Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-092

Proposal Title: School/Community Regenerative Food Forest Model

Project Manager Information

Name: Nikolas Winter-Simat

Organization: Hand In Hand Christian Montessori

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Drawing on agro-ecology and permaculture, this research-driven initiative seeks to restore neglected school land into a biodiverse food forest, creating ongoing educational opportunities and developing collaboration with key community organizations.

ENRTF Funds Requested: $256,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2029

LCCMR Funding Category: Small Projects (G)

Secondary Category: Education and Outdoor Recreation (C)

Project Location

What is the best scale for describing where your work will take place?

Region(s): Metro

What is the best scale to describe the area impacted by your work?

Region(s): Metro

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project and In the Future

Narrative

Describe the opportunity or problem your proposal seeks to address. Include any relevant background information.

Four years ago, our school purchased an abandoned school building on 2.5 acres of land that contains a small forest, a field and a pond. While the building has been restored, the forest remains largely neglected and overrun with invasive plants. The opportunity to restore biodiversity and ecological balance to the forest and pond remains unfulfilled. A central problem addressed in this project is a perceived division between wild places and agricultural land. To bridge this gap, we seek to develop an education-focused regenerative food forest within our urban setting.

Beyond environmental revitalization, our project seeks to address a prevailing disconnection between young people and nature. Research reflects that when humans see themselves as inherently belonging within ecosystems, they are more likely to exhibit ecologically responsible attitudes and behaviors. Rather than remaining detached from the environment or anthropocentrically using the land, this project encourages students to experience meaningful interactions aimed at fostering connection, preservation and reciprocity with an ecosystem they care deeply about.

This project blends wild spaces with agricultural land while fostering greater connections between young people and nature. This well-documented working model could be replicated around the metro area, the state and the nation.

What is your proposed solution to the problem or opportunity discussed above? Introduce us to the work you are seeking funding to do. You will be asked to expand on this proposed solution in Activities & Milestones.

Essential to this project is the intentional engagement of youth, educators and community members as participants, collaborators and co-designers. Our school has a strong focus on engaging youth in learning through practical, integrated, relevant and meaningful work. We also have an established urban agriculture program in our high school. Our students have begun developing a rain garden, planted several fruit trees and started growing vegetables in two raised garden beds. We believe this groundwork provides an amazing springboard for the proposed project. The regenerative food forest project will use a research-driven approach providing a well-documented process that can be replicated by other schools or organizations seeking to transform urban semi-wild spaces into thriving biodiverse ecosystems that mutually benefit all - including soil systems, plant life, air and water quality, wildlife, aquatic life and human experience. We hope to demonstrate how neglected green spaces can be restored into thriving sanctuaries containing edible and medicinal plants. This grant will provide equipment, materials and the valuable leadership and expertise needed to establish this work, ensure its sustainability and foster its replication.

What are the specific project outcomes as they relate to the public purpose of protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the state's natural resources?

Replace invasive species (eg. buckthorn, burdock) with native edible and medicinal plants that contribute to a healthier, more diverse ecosystem.
- Measuring and monitoring improvements in soil and water quality.
- Protect, enhance and preserve an urban semi-wild space in an educational environment.
- Involve students, families, community members and other stakeholders in the process. Document changes in participants thoughts or feelings about conservation activities.
- Prioritize renewable/sustainable practices.
- Take a research-driven approach resulting in clear documentation that can be used to replicate the project in similar contexts.
- Promote the work through media, workshops and community

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Project foundations, staff positions and organizational partnerships

Activity Budget: $10,000

Activity Description:
Initially we will work with our consultants to further develop the underlying philosophies guiding this project as well as the objectives, timeline and work plan. We will use these documents to create job descriptions and advertise the positions proposed in this application. A part of advertising these positions will include reaching out to existing and potential partner organizations to establish connection and inform them of our project.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Write a detailed project overview with objectives and activities on a timeline	July 31, 2026
Create and post job descriptions with plans to hire by September 1.	August 31, 2026

Activity 2: Hire and establish Team, HR inductions, begin project development with Urban Agriculture students

Activity Budget: $50,000

Activity Description:
Starting in September we will hire staff and establish our team, divide roles and responsibilities according to individual skills and conduct all required HR paperwork and induction processes. Under direction of the Project Coordinator we will begin the project by working closely with the existing Urban Agriculture student group to plan and implement the following activities and projects:
Make preliminary connections with local partner organizations.
Consult with experts to determine best practice for reducing the spread of invasive species and developing alternative maintenance techniques.
Document existing species within the forest and pond environments, including plant life, wildlife and aquatic life.
Consult with local indigenous ethnobotanists regarding introduction of species that would enhance biodiversity and support vulnerable, declining, poorly understood or sensitive species.
Have soil health and pond water quality assessed.
Consult with partner organizations to establish sustainable practices that would prioritize renewable energy preference at every level of the project.
Work with design consultants developing a landscape concept and planting plan to begin planting trees and shrubs.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Hire and establish staff team. Work with Urban Ag Students.	September 30, 2026
Establish landscape and planting plans	January 31, 2027
Enact the first stage of landscaping, planting trees and shrubs and removing invasive plants/trees.	June 30, 2027

Activity 3: Establish CSA, tree planting, coordinate community volunteers and partner organizations

Activity Budget: $60,000

Activity Description:
Over the summer of 2027, staff will help a team of student interns to manage food production and launch the first CSA subscription of between 20-30 community members.

