



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2026 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2026-183

Proposal Title: Early Childhood Learning Center Expansion

Project Manager Information

Name: Shawna Weaver

Organization: Lake Superior Authority

Office Telephone: (218) 740-2013

Email: sweaver@glaquarium.org

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: We will expand our learning center by relocating our early childhood program to a space specifically designed for experiential learning and nature play with direct access to our outdoor playscape.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$176,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2028

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): NE

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

Region(s): NE

When will the work impact occur?

In the Future

Narrative

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

Our Discovery Center (our large classroom that can be divided into three spaces) serves thousands of guests every year. We host our daily early childhood learners, k-12 field trips, and community meetings in the Discovery Center. One of the three divided spaces serves as our early childhood learning room. However, because we often need the whole space for larger groups, our early childhood space must regularly be transformed to serve k-12 students and adults. Transforming the space is a disruption for our educators and requires materials to be broken down and stored. We cannot house our education animals in the space because of the wide variety of functions occurring in the room. Furthermore, the Discovery Center is on our second level, so our early childhood students must move through the building to go outside for nature play in our outdoor classroom. There is not a bathroom connected to the current space, so children must use restrooms shared with the general public. As more families struggle to find adequate childcare, our current space limits our ability to serve more families or cultivate an innovative space specifically for early learners.

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.

Building an Early Childhood Learning Center in its own dedicated space enables us to design it to meet the specific needs of early learners, and reduces congestion in our upstairs Discovery Center. We have an underutilized meeting room on the main level of the Aquarium. Repurposing the meeting room would enable us to create the Early Childhood Learning Center with an exterior door, education animal habitats, a private bathroom, a height-appropriate/ADA sink and counter, and more permanent classroom equipment and fixtures. The exterior door would be significantly more convenient for families and staff, and for students to easily access the outdoor classroom during programming. We could offer more early childhood learning opportunities because we would have more flexibility in our room schedule. We could also serve more guests in the Discovery Center, as we would have all three potential spaces always available for k-12 and community programming. Our plan includes redesigning the downstairs meeting room and completing the remodel, shifting the early childhood programming to the new space, and recommissioning the current early childhood space in the Discovery Center for other programming.

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?

This project supports our mission to engage and inspire, encouraging stewardship of wildlife and water. Our cradle-to-cradle approach to community education strengthens our citizens' understanding and motivation for conservation, protection, and preservation. By offering more early childhood learning opportunities we broaden our reach for more lifelong learners, especially as the new space will incorporate enhanced and permanent age-appropriate science education. By expanding our available space for community events and k-12 learning, we can expand programs and increase our capacity to teach about and build out exhibit materials about natural resources and resource protection, conservation, and preservation.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Finalize Plan and Secure Contract Work.

Activity Budget: \$11,000

Activity Description:

Finalize work plan and design, advertise for construction contract bid, and select contractor to secure permits and work plan.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Finalize approved design and work plans.	August 31, 2026
Advertise and select construction contractor bid.	September 30, 2026
Work with contractor to secure required permits.	December 31, 2026

Activity 2: Demolition of Current Space and Reconstruction of Exterior Wall

Activity Budget: \$50,000

Activity Description:

Demolish current interior space, and exterior wall that currently does not have a door or lower windows. Leave windows that are currently toward ceiling for continued light into space. Install exterior door and new larger window with blinds. Install new concrete stoop. Reconstruction will be completed by Johnson Wilson Constructors, who have already completed the bidding process for this project. Door and window will allow for visual and physical access to outside, which will provide direct access for family drop-off and pick-up and direct access to the playscape and outdoor classroom. Larger window will provide lighting for seed starting and observation of the outdoors for lessons. The remodel is in response to staff and family survey feedback regarding a need for direct access to outside. Continued feedback tracking will determine the perceived impact of these improvements and potential for further improvements that can be made for early childhood families.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Demolition of exterior wall	June 30, 2027
Installation of door and window	July 31, 2027
Installation of exterior concrete stoop.	August 31, 2027

Activity 3: Remodel Interior Room for Early Childhood Learning Center

Activity Budget: \$65,000

Activity Description:

Install counters and sinks at two height levels. Two height levels will be ADA compliant and meet early childhood education standards. This will enable young children to have easier/safer access to sink and countertop. Install education animal habitat infrastructure (for lighting and electric, and storage). This will provide permanent space for education animals for which adequate space and electricity is required for lighting, heating, and ventilation components. Install vertical cabinetry and storage for adequate materials storage that can be easily accessed and easily secured. Install flooring that is easily cleaned. Procure and place furnishings and equipment.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Electric outlets updated for animal habitats.	September 30, 2027
Cabinetry, countertops, and plumbing updated throughout room.	November 30, 2027
Flooring installed.	January 31, 2028
Furnishings and equipment placed.	April 30, 2028

