remove impediments to visiting; Strategy 3D, identify, increase and promote the availability of public transportation to and from outdoor recreational facilities.
- Compliance monitoring and enforcement – DEEP and possibly volunteers conduct site visits and provide award recipients an opportunity to demonstrate accomplishments from OSWA/UGCG funding. Specifically, show how public access is accomplished. If an entity has not complied with public access requirements for past grants, then funding will be withheld.
- Re-examine the public access requirement – consider a waiver option (as it is for water companies) for protection on certain sensitive natural resources – wildlife, plants and sensitive soils that are impacted by human interaction (i.e. sites with rattlesnakes, steep slopes, wetlands) or priority areas for climate change resiliency/adaptation.
- Additional bond funding for the Recreation and Trails (RTP) program could provide much needed support to OSWA/UGCG project sponsors for trail and infrastructure development.
- Add requirement for directional signage on location and parking and emphasize need for visible public access signage.
- Add requirement for communication and public outreach plan and implementation for project – require that grantees provide information on the land and how to access it to local schools, civic organizations, the press and through social media including celebration of project completion.
- For public access plan's need for signage, include the need for trail maps that are available to the public on the organizations website, identification of proximity to neighborhood, transportation and relationships with local service organizations. Provide for more points to proposals with greater public access such as ADA compliant, urban greenway.
- Publish publicly and improve GIS map accessibility showing all OSWA/UGCG properties and parking and/or trailhead access points.
- Connect cities to green linear parks or rail trails.
- Fund number of projects that are on transportation routes.

- Make points provided for access for those with disabilities clearer – What type of disabilities?
- Need for additional DEEP staff for OSWA/UGCG to administer the grant program and prior grant projects. This is a valuable program with impacts on the health of individuals and natural resources.
- Improve website design for ease of access of information on grant program – add an index
- Support that current criteria for public access be retained as public benefits worthy of state investment. For example, “in Northwest CT’s towns provide highly regarded opportunities for public access to natural lands...for all manner of passive recreation. The ‘public’ using this access includes not only residents of all races and economic situations residing and working in our communities, but also visitors from across the state and nearby NY.”

How can DEEP ensure OSWA and UGCG grants are distributed equitably across the state from an environmental justice perspective?

DEEP background introduction: DEEP’s Environmental Equity Policy provides that “no segment of the population should, because of its racial or economic makeup....be denied equal access to environmental benefits.” This includes the preservation of open space. In addition, Executive Order 3, issued by Governor Lamont in September, 2019, on Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation (GC3) prioritizes and recognizes that issues of environmental justice and equity are central to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Accordingly, DEEP is reviewing the equitable administration of the OSWA and UGCG programs to preserve and improve open space that is available to all people in Connecticut – including those who live in underserved communities. *Recommend review OSWA grant application section 8 Community Impact; section 9 Local Support; Scoring Sheet; and UGCG grant application.*

- Prioritize environmental justice in OSWA program by seeking or giving preference to small plots in urban areas developed by or with community groups.
- Expand reach of program by implementing a public outreach campaign to promote programs; increase funding to incentivize more applications, including smaller projects in urban and heavily populated areas, expand number of applications funded each year (with associated increase in DEEP staff), commit to a consistent schedule of grant rounds and more predictability/transparency in levels of funding.
- Appreciate reducing number of required appraisals – this is helpful as the grants are expensive to apply for.
- Request that the state help with expense for surveys – especially for small land trusts/those in distressed communities. It would lift a barrier to them applying.
- Limit applications to one project per year. Organizations with the capacity to apply for multiple projects per year likely do not need the funding as much as those who can only do one application.

