Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

LEGISLATIVE, FUNDING, AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

R-25-98
July 15, 2025

AGENDA ITEM 2

AGENDA ITEM

Grantmaking Program Strategic Review and Recommendations

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Forward to the full Board of Directors for consideration and approval three recommended updates to Board Policy 3.10, *District Grantmaking Program*:
    a. Increase the Grantmaking Program award budget from $250,000 to $300,000, with an increased grant award size in each tier: Tier 1 from $25,000 to $30,000 and Tier 2 to $50,000 to $60,000.
    b. Limit the grantee reimbursement period to a maximum of two years to align with the biennial (every two years) Grantmaking Program cycle and the corresponding release of a new Request for Proposals.
    c. Adopt the recommended Funding Priority descriptive updates.

2. Select one of the three options to establish a Grantmaking Program impact statement for inclusion in Board Policy 3.10, *District Grantmaking Program*, and forward to the full Board of Directors for consideration and approval:
    a. Option 1: Maximize Reach by Distributing Grants Across a Broad Grantee Base
    b. Option 2: Support Early-Stage and Grassroots Initiatives --- *RECOMMENDED*
    c. Option 3: Amplify Initiatives with Supplemental and Gap Funding

SUMMARY

The Grants Program manages the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's (District) Grantmaking Program (the Program) that was established in 2017. Having completed three grant making cycles, in Fiscal Year 2024-25 (FY25) the Grants team conducted a strategic review of the Program policy and activities to understand its level of success thus far. Seven Areas of Success, and corresponding outcome measures, were evaluated and rated on a scale of one (1) to three (3), where 3 indicates full success. Out of 21 points possible, the Program scored 16.4 with an average score of 2.3 per Success Area. The strengths, with a score of 2.5 or higher, include having a clear purpose (Success Area 1); funding programs and activities that align with annual goals and objectives (Success Area 2); broad diversity among beneficiaries and participants of grant-funded activities, as well as locations of grantee headquarters and services (Success Area 3); and serving as an effective partner to grantees (Success Area 4). Ratings for Success Areas 5 through 7 (Equitability; Awareness among Stakeholders; and Management Systems, respectively) each fall below 2.5.

Based on the findings of the strategic review, the Legislative, Funding, and Public Affairs Committee (LFPAC) is asked to consider four policy updates to forward on to the full Board of Directors (Board) for their consideration and approval:

1. Increase the award budget from $250,000 to $300,000, with an increased grant award size in each tier: Tier 1 from $25,000 to $30,000 and Tier 2 from $50,000 to $60,000.
2. Limit the reimbursement period to two years to align with the biennial award cycle.
3. Adopt updates to the Funding Priority descriptions.
4. Select one of the following options to establish a Program impact statement:
    a. Option 1: Maximize Reach by Distributing Grants Across a Broad Grantee Base
    b. Option 2: Support Early-Stage and Grassroots Initiatives --- *RECOMMENDED*
    c. Option 3: Amplify Initiatives with Supplemental and Gap Funding

Background

Board Policy 3.10, *District Grantmaking Program* (Attachment 1), came into effect in February 2018, replacing the 2007 Resource Management Grant Program. While the policy states that the Program shall be evaluated every three years, and Program staff have made administrative modifications following each of the three grant making cycles to date (such as adopting the use of a pre-proposal step and encouraging applications that advance tribal engagement), this is the first comprehensive assessment.

Because the Grants Program Strategic Plan 2018 – 2021 did not define how grant making success is measured, to guide the strategic review of the Program's effort, following an intensive planning session in November 2024 Grants Program staff developed a measurement framework and outlined a process to answer the following questions:

- What was the Program intended to do?
- Has the Program been successful?
- How is success measured?

To create the framework, staff identified the focal areas, Areas of Success, to be reviewed and the specific measures for each area and then rated those measures on a 1 to 3 scale, with 3 represented being fully successful. The table below shows the framework's seven (7) Areas of Success and the average rating across each area's specific measures of success. The complete framework, showing the individual measure and ratings, is provided in Attachment 2.