Staff will strengthen partnerships with local indigenous, BIPOC, underserved communities by increasing accessibility to the project with hands-on volunteer opportunities.

Staff will collaborate with partner organizations to continue:

enhancing greater biodiversity to terrestrial and aquatic environments;
reducing the spread of invasive plants according to alternative control techniques established in previous phase;
monitoring soil and water health, making necessary adjustments;
re-assessing and re-aligning with best practices regarding renewable energy initiatives at every level of the project;
assessing and documenting diversity of species and quality of habitat restoration.

Staff will also begin to establish access trails and outdoor meeting areas to improve accessibility, safety and engagement.

Staff will work with student interns to begin planning community workshops and activities that prioritize involvement with indigenous, BIPOC and underserved communities and center holistic efforts toward more generative futures including: ecosystem resilience in the face of climate adaptation; best practices for renewable energy reliance; restoration of biodiverse ecosystems; enhancing participants' experiential connection with nature.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Purchase tools and equipment needed.	May 31, 2027
Coordinate student led CSA project	August 31, 2027
Coordinate volunteer groups to remove invasive plants and establish paths	October 31, 2027

Activity 4: Expand the CSA project to engage more community members and provide funding for long-term sustainability

Activity Budget: $88,000

Activity Description:
Over the calendar year of 2028 we will increase access to the food forest and further develop the CSA project so that it can be fully managed by students and school staff. This will involve establishing ongoing paid student leadership positions, building community volunteer groups and running regular tours and workshops. The CSA project will expand to include winter boxes of preserved foods, dried herbs and other products from the food forest.
Paths and outdoor learning spaces will be further developed increasing community accessibility and encouraging culturally relevant, inclusive opportunities for underserved communities.
This year will also involve continued monitoring and maintenance of soil and water quality; renewed commitment to sustainable practices using renewable energy; planting and caring for trees and shrubs, continued restoration of biodiverse habitat for thriving wildlife and aquatic life; continued reduction of invasive species such as buckthorn and burdock if any remain and the establishment relevant policies and procedures.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Expand the CSA project to a manageable and sustainable size. Add winter boxes	November 30, 2028
Conduct first round of regular tours and workshops	November 30, 2028
Final round of removal and replacement of invasive species.	November 30, 2028
Complete paths and outdoor learning spaces	December 31, 2028

Activity 5: Project documentation, Transition ongoing responsibilities to school staff and student leadership team. Grant completion.

Activity Budget: $48,000

Activity Description:
From January to June 2029 staff employed through the grant will focus on transitioning to the sustainable continuation of the project and promotion of similar projects. This will include documenting best practices and working with school staff and students on ongoing maintenance and development activities. Staff will work to finalize the grant and produce media content that documents the project and provides resources for others to engage in similar projects. Regular tours will be established that involve student leaders and school staff. As this also marks the end of the research, the project coordinator will analyze data and write a research report on the findings, limitations and implications.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Finalize grant requirments	June 30, 2029
Hand off all ongoing responsibilities to school staff and student leaders.	June 30, 2029
Produce and publish media content documenting the project	June 30, 2029
Complete a research report including data, methods, findings, limitations and implications.	June 30, 2029

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Kim O'Brien	Rice and Larpenteur Alliance	The Rice and Larpenteur Alliance is our neighborhood organization. They are very active in the area and have been strong supporters of our previous urban agriculture projects. They will help us with neighborhood engagement, translation for publications and events and work that requires connections with city and county officials.	No
Linda Black Elk	NATIFS	Linda is and ethnobotanist and Indigenous food and plant medicine expert. As part of her role with NATIFS she will be a key consultant for out plant selection and community engagement regarding native plant uses.	Yes
Mark-Peter Lundquist	Urban Ventures Farm	Urban Ventures has been operating a small urban farm on the Greenway of Minneapolis for many years. The will play a key consultancy role in our planning and development stages.	No
Lilly Springs Farm	Lilly Springs Farm	Design and operations consultation.	Yes

Long-Term Implementation and Funding

Describe how the results will be implemented and how any ongoing effort will be funded. If not already addressed as part of the project, how will findings, results, and products developed be implemented after project completion? If additional work is needed, how will this work be funded?