- Remove the local match requirement for all, or a subset of applicants. This may open preservation opportunities in communities that cannot commit the currently required match.
- Urge not to think of equitable distribution and environmental justice in only geographic terms but also to the extent of impact on the state as a whole and in terms of recreational accessibility to large tracts of land for passive recreation. For example, Northwest CT's large blocks of forest and open space can "serve as 'lungs' for the state as a whole." Data collected by the Housatonic Valley Association, shows that the Northwest CT trails, rivers and trails are a popular choice for daytrippers from Bridgeport, New Haven, Hartford, Danbury in addition to NYC borough's.
- While agree with GC3 Phase I near-term recommendations that the state should invest in climate mitigation and adaptation strategies that benefit underserved populations and communities disproportionately impacted or put at risk due to climate related threats, the OSWA program should continue to center around the protection of undeveloped land in furtherance of the state's land protection vision and in providing for resilience and mitigation, specifically the recommendations contained in the Working and Natural Lands section of the GC3 Report (pgs. 40-46)
- UGCG grants are easier to spread out throughout the state. The OSWA grant may not be because most of the highest quality lands needing protection are located in rural areas and usually priced at a lesser value. DEEP grant dollars go further – equitable to spend as many as many grant dollars and fund more projects.
- To break down barriers to equity in use of natural preserves, focus on transportation access, and sharing information through new media channels and in additional languages.
- Encourage entities seeking grants to establish or enhance their programs to include programs with a focus on "city to forest" or other programs to engage in natural resource education at properties acquired using OSWA/UGCG.
- Give priority points to distressed and disadvantaged communities.
- Eliminate requirement that projects in distressed or disadvantaged communities have approval from their town government – DEEP can assess this information as with other applications.
- Apply additional weight to proposals which are located within a certain number of miles from inner cities and targeted communities.
- Prioritize minimal acreage requirements (.25 acres) as urban communities may have limited access to open space.
- Open space should also be available for purchase of properties having existing structures that require environmental cleanup and demolition to create much-needed open space in urban settings - change eligibility requirements to allow land associated with environmental contamination and not be remediated prior to acquisition in a manner that is satisfactory to the Commissioner.

- Examine past locations of OSWA/UGCG grants to help to identify geographic areas that have been less served. Targeted program in next round could focus new grant resources on those areas.
- Recommend data analysis through a tool such as esri storymap to post results for the public: where, what, what of the projects and match to the demographics of the town receiving benefits – Sustainable CT may be helpful.
- Add requirement for applicant to explain how open space preservation project will help underserved communities. “For example, preserving land upstream from drinking water reservoir that serves Hartford could help protect Hartford’s drinking water.”
- Attend meetings of underserved communities and ask if they want or need assistance on grant application.
- DEEP leadership should come from a cross-section of communities and have a person experience with environmental justice issues.

How can DEEP better address climate mitigation and adaptation in the OSWA and UGCG grant application and scoring?

DEEP background introduction: [Executive Order No. 3](#) re-established and expanded the membership and responsibilities of the GC3 to include mitigation, adaptation and resilience in the face of climate change impacts. The GC3 issued a Phase I Near Term Actions report, Taking Action on Climate Change and Building a More Resilient Connecticut for All in January 2021 https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/climatechange/GC3/GC3_Phase1_Report_Jan2021.pdf. This Report provides a number of recommendations from several of the working groups, including the Working and Natural Lands and Equity and Environmental Justice Working Groups that we want to take into consideration as we assess the 2021 OSWA and UGCG grant applications. *Recommend review of OSWA grant application section 2 Conservation, Climate and Recreation value; Scoring Sheet; and UGCG grant application*

- Prioritize protection of drinking water supply (source water protection). This is included in DEEP’s Open Space Plan and the State Water Plan.
- Give higher rank to forested parcels. Core forest and “forever natively wild” /intact ecosystem proposals should get the highest scoring – they have highest ecological value and the strongest support of climate resilience. Add better explanation role of forests and tree in helping to combat climate change.
- DEEP open space program should adopt The Nature Conservancy’s (TNC) Resilient and Connected Network (RNC) data to plan and set priorities for land acquisition. For more than 10 years, a team of 150 scientists in TNC have developed a comprehensive map of resilient lands and significant climate corridors across North America. See link:

- Consider GC3 Phase I report including recommendations 30a and 35. See all sub-group reports from Working Lands as they relate to need to ramp up investment in land conservation.
- Need more guidance and training for applicants on how to address climate change impacts and developing mitigation approaches.
- Needs to carry more weight in ranking criteria.
- Increase use of easement as a tool.
- Reduce requirement of public access.
- Include other important features such a recharge and discharge areas, flood prone areas, prime farmland and cross valley landscape.
- Include carbon footprint assessment.
- Do not support and/or fund the placement of solar panels.
- Coordinate with Land and Water Resources, Fisheries and Forestry Divisions of DEEP to identify and prioritize areas for acquisition most valuable for protection of tree community, cold water stream habitat and tidal marsh migration as a result of sea level rise.
- Add scoring for 5% of OSWA lands that will be new tidal areas with the 20" sea level rise.
- Provide higher scores for larger tracks of land greater than 200 acres that expand large tracks of existing open space.
- Provide additional points if plan can support mitigation actions listed within the municipal or regional Hazard Mitigation Plans.
- DEEP scoring on climate from 2020 round sufficient – riparian corridors, wildlife linkages, core forest and inland migration of coastal wetlands are the most significant resources for conservation.
- Require as much undisturbed natural area as possible – when applicant shows public access, additional points should be provided for designating undisturbed natural lands on parcel.

How can DEEP enhance the UGCG program to include urban forestry improvement projects?

- Change policy to recognize urban forests as a component of community gardens.
- Make UGCG a distinct program with it own funding source.
- Increase outreach to urban communities about the grant and the benefits of urban forests. Partner with National Arbor Day Foundation and other organizations to encourage planting of trees and preservation and expansion of urban forestry sites.
- Establish and maintain relationships and prioritize goals with local tree wardens and inland wetland and conservation commissions. NH and other states have models for “community forests” which CT should explore.
- Involve local organizations that are already doing this work.
- Develop opportunities for cooperation with the electric utilities.

- Identify target areas for tree planting – where there are urban forest deserts. Provide extra points for communities taking advantage of Neighborhood Assistance Program and have companies donating funds to support conservation efforts. PROVIDE LINK
- This seems already addressed in current application.
- Consider picnic tables, sheds and pavilions to the list of features of UGCG application.
- Enhance UGCG to include acquisition of land and allowance for non-profit applicants (examine extent of need for statutory revision) - NGOs and COGs with demonstrated ability to implement projects and manage grant funds with letters of support/partnership from municipality. Requiring that applicants are municipalities creates challenges and barriers in EJ communities because community groups may not have access to get ideas in front of municipal boards and it can cause administrative challenges and project delays as partners have to go through the municipal process for the application and contract awards. Encourage non traditional applicants, such as churches, youth groups, scouts, food banks, homeless and refuge organizations.
- Amend UGCG statute to include broader definitions, wider project types and more extensive range of accepted purchases. Allow more flexibility on the land ownership for UGCG to include land trusts with an easement held by DEEP, municipality. Prioritize urban and impaired areas for remediation and neighborhood connections – encourage riverside and linear parks, bike paths, overpasses. Allow 5 years control instead of 10 for some kinds of UGCG projects.
- Allow UGCG to includes more local food production infrastructure such as greenhouses. Further examine and redefine the no “commercial activities” on fee simple OSWA and UGCG, since community gardens and farms often serve as incubator farms and food businesses – coordinate with DoAg recently enhanced programs on food security.
- Provide for purchase of properties having existing structures that require environmental cleanup and demolition to create urban forests to mitigate blight in urban areas. Change eligibility to allow land associated with environmental contamination and that will not be remediated prior to acquisition in a manner satisfactory to Commissioner.
- Re-examine UGCG eligibility – need to understand “where people of color live and communities near by.” These towns may not necessarily fall within the “distressed municipality” definition.
- See GC3 Phase I report – support urban forestry and community interest in tree planting, etc. Pg. 38, recommendation 29; pg. 41 recommendation 37.
- Ensure recently announced DEEP’s urban forest grant program complements the OSWA/UGCG programs.
- Recommend review of report *Green Cities: Good Health* that shows the numerous benefits that urban forests and parks provide.

- UGCG are easier to spread out through the state as opposed to OSWA grants (see comment above in Equity section)
- Urban gardens should be a combination of financial need, historic injustice and per capita enjoyment.
- Embrace the reliance of urban areas on rural areas. Prioritize drinking water supplies and land use cover. Then look at the other ecosystem services they provide: clean water, clean air, large carbon “sinks” for sequestration and storage, temperature modification/reducing heat islands, other health benefits. Forests are critically as important as prime farmland – they are not in competition. Both will provide food security, water security and address mitigation and adaptation to climate change. A certain amount should go to urban forests.

How can DEEP best provide accountability for open space projects to be accomplished with 100% of grant funds spent within 2 years?