Areas of Success	**Ratings** **3=Fully successful** **2=Moderately successful** **1=Not yet successful**
1. Purpose	2.75
2. Organizational goals/objectives	2.75
3. Diversity	2.88
4. Effectiveness	2.5
5. Equitability	2
6. Awareness among Stakeholders	1.5
7. Management Systems	2

Overall, the evaluation of the Program suggests a moderately-high degree of success, with an success rating of 16.4 out of 21 possible points, and an average total score of 2.3. The strengths, with a score of 2.5 or higher, include having a clear purpose (Success Area 1); funding programs and activities that align with annual goals and objectives (Success Area 2); broad diversity among beneficiaries and participants of grant-funded activities, as well as locations of grantee headquarters and services (Success Area 3); and serving as an effective partner to grantees (Success Area 4) in two ways: 1) grantees reported the successful completion of their grant-funded work within the set timeline, and 2) grantees reported receiving support from the District during the application process and timely grant disbursements.

Averaged ratings for Success Areas 5, 6, and 7 (Equitability; Awareness among stakeholders; and Management system, respectively) fall below 2.5, suggesting opportunities for growth.

Findings, analysis and recommendations for each Area of Success and their measures are presented in Attachment 3, *Grantmaking Program Strategic Review*. Of the 23 recommendations, four affect policy and require LFPAC review and concurrence. The remainder are administrative procedural improvements that can be authorized by the General Manager.

The four policy-level recommendations that are presented for LFPAC review are as follows:

1. Increase the Program award budget to $300,000, with an increased grant award size in each tier: Raise Tier 1 to $30,000 and Tier 2 to $60,000.
2. Limit the grant reimbursement period to two years to align with the biennial funding cycle.
3. Adopt updates to the Funding Priority descriptions.
4. Select a recommended option to establish a Grantmaking Program Impact Statement.

Overall, the Program is strong, mission-aligned, and provides value to the communities it serves. There are opportunities for improvement, most at an administrative level with four higher-level policy considerations to improve its overall efficiency and effectiveness and to expand upon its beneficial impact on the community as an integral part of advancing the District's mission.

DISCUSSION

Recommendation 1: Increase the Program award budget to $300,500, with an increased grant award size in each tier

The Program award budget of $250,000 was set in 2017. To adjust for inflation, it is recommended to increase the overall grant award budget to $300,000, based on an annual cost of living increase of 3% over 7 years. It is also recommended to increase the maximum award amounts for each tier, which would also follow the 3% increase over 7 years: Tier 1 would increase from $25,000 to $30,000 and Tier 2 would increase from $50,000 to $60,000.

Recommendation 2: Limit the grant reimbursement period to a maximum of two years to align with the biennial Program grant cycle

Consider aligning the grant term limit with the Grantmaking Program cycle and the corresponding release of a new RFP by revising the current three-year grant reimbursement period to a two-year period. Under the existing policy, grantees may be ineligible to apply for the

next grant cycle if their current project has not yet closed. A two-year grant term would better align with the application timeline, allowing successful grantees the opportunity to reapply in the subsequent cycle. This change would encourage timely and efficient use of grant funds, ultimately supporting more impactful outcomes within a shorter, yet manageable, timeframe.

Recommendation 3: Adopt updates to the Funding Priority descriptions.

Board Policy 3.10 includes descriptions of the three funding priorities. Based on findings from the Program strategic review, updates to the descriptions are recommended as shown below in tracked changes (strike-though and underline).

Access, Interpretation, and Education
Funding for access, environmental interpretation, and education is directed towards facilitating equitable access and broad opportunity for all residents to experience and increase awareness of District lands while fostering an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship. ~~Proposals are invited for projects that contribute an understanding and appreciation of our natural systems, restore indigenous knowledge, facilitate opportunities for outdoor engagement and nature-based experiences, or provide nature-based educational and interpretive experiences for children and/or adults.~~ Applications that incorporate activities conducted on District lands, and/or that incorporate District-developed lesson plans that highlight Midpen lands and resource conservation work, are preferred. Agriculture-based environmental education projects, such as those that provide hands-on learning about sustainable farming practices, food systems, or the ecological connections between agriculture and natural habitats, are welcomed. Applicants are encouraged to emphasize if and how the proposal bridges gaps in access, widens equitable participation, supports indigenous communities, or otherwise helps lower barriers to traditionally underserved or under-represented communities. Funding can be used for staff time to create or execute programming, provide transportation to opportunities for outdoor engagement or nature-based experiences, facilitate knowledge of outdoor recreational opportunities, broaden access to the outdoors, engage residents in environmental stewardship activities, etc. Examples of funded project outcomes include, but are not limited to, enhanced environmental literacy; restoration and integration of indigenous knowledge; expanded outdoor engagement in nature; increased community stewardship; improved mental health; bridging participation gaps; and increased motivation for science, conservation, and environmental careers.