Throughout the project we will continually integrate findings and feedback. At the end of the funding period we will require far less financial input and labor. The development of a community supported agriculture subscription, workshops and school leadership will contribute to the long-term financial and organizational sustainability of the project. All data and findings will be documented both academically and in more accessible ways including videos, photos and a short publication. We also plan to create a short documentary following the project.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Nikolas Winter-Simat

Job Title: Dean of Students and Urban Agriculture Lead Instructor

Provide description of the project manager's qualifications to manage the proposed project.

Nikolas has been involved in urban agriculture projects across the Twin Cities for the past 8 years. He developed the CREO Urban Agriculture school course in 2022 which is a student-let project that includes maple syrup production, seedling propagation, orchard planting/managing, produce preservation and farmers market management. Nikolas has been involved in the development of the Roof Depot Urban Farm Project in East Phillips neighborhood as well as the establishment of a South Minneapolis community garden network funded by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Nikolas has managed grants and large projects of this size and scope in the past. These include the establishment of an arts-focused special assistance school in Brisbane, Australia, coordinating an international Indigenous professional exchange program for Many Nations and operating a local non-profit neighborhood organization as board president. Nikolas holds a research Masters Degree in Philosophy and has diverse experiences as a researcher in the United States and in Australia. He continues his work in academia teaching Philosophy and Professional Ethics at a local university. He will oversee the research component of the project including research design, data collection, data analysis and reporting.

Organization: Hand In Hand Christian Montessori

Organization Description:

Hand In Hand Christian Montessori is a non-profit private school pursuing holistic education for infants through 12th

grade. Students in 7th - 12th grade are directly involved in our urban agriculture program but younger students are involved in workshops and many aspects of planting and caring for plants. Our school has partnerships with adolescent Montessori schools around the world. Agriculture is a large part of these programs as it provides so many opportunities for learning, skill development, economic independence and connection to land, water, food and animals. We are seeking to develop a replicable model of urban land management that is educational, ecologically integrated and financially sustainable.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	$ Amount
Personnel								
Project Coordinator		Coordinate and support other personnel, project management, budget oversight, research design, deployment and documentation, grant reporting			5%	0.75		$60,000
Food Forest Lead		Plan and execute project objectives, organize and facilitate community volunteer events, coordinate community outreach, initiate design consultations with experts, access specific expertise as needed, delegate to Forest Farm assistant			5%	0.75		$60,000
Food Forest Assistants and Youth Interns		Assist the Food Forest Lead in the implementation of the project objectives. Lead workshops. Facilitate volunteer work groups.			5%	0.75		$60,000
Financial Accounting		Provide financial tracking, payroll and invoicing			5%	0.18		$15,000
							Sub Total	**$195,000**
Contracts and Services								
Lilly Springs Farm	Service Contract	Lilly Springs Farm will provide regular consultation and workshops on permaculture design and forest management.				0.1		$10,000
Urban Ventures Farm	Service Contract	Urban Ventures Farm will support this project with urban agriculture expertise, technical training for staff and students and workshops for the larger community. They will also provide oversight for the long-term sustainability of the project.				0.1		$10,000
NATIFS	Service Contract	Consultation and workshops on Indigenous agricultural philosophy and practices. Design consultation. Project development assistance regarding the selection and introduction of native plants to replace invasive species.				0.1		$10,000
							Sub Total	**$30,000**
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								

	Equipment	Lawn Tractor with Trailer	This tractor will enable us to haul buckthorn brush, logs and other debris from the wooded areas. It will also aid with maple sap collection and moving materials such as compost, soil and leaves. The mower function will also help mulch excessive cover crop growth and invasive weeds.					$4,000
	Tools and Supplies	Farm hand tools (shovels, rakes, splitter, mulch forks, hand saws, pruners, chainsaw)	These tools will allow us to have larger numbers of students, community members and volunteers participate in workshops and work days.					$2,000
	Tools and Supplies	Fruit Trees, shrubs and native medicinal plants	These plants are a central part of creating a food forest, mitigating soil erosion and restoring soil health. Many of these plants will replace buckthorn after removal and fill spaces where the taller trees meet the open areas.					$4,000
	Equipment	Water and Soil testing kits and equipment	These will be used to regularly test the soil for contaminants and heavy metals. The water tests will be used to monitor the effectiveness of the added trees and shrubs along the rain garden.					$1,000
	Tools and Supplies	Wood chip mulch	Wood chips will be used to restore paths and create new trails to access the pond.					$2,000
	Tools and Supplies	Soil/Compost	A Soil compost mixture will be needed to amend the soil when we plant new trees, shrubs and other plant.					$2,000
							Sub Total	**$15,000**
Capital Expenditures								
		Tool Shed	Secure storage shed for all tools and equipment	X				$4,000
		Fencing	Fencing along the road is needed to allow students safe access to the Food Forest area.	X				$12,000
							Sub Total	**$16,000**

Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	**-**
Travel In Minnesota								
							Sub Total	**-**
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	**-**
Printing and Publication								
							Sub Total	**-**
Other Expenses								
							Sub Total	**-**
							Grand Total	**$256,000**

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
Capital Expenditures		Tool Shed	This shed is needed to keep the tools and equipment purchased for this project safe, clean and in good working order for the full life of each item. Without secure storage, tools and equipment risk theft, damage and a shorter lifespan. **Additional Explanation :** This storage shed will provide safe and secure storage for all equipment purchased for this project. There are no other uses for this storage shed.
Capital Expenditures		Fencing	This fencing will run along the street to provide safe access for students throughout the life of this project and for many years to come. This fencing will increase the amount of time and frequency that students will be able to access the food forest. **Additional Explanation :** This fencing will run along the street to provide safe access for students throughout the life of this project and for many years to come. It cannot be used for any other purpose but to provide safe boundaries.

Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
			State Sub Total	**-**
Non-State				
Cash	School contribution	$3000 per year is designated in our school budget for our urban agriculture projects. Over the 3 years this will total $9000. These funds can be used for any projects or needs to develop and build our urban agriculture program or develop our outdoor spaces.	Secured	$9,000
In-Kind	School staff hours	Our Urban Agriculture program staff and students will collaborate with project staff with in-kind support (time/labor). We estimate that these hours over three years will total 600 hours. At $25/hour that comes to $15000.	Secured	$15,000
Cash	Urban Agriculture grant from Whole Foods	This grant will be used to purchase materials and build raised garden beds and garden fencing	Secured	$3,000
			Non State Sub Total	**$27,000**
			Funds Total	**$27,000**

Total Project Cost: $283,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: 92eb1c0d-277.pdf

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Attached is a map of our school property. Highlighted areas show the Food Forest Project Area, the tree and shrub planting area and the path restorations and pond access trails. There is one raised bed garden area, but other edible and medicinal plants will be planted throughout....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
Good standing with Secretary of State	657f2c6e-7c3.pdf
Audit report	28b4d959-4ed.pdf
Form 990	f439d7e4-6cd.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
Authorization from Director	f1275539-a72.pdf
Authorization from Head of Campus	678a98ad-80d.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

Capital Project Questionnaire, Budget Supplements, Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
Head of Campus Support Letter	9a0e013e-c1c.pdf
Letter of Support - Rice and Larpenteur Alliance	501730c0-07a.pdf
Food Forest Cite Photos	f8af44a4-e61.pdf

Administrative Use

Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?

No

Do you understand that travel expenses are only approved if they follow the "Commissioner's Plan" promulgated by the Commissioner of Management of Budget or, for University of Minnesota projects, the University of Minnesota plan?

N/A

Does your project have potential for royalties, copyrights, patents, sale of products and assets, or revenue generation?

Yes

Do you understand and acknowledge IP and revenue-return and sharing requirements in 116P.10?

Yes

Do you wish to request reinvestment of any revenues into your project instead of returning revenue to the ENRTF? If so, describe here (1) the source and estimated amounts of any revenue and (2) how you propose to use those revenues:

Yes, Students may develop a small CSA program for the local community to enable to the project to be long-term financially sustainable. All funds from the CSA will be reinvested in the Food Forest Project.

Does your project include original, hypothesis-driven research?

Yes

Does the organization have a fiscal agent for this project?

No

Does your project include the pre-design, design, construction, or renovation of a building, trail, campground, or other fixed capital asset costing $10,000 or more or large-scale stream or wetland restoration?

No

Do you propose using an appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to conduct a project that provides children's services (as defined in Minnesota Statutes section 299C.61 Subd.7 as "the provision of care, treatment, education, training, instruction, or recreation to children")?

Yes

Do you certify that background checks are performed for background check crimes, as defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 299C.61, Subd. 2, on all employees, contractors, and volunteers who have or may have access to a child to whom children's services are provided by your organization?

Yes

Provide the name(s) and organization(s) of additional individuals assisting in the completion of this proposal:

Nikolas Winter-Simat

Do you understand that a named service contract does not constitute a funder-designated subrecipient or approval of a sole-source contract? In other words, a service contract entity is only approved if it has been selected according to the contracting rules identified in state law and policy for organizations that receive ENRTF funds through direct appropriations, or in the DNR's reimbursement manual for non-state organizations. These rules may include competitive bidding and prevailing wage requirements

Yes, I understand