



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2027 Request for Proposal

General Information

Proposal ID: 2027-604

Proposal Title: Asian Youth Arts and Environmental Leadership

Project Manager Information

Name: VaMegn Thoj

Organization: Asian Economic Development Association

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Project Basic Information

Project Summary: Arts-centered environmental leadership program engaging Southeast Asian youth in outdoor recreation, citizen science, and watershed stewardship while expanding equitable access to Minnesota's parks, lakes, and natural areas.

ENRTF Funds Requested: \$1,018,000

Proposed Project Completion: December 31, 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):

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project

Narrative

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

Many SE Asian and other BIPOC youth from lower-income households in Saint Paul's Frogtown, Rondo, and East Side neighborhoods have limited access to Minnesota's parks, water bodies, and natural areas. Transportation and financial constraints, cultural unfamiliarity with outdoor recreation systems, and limited representation in environmental fields contribute to this gap. In some immigrant communities, activities such as camping may be associated with economic hardship rather than recreation, creating additional cultural barriers to outdoor participation.

These neighborhoods are located within the Capital Region Watershed District (CRWD) and Ramsey Washington Metro Watershed District (RWMWD), where water quality, urban heat islands, and other environmental conditions directly affect community health and local ecosystems.

Without early exposure to outdoor recreation and environmental learning, lower-income youth—particularly from immigrant and refugee families whose caregivers often work long hours or multiple jobs—are less likely to develop the knowledge, confidence, and sense of belonging needed to participate in environmental stewardship or pursue careers in natural resource fields.

Expanding equitable access to environmental education and outdoor experiences is essential to cultivating the next generation of environmental stewards who can actively and effectively protect Minnesota's lakes, rivers, and watershed ecosystems.

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.

In 2025-2026 AEDA launched the Youth Arts and Environmental Leadership Project with support from the Minnesota DNR. This initiative connects lower-income Saint Paul SE Asian and other BIPOC youth, mainly from, Frogtown, Rondo, and East Side neighborhoods, with Minnesota's natural resources through arts-based environmental education, outdoor recreation experiences, and hands-on stewardship activities. This LCCMR proposal seeks to sustain and expand the program for two years to engage more youth in environmental learning and stewardship.

The program combines environmental science, outdoor exploration, and creative expression. Youth participants take part in guided hikes, outdoor learning experiences, and camping trips at parks and natural areas within the CRWD, RWMWD, local nature centers, and parks, including Crosby Farm Park, Lake Phalen, St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park, Belwin Conservancy, and Afton State Park.

During these experiences, the youths participate in citizen science activities focused on water and soil quality and other environmental indicators. These field experiences inform arts-based storytelling and community education projects through which youth document and share their experiences with Minnesota's natural environments.

Through mentorship, group learning, and hands-on environmental activities, youths build confidence navigating natural spaces and develop a deeper understanding of their role in protecting Minnesota's lakes, rivers, and ecosystems.

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?

The project will engage 60 SE Asian youths (20 annually) over three years in outdoor recreation, environmental education, and citizen science activities focused on Minnesota ecosystems and the Mississippi River watershed. Participants will learn environmental observation methods, responsible recreation practices, and watershed stewardship behaviors that support protection of Minnesota's lakes, rivers, and natural areas.

Youth will document environmental observations through field journals, citizen science monitoring activities, and an

annual youth environmental zine distributed to community members and partners. Public presentations and community events will expand awareness of watershed stewardship and encourage broader community participation in protecting Minnesota's natural resources.

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Youth Recruitment and Environmental Stewardship Orientation

Activity Budget: \$203,600

Activity Description:

This project is structured as a sequential learning pathway that moves youth from environmental awareness to hands-on stewardship and community education. Participants begin by exploring cultural relationships with nature and learning foundational environmental observation skills. Subsequent activities build toward outdoor field learning, citizen science monitoring, and youth-led environmental storytelling that shares environmental knowledge with the broader community.

AEDA will recruit 18 SE Asian and other BIPOC youth annually, focusing on Saint Paul’s Frogtown, Rondo, and East Side neighborhoods—communities with historically limited access to outdoor recreation and environmental education opportunities. The program prioritizes youth from SE Asian immigrant and refugee families who are underrepresented in natural resource education and environmental careers.

Orientation sessions will introduce participants to Minnesota’s natural resources, including lakes, rivers, forests, and regional park systems. Youth will learn stewardship practices that protect water quality, wildlife habitat, and ecosystems, and will receive training in environmental observation and journaling techniques used to document ecosystem conditions.