Applied Science
Applied Science funding supports ~~proposals will include~~ academic or practitioner science research projects that ~~support~~ inform the protection and enhancement of natural resources on District lands. ~~The purpose of this support is to develop and disseminate information that advances scientific understanding of natural processes. Projects with potential to increase the effectiveness of applied stewardship of resources on District lands will be preferentially considered.~~ Types of projects may include applied academic research or proof-of-concept, ~~with focus areas including~~ on topics such as integrated pest management, species habitat, restoration, or similar topics relating to natural resource management. Faculty at accredited academic institutions must sponsor research-related projects and field research must take place on District lands. Practitioner science projects other than peer-reviewed research may require faculty sponsorship and will be determined on a case-by-case basis. Examples of funded project outcomes include improved scientific understanding of natural processes, and enhanced stewardship effectiveness on District lands.

Network and Partnership Support
To maximize impact and ensure alignment with multi-jurisdictional conservation and recreation goals, the District welcomes grant proposals that help cultivate, sustain, or expand established conservation networks and partnerships. Eligible activities may include facilitation or consulting services, staff time dedicated to network participation, outreach efforts, meeting coordination, and related expenses such as supplies or communication materials. Examples of funded project outcomes include, but are not limited to, enhanced collaboration and resource sharing; strengthened regional conservation strategies; capacity building for a membership-based organization; and more diversified stakeholders.

Recommendation 4: Select an option to establish a Program Impact Statement

Purpose versus Impact

The Program purpose statement (text box) and funding priorities help explain what the Program does, but it does not explain why it matters. That is, a purpose statement sets the direction and intent, while an impact statement demonstrates the tangible difference made as a result of pursuing that purpose.

Not having an impact statement presents various challenges:

Board Policy 3.10, *District Grantmaking Program* identifies that its purposes are to:

1. Support projects that further Midpen's mission;
2. Build the capacity of academic and nonprofit institutions to sustain and grow the conservation field; and
3. Facilitate Midpen's mission and work by building and strengthening partnerships.

- It is possible to speak about the success of an individual grant-funded project but challenging to convey what the District is striving to achieve through its grantmaking.
- It limits the ability to identify specific, measurable outcomes for the Program.
- It makes selecting grantees more challenging by limiting applicants' and reviewers' decision making to only in how the proposed project aligns with one of the funding priorities.

How an Impact Statement Helps

An impact statement:

- Creates a shared understanding of the value and significance of the District's investments in grantees. This is especially true for a grantmaking program, like the District's, with a relatively small award budget distributed across three funding priorities.
- Helps the District understand where and how to achieve the most impact in the community that also aligns with its mission.
- Clarifies criteria for the prospective applicants and in how District reviewers evaluate each proposal, increasing the likelihood of receiving strong applications and reducing the number of poorly-aligned submittals.

Impact Statement Considerations

Small local grant makers, like the District, can play a unique and significant role through its grant making that results in meaningful impacts, as these examples show:

- *Seeding New Projects:* Small or modest size grants often act as the crucial first funding for new initiatives, enabling grassroots organizations and supporting existing

organizations with emerging ideas to launch projects that might otherwise remain unfunded.

- *Leveraging Additional Funding:* Recipients often use small or modest-sized grants to attract or unlock further funding from other sources, multiplying the original investment's impact.
- *Enabling Program Expansion:* Modest grants can help organizations scale up their services, reach more people, or sustain programs beyond the grant period.
- *Empowering Limited-Capital Nonprofits:* Funding can be directed to nonprofits that have limited capital/capacity.

Proposed Impact Statement Options

The following reflects three impact options for the Program. The impact statement is further understood when placed in the context of the Program's purpose and funding priorities:

In support of the District's mission and annual organizational goals, the Grantmaking Program advances applied science, fosters collaborative conservation networks, and expands equitable access to the outdoors with investments that (INSERT impact statement option).

