



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2027 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2027-213

Proposal Title: Environmental Learning Center Program Enhancements: Ritter Farm Park

Project Manager Information

Name: Joe Masiarchin

Organization: City of Lakeville

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Email: jmasiarchin@lakevillemn.gov

Project Basic Information

Project Summary: This project expands accessible, year-round nature programming for all ages, strengthening environmental literacy, stewardship, and well-being through dedicated staff and enhanced outdoor learning spaces connected to Lakeville's Environmental Learning Center.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$723,000

Proposed Project Completion: June 30, 2030

LCCMR Funding 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.

As one of the fastest-growing communities in the state, Lakeville has added more than 10,000 residents since 2018 and is projected to exceed 90,000 by 2050. As development increases, and the community transitions from rural to urban, access to meaningful outdoor experiences becomes more limited—particularly for youth and families without nearby natural areas. Expanding environmental education is both timely and necessary.

Ritter Farm Park, a 340-acre nature preserve of prairie, oak savanna, woodland, trails, and aquatic eco-systems connected to Lake Marion, offers an exceptional setting for immersive learning. In 2022, the City invested \$1.5 million to transform a historic log cabin into the new Environmental Learning Center (ELC), strengthening its role as a year-round hub for hands-on nature education programs.

Over the past decade, extensive prairie and woodland restoration at Ritter have revitalized native Minnesota ecosystems, enhancing habitat, biodiversity, and educational value. The forthcoming Lake Marion Greenway will connect the park to more than 20 miles of paved, accessible trails, expanding community reach and connectivity. While ELC programming blends indoor and outdoor learning, limited staffing and the absence of an outdoor classroom restrict program growth and consistent engagement.

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.

An effective solution is to expand and deepen Lakeville’s long-standing environmental education programming at Ritter Farm Park and the ELC. Building on decades of nature-based learning, this project will increase program capacity, broaden community reach, and enhance participant experiences through dedicated staffing and improved outdoor spaces.

The year-round ELC building serves as the central hub for environmental education, providing an indoor classroom and environmental equipment that allows students to investigate ecosystems, analyze environmental conditions, and engage in real-world scientific inquiry. This project will extend that learning outdoors through the development of a permanent, accessible outdoor classroom with natural seating and shade structures. Located adjacent to native plant gardens, pollinator habitat, and rainwater collection features, the space will create a seamless connection between indoor instruction and hands-on field experiences.

Grant funding will support a full-time Nature Program Coordinator and trained environmental educators to strengthen curriculum development, lead high-quality programs, coordinate volunteers, and expand partnerships with schools and community organizations. Expanded offerings will increase access to guided hikes, wildlife observation, education of the City’s on-going habitat restoration projects, and seasonal workshops—deepening ecological literacy and stewardship in our rapidly growing community.

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?

Through expanded programming in Lakeville, this project strengthens public understanding of and commitment to protecting Minnesota’s natural resources. Guided experiences at Ritter Farm Park, the Environmental Learning Center, and along the Lake Marion Greenway Trail provide hands-on engagement with prairie, woodland, and aquatic restoration. Participants gain firsthand knowledge of habitat conservation, native species protection, and sustainable land management practices. By fostering ecological literacy, stewardship behaviors, and volunteerism, the project enhances long-term preservation efforts and builds a community culture that actively supports conservation and responsible resource management.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Enhancing Nature Programming Through Strategic Staffing and Environmental Education Tools and Field Equipment

Activity Budget: \$523,000

Activity Description:

If this project is funded, we intend to hire one full-time Program Coordinator and two seasonal Educational Instructors to enhance our nature programming. These staff members will bring specialized knowledge in ecology, wildlife biology, botany, and environmental science, transforming ordinary walks into immersive learning experiences. By incorporating signs of wildlife, seasonal changes, and the relationship between Ritter's diverse ecological system, they will create meaningful moments that deepen participants' connection to nature. Their expertise will elevate programming from basic outdoor activities to meaningful educational experiences grounded in science.

With additional staff capacity, we will offer diversified programming such as guided hikes, citizen science initiatives, wildlife monitoring workshops, summer camps, and community lectures. Expanded offerings will attract more diverse audiences and help reach underserved populations in our community. Grant funding will also support environmental education tools and field equipment needed for effective programming, including materials for wildlife observation, habitat monitoring, and hands-on learning activities.