Participant enrollment records, attendance tracking, and pre- and post-orientation surveys will measure engagement and increased awareness of Minnesota ecosystems and environmental stewardship.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Recruit and enroll 20 youth annually, 60 total over three years. Complete annually July 31.	July 31, 2027
Provide environmental observation journals to 100% of participants. Complete annually August 31.	July 31, 2027
Conduct two orientation sessions per year introducing Minnesota ecosystems and stewardship practices. Complete annually Aug31	August 31, 2027
Achieve 80% or higher attendance at orientation sessions. Complete annually Aug31	August 31, 2027
Pre- and post-orientation surveys measuring increased awareness of Minnesota ecosystems and environmental stewardship. Complete annually	August 31, 2027

Activity 2: Cultural Storytelling and Environmental Stewardship Perspectives

Activity Budget: \$203,600

Activity Description:

Youth participants will explore cultural perspectives on environmental stewardship through storytelling sessions led by SE Asian elders and cultural bearers. These sessions will highlight traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship practices connected to rivers, forests, and agricultural landscapes in SE Asia.

Youth will reflect on these traditions and connect them to Minnesota’s natural environments through writing and journaling exercises documenting their evolving relationship with nature. These reflections will help shape the environmental storytelling and educational materials produced later in the program.

Youth journals, reflection exercises, and facilitated discussions will document how participants’ understanding of environmental stewardship evolves over the course of the activity and how cultural identity informs their relationship to

local ecosystems. Connecting cultural identity with environmental stewardship strengthens youth engagement and encourages long-term commitment to protecting Minnesota’s natural resources.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
1. Host 2 cultural storytelling sessions annually led by SE Asian elders or cultural	September 30, 2027
2. Engage 100% of youth participants in journaling and reflection exercises following storytelling sessions.	October 31, 2027
3. Produce at least 40 youth reflection entries annually documenting cultural perspectives on stewardship.	October 31, 2027
4. Facilitate group discussions connecting traditional ecological knowledge to Minnesota ecosystems.	October 31, 2027

Activity 3: Citizen Science Training and Environmental Monitoring Preparation

Activity Budget: \$203,600

Activity Description:

Youth participants will receive training in citizen science methods used to observe and monitor environmental conditions. Instruction will incorporate educational resources from the Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), and regional watershed districts including the RWMWD and CRWD.

Participants will learn the scientific method and practice using field equipment including water testing kits, binoculars, and GPS-enabled observation tools. Guided field exercises will teach youth how to collect and document environmental observations that build community awareness of watershed conditions and ecosystem health.

Pre- and post-training assessments, youth observation logs, and field documentation will measure increases in participants’ knowledge of environmental monitoring techniques and their ability to observe and interpret ecosystem conditions. Training youth in citizen science expands community capacity to observe and understand environmental conditions affecting Minnesota’s lakes, rivers, and natural landscapes.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Conduct 2 citizen science training workshops annually.	October 31, 2027
Provide hands-on training using water testing kits and observation tools.	October 31, 2027
Complete at least 3 field monitoring exercises annually.	November 30, 2027
Produce youth field observation records documenting environmental conditions.	November 30, 2027
Train 20 youth annually (60 total) in environmental monitoring methods. Complete annually May 31.	May 31, 2028

Activity 4: Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Field Learning

Activity Budget: \$203,600

Activity Description:

Youth will participate in outdoor recreation and environmental learning experiences in regional parks and natural areas in the CRWD, RWMWD and neighboring watershed districts, including Lake Phalen, Lake Como, Crosby Farm Regional Park, Afton and other nearby regional and state parks. Activities such as kayaking, fishing, hiking, and camping will be combined with environmental monitoring activities including water quality testing and habitat observation.

Participants will document environmental observations through photography, journaling, and field notes. Youth will also

explore environmental conditions in their own neighborhoods through an environmental justice tour examining tree canopy coverage, stormwater infrastructure, and urban environmental challenges.