Option 1: Maximize Reach by Distributing Grants Across a Broad Grantee Base
This option reflects the current grantmaking experience. It spreads grant resources across a range of grantees, allowing the District to engage a wide range of organizations and communities. Factors such as the organization's size, longevity of the effort/service/organization, or match funding are not explicitly considered.

Option 2: Support Early-Stage and Grassroots Initiatives ---- *RECOMMENDED*
This option aligns with a strategy to support early-stage initiatives, grassroots organizations (i.e., those with limited capacity), and/or projects that require more modest funding.

- Recommendation rationale: Focusing on early-stage and grassroots initiatives positions Midpen as a *catalyzing funder*, maximizing the impact of a modest grant budget by helping to launch new initiatives and/or prioritizing and advancing the capacity of for lower-resourced organizations (those with net assets under $1.2 million, excluding land, building, and equipment). This approach advances the grantmaking program's stated purpose of building nonprofit capacity and ensuring equitable access to funding for groups with limited resources. It also enables the District to offer meaningful partnership and non-monetary support, such as technical assistance or training, strengthening relationships and organizational health in line with guiding principles. Option 2 aligns with the District's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by reaching lower-resourced, community-driven organizations and fostering broad, regionally inclusive participation. The eligibility structure ensures both grassroots and larger organizations can access support for early-stage work, while support for established projects is reserved for grassroots groups, reinforcing the focus on capacity building and equity.

Option 3: Amplify Initiatives with Supplemental and Gap Funding
This option focuses on helping to close a funding gap or serve as a matching grant, allowing the District to help projects bridge funding shortfalls, unlock other revenue sources, and ensure the completion of high-impact, high-cost projects that might otherwise stall.

As shown in the tables below, each impact is detailed with a goal, strategy implication, intended results and examples of the metrics to inform Program success.

Option 1

Impact	Goal	Strategy Implications	Intended Results	Example Metrics
Maximize Reach by Distributing Grants Across a Broad Grantee Base	Increase the breadth of the District's impact by distributing grants widely to maximize community reach and the diversity of projects	Spreading grant resources across a range of grantees allows the District to engage a wider range of organizations and communities	Encourage a broad spectrum of project types and geographic distribution Strengthen community capacity and foster new partnerships across the service area	Total number of unique grantees funded per cycle Percentage increase in new grantees year-over-year Geographic and demographic diversity of funded projects Number of communities or populations newly reached through grant-funded activities

Option 2

Impact	Goal	Strategy Implications	Intended Results	Example Metrics
Support Early-Stage and Grassroots Initiatives	Increase the number of early-stage initiatives, grassroots organizations, and small-scale projects supported by the District's Grantmaking Program	Aligns with a strategy to support early-stage initiatives and organizations with limited capacity, or specific projects that require less funding	Expand opportunities for new and emerging projects and/or organizations to access funding and build capacity Increase engagement with underserved and underrepresented communities by lowering financial and administrative barriers to entry	Percentage of grants awarded for early stage initiatives Percentage of grants awarded to grassroots organizations Number of projects funded that serve underserved or underrepresented communities