This project represents an investment in educational excellence, community engagement, and conservation outcomes aligned with our board-approved 2025 Strategic Plan. By enhancing the depth, quality, and reach of our programming, these staff members will strengthen our community's long-term connection to Minnesota's natural environment.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Advertise for full-time Program Coordinator	July 31, 2027
On-board full-time Program Coordinator	August 31, 2027
Program Coordinator plans on-going, enhanced programming	September 30, 2027
Begin acquisition of tools and equipment	November 30, 2027
Advertise for two seasonal Educational Instructors	January 31, 2028
On-board Educational Instructors	March 31, 2028
Instruct spring/summer activities	August 31, 2028
Review year one programming as planning continues for future years	September 30, 2028

Activity 2: Connecting the Community to Nature Through Outdoor Education: Classroom, Interpretive Signage and Natural Play Area

Activity Budget: \$200,000

Activity Description:

Installing an outdoor classroom and nature play area will create an accessible space where environmental education, exploration, and community engagement can thrive. This dedicated outdoor learning environment will allow educators to conduct programs directly within the natural landscape, helping participants develop a deeper understanding of local ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and seasonal changes. Schools, families, and community groups will benefit from a flexible space designed for field trips, workshops, guided programs, and hands-on environmental learning experiences.

The nature play area will complement the classroom by providing opportunities for unstructured, nature-based play that encourages curiosity, creativity, and physical activity. Using natural themed elements the space will invite children,

families and visitors of all ages to interact with the environment while building confidence and comfort in outdoor settings. Research shows that nature play supports cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and social collaboration.

Together, these spaces will expand opportunities for year-round programming and strengthen connections between our programs and the natural environment. The project will increase access to outdoor learning opportunities for local schools and underserved community members while fostering environmental stewardship. By investing in outdoor education, adjacent to Lakeville's ELC this project will help cultivate lifelong appreciation, understanding, and care for Minnesota's natural resources.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Feasibility and Analysis	January 31, 2027
Design	March 31, 2027
Consultation with SHPO	April 30, 2027
Community Engagement and Survey	July 31, 2027
Pre-Construction and Bidding	April 30, 2028
Construction	May 31, 2028
Incorporate Use of new Outdoor Amenities into Expanded Program Offerings	November 30, 2028

Dissemination

Describe your plans for dissemination, presentation, documentation, or sharing of data, results, samples, physical collections, and other products and how they will follow ENRTF Acknowledgement Requirements and Guidelines.

Our project will employ a multi-faceted approach to ensure that results, data, and outcomes are widely accessible, useful, and understandable. Key strategies include:

1. Engagement

We will actively involve stakeholders, including county partners, natural resource managers, and environmental organizations in Minnesota, throughout the project. Regular workshops, focus groups, and advisory meetings will provide opportunities for these entities to give input, understand progress, and apply findings.

2. Project Updates

All key milestones of the project will be shared with the Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources Committee and Lakeville City Council. All information will be made available through publicly accessible platforms, such as the department website, social media and the seasonal Recreation Brochure. Summaries and visualizations will be created in plain language to ensure accessibility.

3. Education and Public Outreach

We will develop educational materials, including brochures, infographics, and promotional/educational videos, to communicate project updates to the public. Presentations at local schools, community facilities, and public events will promote awareness of LCCMR funded programs and encourage behaviors that protect and enhance the environment.

4. Acknowledgment of ENRTF Support

All products, presentations, and outreach materials will clearly acknowledge funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, highlighting how public resources contribute to advancing knowledge and stewardship of Minnesota's environment.

Through this integrated dissemination strategy, the project ensures that research benefits Lakeville and neighboring communities, informs resource management, preserves collections for future use, and fosters environmental stewardship.

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?

Project results will be implemented through expanded year-round programming at Ritter Farm Park and the Environmental Learning Center, integrating stewardship education, volunteer restoration, and community partnerships into standard operations. This work directly advances the City's 2025 Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan—formally reviewed and approved by the City Council—which prioritizes expanded environmental programming at the ELC. Three years of grant funding will build staffing capacity and revenue strategies to move toward long-term sustainability. The City of Lakeville will continue investing in facilities and habitat restoration to sustain programming beyond the grant term.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: Joe Masiarchin

Job Title: Environmental Learning Center Program Enhancements: Ritter Farm Park

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

The Project Manager for the Environmental Learning Center Program Enhancements at Ritter Farm Park is Joe Masiarchin, Parks and Recreation Director for the City of Lakeville. Joe has worked in the Parks and Recreation field for over 26 years, as a Recreation Supervisor, Manager and Parks and Recreation Director. He has overseen a multitude of projects during his career, including the current construction of the new Lake Marion Greenway Trail connecting downtown Lakeville to the Environmental Learning Center in Ritter Farm Park. He was instrumental in the development of the Park and Recreation Departments 2025 Strategic Plan which included program and administrative staff, board members and community representatives in the planning process. As one of the priorities, the plan identified the need for expanded programming tied to the ELC.