Activity 4: Adjacent Bathroom is Installed**Activity Budget:** \$50,000**Activity Description:**

New bathroom adjacent to classroom will be walled in so it is easily accessed by the Early Childhood Learning Center. A new door on the interior wall will be cut, and new plumbing line for a toilet and sink will be completed. The bathroom will be ADA compliant and accessible directly from the classroom to improve convenience and further increase safety for children by reducing interactions with general public.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Construct walls and door for adjacent bathroom.	February 28, 2028
Install toilet, sink, cabinetry for bathroom.	March 31, 2028

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?

Once early childhood education is implemented, it is self-sustaining through the memberships and program fees it garners. As we began and expanded our early childhood education programming over the past decade, we have seen an increase in memberships and program fees that exceed the cost of our program. Additional work that will happen concurrently to compliment the Early Childhood Learning Center includes updates to our outdoor playscape and outdoor classroom, for which funding is secured and pending. Beyond these major updates, maintenance will be covered by the excess in funds raised and as needed through our memberships.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Shawna Weaver

Job Title: Director of Learning and Engagement

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

Dr. Weaver has twenty years of experience in education and program development. Her background includes project management to build and design interior and exterior spaces for early childhood education and environmental education. She has additional experience in capital campaigns and program design to support construction and remodeling projects. Her PhD is in Sustainability Education, giving her a unique and valuable perspective for this project. She has successfully completed remodeling and build-out projects for education centers larger than this, including outdoor classroom plans at Marshall School, an indoor/outdoor education center at Animal Allies Humane Society, and outdoor public learning features at the Walter Munk Foundation for the Oceans in San Diego, CA. She has served as a consultant for several organizations as they worked through similar projects.

Organization: Lake Superior Authority

Organization Description:

Lake Superior Authority dba Great Lakes Aquarium was established in 1998 as an educational showcase of the economic, recreational, biological and aesthetic importance of freshwater resources – with a particular focus on Lake Superior. The Aquarium exists to provide opportunities for community members and visitors to the region to engage with water and wildlife. The audience it serves ranges in age from young children to older adults who identify as members and non-members, staff and volunteers. Groups of people visit the Aquarium as friends, family, schools, professional organizations, clubs and for special events.

Great Lakes Aquarium is a community gathering space that supports a positive personal attachment to the Lakes Superior region, through hands-on discovery, engagement and programming with live animals, and the presentation of information and ideas related to conservation actions. In addition, the Aquarium provides a unique setting to strengthen relationships through shared memory making, enhance social and inquiry skills, and expand world views.

Our mission is to engage and inspire, encouraging stewardship of wildlife and water.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
							Sub Total	-
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Service Contract	The construction company will do demolition and reconstruction. Included in the contract will be all materials and equipment needed, including doors, window, flooring, electric work, plumbing, toilet, sinks, and cabinetry.				4,052		\$176,000
							Sub Total	\$176,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
							Sub Total	-
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
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	\$176,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
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Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	Amount
State				
			State Sub Total	-
Non-State				
In-Kind	Staff salary and benefits	Project planning (predesign, design) and management.	Secured	\$40,000
Cash	Program fees	Furnishings, materials, equipment for classroom	Secured	\$10,000
Cash	Foundation grants	Supplement funding for construction contract to remodel classroom space.	Pending	\$25,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$75,000
			Funds Total	\$75,000

Total Project Cost: \$251,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [c4ba2de0-14f.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Blue circle on exterior map of the Aquarium indicating where the new early childhood learning center entrance will be. This shows its proximity to our outdoor playscape and classroom, adjacent to the new space....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
2023 990	4ef3903e-d6e.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
Board Resolution ECLC Reconstruction Project	67ad608d-f28.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Capital Construction Project Questionnaire	34d4cea7-acb.pdf
Photo of current early childhood learning space	1f3e92be-278.jpe
Photo of room to be remodeled	eb1d6a76-80e.jpe

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?

No

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

N/A

Do you wish to request reinvestment of any revenues into your project instead of returning revenue to the ENRTF?

N/A

Does your project include original, hypothesis-driven research?

No

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?

Yes

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")?

No

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

Jay Walker, Julie Marano

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