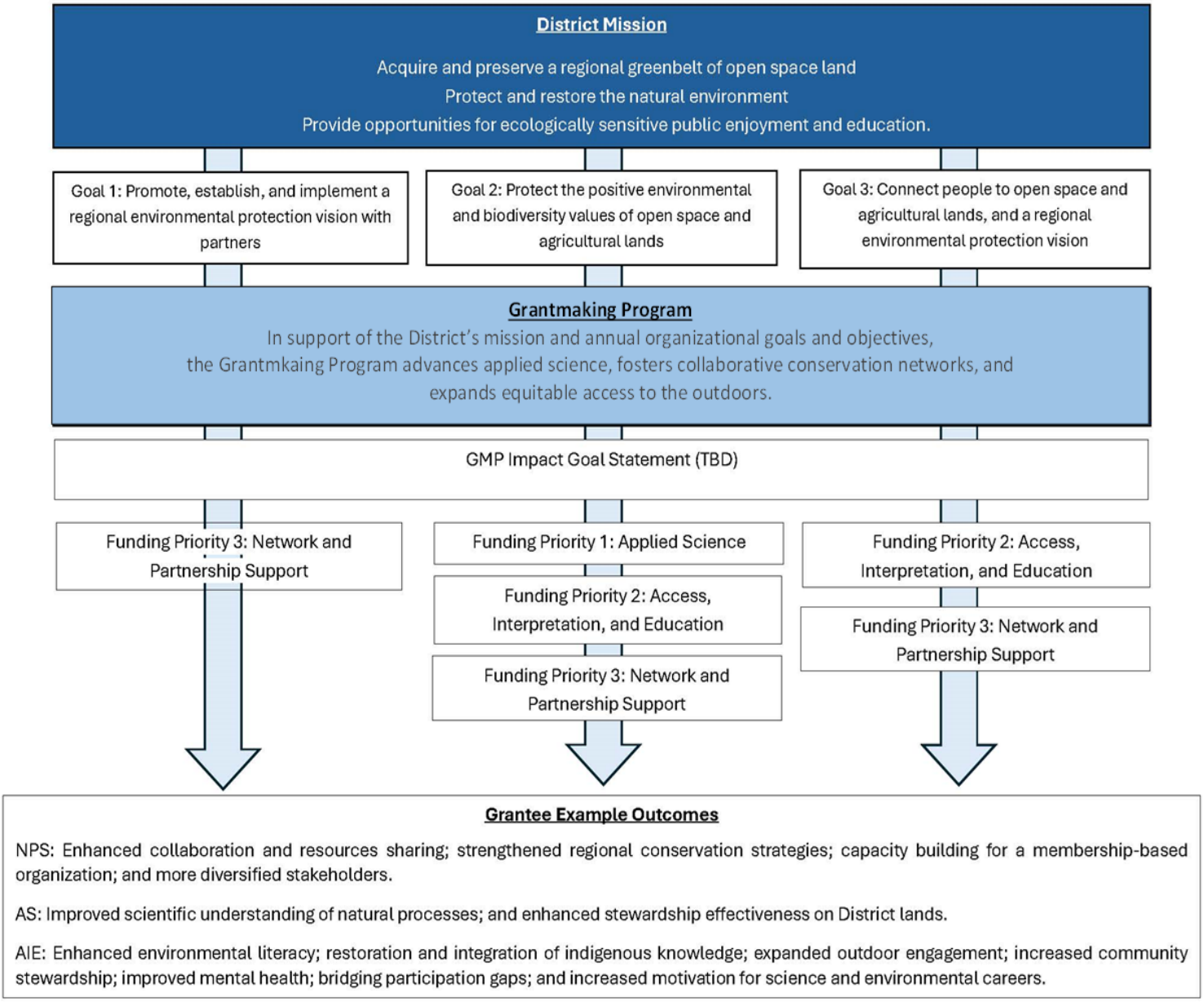
Option 3

Impact	Goal	Strategy Implications	Intended Results	Example Metrics
Amplify Initiatives with Supplemental and Gap Funding	Position the District as a strategic supplemental supporter by prioritizing grants that provide gap funding or matching support, enabling grantees to leverage additional resources and successfully complete projects that align with the District's mission	By focusing on gap and matching grants, the District can help organizations bridge funding shortfalls, unlock other revenue sources, and ensure the completion of high-impact projects that might otherwise stall	Increase the number of projects that successfully secure full funding and reach completion due to the District's supplemental support Strengthen organizational sustainability and capacity by encouraging diversified funding bases among grantees	Percentage of grants awarded as gap or matching funds. Total additional funds leveraged by the District's grants. Number of projects completed that would not have proceeded without supplemental support

Grantmaking Program Alignment with District Mission

The chart below shows how the District's mission and goals are expressed through the Grantmaking Program, including its impact (TBD), funding priorities and prospective outcomes.

Grantmaking Program Alignment with the District's Mission and Goals



Grantee Example Outcomes

NPS: Enhanced collaboration and resources sharing; strengthened regional conservation strategies; capacity building for a membership-based organization; and more diversified stakeholders.

AS: Improved scientific understanding of natural processes; and enhanced stewardship effectiveness on District lands.