Environmental observation logs, water monitoring activities, and youth reflections will document learning outcomes and track increased environmental awareness and stewardship knowledge. Outdoor field learning experiences build knowledge of Minnesota ecosystems while encouraging responsible recreation and stewardship of public lands and waters.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Facilitate at least one overnight camping experience each program year. Complete annual August 30.	October 31, 2027
Conduct 4 outdoor field learning trips annually to parks or natural areas. Complete annually Oct31.	June 30, 2028
Conduct one environmental justice neighborhood tour annually. Complete Annually November 15.	June 30, 2028
Complete 3 environmental monitoring activities annually during field trips.	June 30, 2028
Engage 100% of youth participants in environmental observation documentation. Complete November 30 annually.	June 30, 2028

Activity 5: Environmental Storytelling, Youth Zine Production, and Community Education

Activity Budget: \$203,600

Activity Description:

Youth will translate their environmental learning into public education materials designed to promote environmental stewardship. Participants will collaborate with teaching artists to produce an annual youth environmental zine featuring writings, photography, artwork, and observations of Minnesota’s natural environments captured in their journals and field notes.

Youth will also participate in environmental book club and literacy events at XIA Books, Gallery and Café, where they will read and discuss environmentally themed books among themselves and with other youth and community members. The program will culminate in a public showcase where youth present their environmental storytelling projects, including their zines, and share their work with community members.

Event attendance records, zine distribution numbers, and youth presentations will document community engagement and measure how youth-led storytelling increases public awareness of environmental stewardship and responsible care of Minnesota’s natural resources.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Engage 100% of youth participants in zine writing, artwork, or photography contributions. Complete February annually	February 28, 2028
Produce one youth environmental zine annually. Completely annually March	March 31, 2028
3. Host at least 2 environmental literacy or book club events annually. Complete annually April30.	April 30, 2028
Distribute zines through XIA events and partner organizations each year. Complete annually May 30.	May 31, 2028
5. Present one annual community showcase of youth environmental work. Annually May31.	May 31, 2028

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
May yer Thao	Hmong American Partnership	Provide bus transportation for field trips	Yes
Maggie McKenna	MPCA	Provide support with educational activities and curriculum.	No
Bob Meier	DNR	Provide access to DNR resources and support education activities to state parks.	No

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.

Project results, environmental observations, and educational materials will be shared through a coordinated dissemination strategy designed to reach community members, watershed organizations, public agencies, and environmental practitioners across Minnesota.

Youth participants will collect environmental observations through citizen science activities including water quality monitoring, habitat observation, and ecosystem documentation. These observations will be compiled and shared with partner organizations such as the Capital Region Watershed District, Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District, and other environmental partners to support broader awareness of local environmental conditions and stewardship practices.

Youth will translate their learning into accessible public education materials, including an annual youth-produced environmental zine featuring writing, photography, artwork, and environmental observations documenting Minnesota ecosystems. Zines and related educational materials will be distributed through community events, partner networks, and programs hosted at XIA Books, Gallery and Café.

Project findings will also be shared through public presentations and community showcases where youth present their citizen science work and environmental storytelling projects.

All project materials, signage, and communications will acknowledge the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund using the required ENRTF language attribution and logo.

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?

Following the grant period, the Youth Arts & Environmental Leadership Project is strengthened and fully integrated into our ongoing art and cultural, youth leadership and community education programming. Equipment, curriculum, and partnerships developed through the project will allow the program to continue with reduced operating costs.

AEDA will pursue continued funding through environmental education grants, foundation support, and partnerships with organizations such as the Minnesota Humanities Center and Minnesota DNR. Youth participants will also serve as peer mentors for future cohorts, creating a sustainable leadership pipeline that continues to promote environmental stewardship and community engagement with Minnesota's natural resources.

Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

Project Manager Name: VaMegn Thoj

Job Title: Executive Director

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

Va-Megn Thoj is a distinguished nonprofit executive and community advocate dedicated to building sustainable infrastructure for underserved populations. With over two decades of leadership experience, he has become a pivotal figure in the Hmong American community and the broader nonprofit sector, known for his ability to blend cultural intelligence with strategic organizational growth.

Throughout his career, Va-Megn has specialized in navigating the complexities of community-based development. As a leader, he has consistently demonstrated a knack for transforming grassroots initiatives into robust, scalable programs. His approach centers on the belief that true equity is achieved when communities have the tools to govern their own narratives and economic futures. He has successfully overseen multi-million dollar budgets, spearheaded capital campaigns, and cultivated diverse revenue streams to ensure long-term institutional stability.

A significant portion of Va-Megn's legacy is rooted in his pioneering work in community media. Recognizing that representation is a cornerstone of civic power, he led efforts to create platforms where Hmong and other immigrant voices could thrive. By bridging the digital divide and fostering media literacy, he empowered thousands to engage more deeply with the democratic process.