Organization: City of Lakeville

Organization Description:

The City of Lakeville combines a suburban lifestyle with convenient access to major employment, cultural, and transportation centers in the region. According to the 2020 Census, Lakeville had a population of 69,490, making it one of the largest cities in Minnesota and one of the fastest-growing communities in the metro area. Since then, the city has continued to grow, with its current population now exceeding 80,000 residents.

Lakeville is known for its strong sense of community, quality schools, and abundant parks and recreation opportunities. The city maintains 70 parks, 150 miles of trails, and numerous lakes, and natural areas that support outdoor activities year-round. Residents enjoy a variety of recreational amenities, community events, and local businesses that contribute to the city's welcoming atmosphere. With continued population growth and a diverse local economy, Lakeville offers a balanced mix of small-town charm and modern suburban development.

Community life is further enriched through programs offered by the Lakeville Parks and Recreation Department. Nature and environmental education programs take place at Ritter Farm Park. Residents can also participate in senior and arts programming at the Lakeville Heritage Center and the Lakeville Area Arts Center, along with public events held throughout the year.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Program Coordinator		This position would strengthen curriculum development, lead high-quality programs, coordinate volunteers, and expand partnerships and programming			40%	3		\$397,000
Educational Instructors		These positions would assist the Program Coordinator with class instruction, course development and program oversight			17%	1.5		\$76,000
							Sub Total	\$473,000
Contracts and Services								
TBD	Subaward	NATURE PLAY AREA: A nature play area is designed to help children explore and learn through direct interaction with natural elements instead of traditional plastic playground equipment. The main purposes are to encourage imaginative and open ended play, support physical development, foster emotional well being and build environmental awareness.				0		\$85,000
TBD	Subaward	OUTDOOR CLASSROOM: The contractor will complete the installation of an accessible outdoor classroom to support programming associated with the ELC. The classroom will enhance direct access to hands-on, experiential outdoor learning opportunities, creating an inclusive environment that expands educational engagement and strengthens connections between students and the natural environment.				0		\$65,000
Vacker Signs	Service Contract	EDUCATIONAL SIGNAGE: New, interpretive signage throughout Ritter Farm Park will educate visitors about the surrounding habitats, native species, ecological systems, and ongoing land management initiatives. These educational signs will enhance visitor understanding, foster environmental stewardship, and provide meaningful context to the natural features and conservation efforts within the park.				0		\$50,000

							Sub Total	\$200,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Tools and Supplies	Instructional aids such as sensory educational materials, year round exploration tools, nature journals, binoculars, aquatic testing kits and more	Environmental equipment and supplies are essential to the success of this program. This would enhance engagement, deepen environmental understanding, and ensure meaningful instruction.					\$50,000
							Sub Total	\$50,000
Capital Equipment								
							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	\$723,000

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				
Cash	City Budget	Engineering and Design Work	Secured	\$20,000
Cash	City Budget	Nature Play Equipment	Secured	\$115,000
Cash	Donations	Outdoor Classroom and Shade Structure	Secured	\$26,000
Cash	City Budget	Outdoor Classroom and Shade Structure	Secured	\$150,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$311,000
			Funds Total	\$311,000

Total Project Cost: \$1,034,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [4704934d-2ea.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Map showing the location of Lakeville's Environmental Learning Center and proposed outdoor classroom and other improvements....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
Current Board Approved Financial Statement(Q3)	e7551c56-3ec.pdf
MN Legal Compliance Letter	5161a59f-1a8.pdf
Internal Control Letter	5bfbddae-7bf.pdf
Governance Communications Letter	6544aea7-24d.pdf
EAS	40cf2425-1b4.pdf
ACFR	ae73a379-5e2.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
City of Lakeville Resolution Approving Application	be412745-2db.pdf

Supplemental Attachments

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

Title	File
Budget Addendum	06786a94-694.pdf
Capital Construction Project Questionnaire	ee24aa9f-19e.pdf
Letter of Support - Environmental Services	04746f4c-df4.pdf
Letter of Support - Dakota County	a2be5466-005.pdf
Letter of Support - Girl Scouts	1148da7a-35d.pdf
Letter of Support-Vermillion Watershed	320d98c5-265.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?

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")?

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:

Susan Johnson - Recreation Manager, City of Lakeville

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