AIE: Enhanced environmental literacy; restoration and integration of indigenous knowledge; expanded outdoor engagement; increased community stewardship; improved mental health; bridging participation gaps; and increased motivation for science and environmental careers.

FISCAL IMPACT

The recommended action has no direct, immediate fiscal impact. Future fiscal year budgets will be adopted as part of the Budget and Action Plan process.

PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW

February 2018: The Board approved Board Policy 3.10 – *District Grantmaking Program* as a Replacement to the Resource Management Grant Program. (R-18-19, meeting minutes)

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act, and an interested party public notice was emailed to the District's current list.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

This item is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act.

NEXT STEPS

If the recommended updates to Board Policy 3.10 are approved by LFPAC, the updates would be brought to the full Board. Pending Board approval of the proposed updates, Grants staff will work to make these updates known to potential grantee applicants as well as make changes to the upcoming RFP. Grants Program staff will also create a system to capture impact goal data. The next Grantmaking Program cycle is scheduled for fall 2025.

Attachments

1. Board Policy 3.10 Grantmaking
2. Areas of Success Framework
3. Report, Grantmaking Program Strategic Review 2.21.25 rev 5.13.25

Responsible Department Head:
Stefan Jaskulak, Chief Financial Officer and Director of Administrative Services

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Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Board Policy Manual

District Grantmaking Program	**Policy 3.10** **Chapter 3 – Fiscal Management**
Effective Date: 02/28/2018	Revised Date: N/A
Prior Versions: 11/17/2010; 11/14/2007	

Purpose

The purposes of the District's Grantmaking Program are to a) support projects that further the District's mission, b) build the capacity of academic and nonprofit institutions in order to sustain and grow the conservation field; and c) facilitate the District's mission and work by building and strengthening partnerships.

Grantmaking programmatic focus areas

Programmatic priorities
The District's Grantmaking Program will include a broad focus to ensure a range of projects are considered and reflect the diversity of work in which the District engages. Grantmaking will be guided by an emphasis on investments that reflect a regional focus and provide avenues for partnership, both with the District as well as among other stakeholders.

Using these guiding principles, eligible project categories will include proposals focusing on applied science; networks, partnerships; and access, education and interpretation. General grant parameters for each grant proposal category are outlined below, with the grant solicitation providing additional detail for each category.

Applied Science
Research proposals will include academic or practitioner science projects that support the protection and enhancement of natural resources on District lands. The purpose of this support is to develop and disseminate information that advances scientific understanding of natural processes. Projects with potential to increase the effectiveness of applied stewardship of resources on District lands will be preferentially considered. Types of projects may include applied academic research or proof-of-concept, with focus areas including topics such as integrated pest management, species habitat, restoration, or similar topics relating to natural resource management. Faculty at accredited academic institutions must sponsor research-related projects and field research must take place on District lands. Practitioner science projects other than peer-reviewed research may require faculty sponsorship, and will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Network and Partnership Support
In order to broaden its impact and ensure District priorities are aligned with multi-

jurisdictional conservation and recreation plans, grant proposals that cultivate, sustain, or grow established conservation networks will be accepted. Network or partnership support could take the form of facilitation or other consulting support, staff time for network participation, outreach, meeting supplies, etc.

Access, Interpretation and Education

Funding for access, environmental interpretation and education will be directed towards ensuring equal opportunity for all residents to take advantage of District lands while fostering an appreciation for open space protection, outdoor recreation, and environmental stewardship. The focus will be on funding projects that encourage access to and use of District preserves by all and in creating and executing nature-based educational and interpretive experiences for children and adults. Funding can be used for staff time to create or execute programming, transportation, educational and interpretive programming materials or supplies, facilitate knowledge of outdoor recreational opportunities, access to the outdoors, and environmental stewardship activities.

Grant management and internal controls

Program administration

The Grants Specialist will oversee the grant solicitation, selection, and grant management once selected. Other departments, including Visitor Services and Natural Resources, will be brought in for technical expertise to assist in evaluating proposals through a review committee. Once the grants have been selected, the Grants Specialist will oversee the administrative requirements for grant management, with at least one technical content expert from the relevant department assigned to assist in evaluating grant progress.