DEEP background introduction: DEEP’s goal is to provide for consistent, transparent, equitable funding that allows the state to reach its open space goals in a timely manner. Our goal is to fund projects at levels high enough to adequately support project completion within the two-year timeframe while also providing applicants across the state with the opportunity to secure essential matching funds. For these reasons, DEEP will be focused upon on increased levels of accountability for timeliness and the eligibility requirements and criteria for project selection. *Recommend review of OSWA grant application (link) section 1 eligibility; section 3 property cost estimate- appraisals; section 13 past OSWA compliance; scoring sheet; OSWA Instructions Manual (link) and UGCG application (link).*

- Provide DEEP with more funding and staff to support the Land Acquisition and Land Management (LAM) office (see GC3 Phase I Report, pg. 49, recommendation 55). Speed up DEEP review of title certificate, survey and release of money. And/or funded agreements with non-profits, similar to DOag with farmland preservation program. Allow some of the match to be in-kind services.
- Predictability of schedule of grant rounds, transparency in process once awards are announced and consistency in expectation of DEEP funding levels for projects – this assists with planning for conservation organizations for project funding and accomplishing them in a timely manner. Unexpected efforts to find additional large sources of funding slows down project fulfillment.
- Reconsider surveying requirements since fulfillment of the requirement is challenging based upon low supply of surveyors – specially for smaller organizations, when the level of accountability requirements is commensurate with the level of investment.
- Check on compliance with grant requirements two years after grant is received (this could be carried out by volunteers). Start rescinding the funds if the project

is not completed in two years. And/or organizations that have not complied would not be eligible for further grants until the work is completed.

- Attend the meetings of the town commissions to understand the circumstances for the delay. For a small town with volunteers on all commissions, for example, two years can be a tight timeline - see what degree of progress has been achieved to possibly provide latitude.
- Two year timeframe is tight. "The latest round shocked many applicants as the percentage was so low. It is a recipe for failure as is a firm two year timeframe." Obtaining the matching federal funds within this timeframe is also challenging.
- Provide an opportunity for an extension of time if there is a reasonable expectation of closing within another year or if the delay is caused by the state or federal government. But after three years, the applicant should be required to withdraw or make funding available to other projects. In sum, two year grant with the possibility of one year extension under certain circumstances (ex. Encroachments to resolve, surveys with specific legal requirements?). Also, any organization beyond the two year limit, is not allowed to apply for more grants unless there is a reasonable reason for the delay.
- DEEP also needs to move federal grants that are used to match OSWA awards more quickly to the granting agency.
- For grant awardees that complete projects within two years, recognize as "good grant stewards" and perhaps allow extra points for future consideration (for one year only).
- Request quarterly update reports to demonstrate due diligence and progress.

Please provide any other recommendations and comments for 2021 OSWA and UGCG Grant Application and Scoring.

- Execute a more transparent process selection. Post decision making process on website – details on how projects selected.
- Need for predictable annual schedule with state and end date and whether there will be a funding cap or not.
- **Cap on funding? Different opinions**
 - support limit on amount of funding a project can get. It used to be \$500,000, then for a couple of years there was no limit and this year there was a \$400,000 cap. This helps with equitable access to funding.
 - DEEP should not have geographic cap on awards or limits by geography. Scoring criteria appropriately highlight the resources of conservation priority. Additional points should also be provided in less forested, more urban settings.
 - This year, high scoring projects suffered from the \$400,000 cap. "This cap was not communicated to applicants in advance...in the past, applicants could reasonably expect 30-50% of the appraisal as the award."
 - "...Put more money in program...awards from last year were verging on nonviable, regardless of how well a project scored." "If there is a funding

cap, especially as low as last year, the competitive process becomes meaningless. It is too much for applicants to bring forward projects when there is this level of uncertainty.”

- “DEEP must clearly tell applicants that they can expect up to a certain percentage OR up to a max funding award in the application... DEEP should not shy away from hard choices – the best project that meet OSWA criteria should be funded, and lower scoring projects should not.”
- DEEP needs a new conservation goal – new national goal of 30% by 2030. (30 x 30 is a path to 50% conserved – what scientists say is necessary for climate change and to preserve ecosystems.
- Look how dollars can be leverage with other land protection programs including USDA NRCS.