Va-Megn's leadership style is defined by collaboration and mentorship. He is a firm believer in the "leader-full" organization—investing in the next generation of activists and administrators to ensure that movements outlast any single individual. His work often sits at the intersection of:

Economic Justice: Developing programs that foster small business growth and homeownership.

Cultural Preservation: Integrating traditional values into modern social service frameworks.

Systems Change: Advocating for policy shifts at the local and state levels to address systemic disparities.

Today, Va-Megn remains a sought-after consultant and board member, continuing to guide nonprofit boards through transitions and helping organizations align their mission with measurable social impact.

Organization: Asian Economic Development Association

Organization Description:

AEDA is a Saint Paul-based nonprofit dedicated to building leadership, social, cultural and economic opportunities for Asian Minnesotans. Founded in 2006, AEDA has evolved from a small community initiative into a powerhouse of cultural and economic revitalization. While its history is rooted in supporting small businesses development, arts, and culture, its impact has expanded into a holistic model of community stewardship.

Since 2019, AEDA has successfully transitioned this legacy into a vibrant focus on youth leadership and environmental sustainability within the Little Mekong District. By engaging local youth as the next generation of environmental stewards, the organization leads critical neighborhood cleanups and recycling initiatives that maintain the district's vitality. This green transition is built on a technical foundation; AEDA previously conducted rigorous stormwater runoff assessment and adopted plans to protect local water quality. By blending environmental science with community engagement, AEDA empowers young leaders to take ownership of their neighborhood, ensuring the Little Mekong District remains a sustainable, thriving cultural destination for years to come.

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Executive Director		Oversee overall program planning, direction and implementation.			25%	1.5		\$100,000
Program Director		Manage day to day operation of the program			25%	3		\$85,000
Environmental Educator		Develops and coordinates educational activities			25%	3		\$75,000
Program Coordinator		Provide programming assistance			25%	3		\$68,000
Program Specialist		Specialist in youth educational programming, designing curriculum			25%	3		\$75,000
Participant Stipends		\$3000 stipend per participants, 60 participants			0%	36		\$150,000
							Sub Total	\$553,000
Contracts and Services								
Agency Partners	Service Contract	Partners providing program services and educational activities				6		\$100,000
							Sub Total	\$100,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Equipment	Outdoors Equipment: camping and other gear and equipment for outdoor activities, estimated \$2000/participant, 50 participants = \$100,000.	Equipping and supplying mostly low income youths with no or little prior experience for outdoor nature activities will incur a substantial cost.					\$100,000
							Sub Total	\$100,000
Capital Equipment								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								

							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	4 trips, 20 participants, 3 years, \$400/participant: \$96,000. 500 miles, \$.75/mile: \$281. Bus rental: 4 trips, 12 days, \$800/day:\$9,600. Incidentals: 12 days, \$300 day: \$3,600.	Camping trips and day trips, costs of lodging, meals, travel and transportation.					\$109,000
							Sub Total	\$109,000
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	Printing program materials and educational materials to the community	Outreach documents, handouts for workshops, and other educational materials					\$3,000
	Publication	Educational brochures and booklets created by the youth	Distributing program highlights and youth produced educational materials to community for outreach and educational purposes.					\$5,000
							Sub Total	\$8,000
Other Expenses								
		Program space rental	Space to meet and convene participants, hold workshops and educational activities, and other program events. \$3,000/month/36 months = \$108,000					\$108,000
		Insurance costs for youth programming	Youth programming requires additional insurance: \$1000 annually, 3 years = \$3,000					\$3,000
		Technology expenses	4 laptops = \$6000. Internet, website, and phone: \$300/month, 36 months = \$10,300					\$16,000
		Program bookkeeping and billing	\$120 hours, 5 hours per month, 36 months = \$21,000					\$21,000

							Sub Total	\$148,000
							Grand Total	\$1,018,000

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				
			Non State Sub Total	-
			Funds Total	-

Total Project Cost: \$1,018,000

This amount accurately reflects total project cost?

Yes

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [2b3146a0-e9c.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

A magazine produced by one of the 2025 youth groups (Hmong boys cohort) in AEDA's Youth Arts Leadership program....

Financial Capacity

Title	File
SOC Certificate of Good Standing	15bc1650-7c9.pdf
Audited financial statements	ab16feb4-d1f.pdf
AEDA 990	34aef34c-354.pdf

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
AEDA Board Letter	85c61b64-3b0.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?

Yes, I understand the Commissioner's Plan applies.

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?

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:

None

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