Proposal solicitation, selection and due diligence

The District is committed to soliciting proposals from a diverse range of organizations and application solicitations will be broadly disseminated to encourage organizations that reach underserved communities to apply. Additionally, the District will consider past District funding in its scoring criteria in order to increase the competitiveness of organizations that have not previously received District funding.

Eligible grantees will include accredited academic institutions, 501(c)(3) nonprofits, or public entities. Organizations without an IRS-designated status will be eligible for funding if a fiscal sponsorship is established prior to application submittal. A formal evaluation criteria will be used to select proposals for funding, including the organization's ability to administer the grant. Example evaluation categories include the applicant's ability to successfully complete the proposed work in the anticipated timeline and budget, past District funding, fit with District's mission, Board priority, and potential to develop new partnerships.

Grant terms and internal controls

The maximum award for individual grants will be $50,000. The award can be expended as necessary within a three-year grant term, contingent on satisfactory progress on grant objectives. Grants will be administered on a reimbursement basis, with up to 15% available up front if the grantee has a demonstrable need. Grantees will be eligible for reimbursement costs

up until the original grant amount, contingent on satisfactory progress toward grant goals.

Grant applications and reporting
Grantees will be responsible for submitting annual or semi-annual reports that summarize activities and any relevant findings, alongside periodic check-ins with District staff. Additionally, grantees may also be asked to present the grant outcomes to the District staff and/or the Board in addition to formal reporting. Additionally, reimbursement submissions will require expenses to date recorded against the budget, along with invoices and accomplishments and milestones achieved during the reimbursement period.

The application and reporting process will be specific to a) the grant category, and b) the dollar amount awarded. Applications and reporting procedures will have two tiers of requirements (up to $25,000 and up to $50,000). This structure will ensure that smaller grantees are not prohibited from applying due to cumbersome application and reporting requirements in relation to the funding received. Additionally, the District will require that grantees make any acquired data, educational/interpretive materials, or conclusions available to the public. The Board will receive updates on the status of the grants and outcomes through an annual report.

Additional grant requirements and process
- Application solicitations will be released every year or every other year when funding is available and the District Grantmaking Policy will be evaluated every three years and updated as necessary. Grantees will continue to be eligible for additional application cycles, with no funding tenure limit.
- Eligible projects must not result in permanent damage and/or impairment to habitats or natural resources on District lands and will be in compliance with the District's Permit to Enter procedures (required for research projects).
- If indirect costs are costs incurred that do not have directly attributable expenses, they may be charged at no more than 10% of total grant cost. Examples include general and administrative costs, general equipment purchase or maintenance, and salaries and benefits of executive or administrative personnel who may not be directly engaged in the project. Subcontractors are excluded from indirect cost calculations.

Areas of Success Framework

Areas of Success	Rating Scores 3=Fully successful 2=Moderately successful 1=Not yet successful		Success Measures
	AREAS	MEASURES	
1. Purpose	2.75	2.75	Statement exists of what the grantmaking program is designed to do and the priorities for its work.
2. Organizational goals/objectives	2.75	3	A. Grantees address at least one annual goal • Current year goals and objectives explicitly stated RFP • Evaluations of applications based on these goals/objectives
		2.5	B. DEI objectives are explicitly stated; outreach and proposal evaluation take DEI into consideration.
3. Diversity	2.88	2.75	A. Applicants and grantees are distributed across the District's three funding priorities.
		3	B. There is geographical diversity in the location of headquarters, services, and beneficiaries/participants.
4. Effectiveness	2.5	2.5	A. Grantees accomplished all deliverables in time allotted with funding
		3	B. Applicants and grantees respond to questions and reimbursement requests from the grantmaking program staff in a timely manner.
		2	C. District grants build the capacity of grantees
5. Equitability	2	2	A. Funding is multi-year and unrestricted
		2.5	B. Paperwork is simple/streamlined to reduce
		1.5	C. Burden of early-stage vetting is on the funder
		2	D. Processes are transparent & responsive
		2.5	E. Processes include solicitation of feedback
		1.5	F. "Support beyond the check" is provided
6.Awareness among stakeholders	1.5	1	A. Presentations to board/staff by grantmaking program staff and grantees
		2	B. Grant outcomes and/or grantee stories distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters
7. Management system	2	2	A. The grantmaking program data and document management systems and personnel capacity adequately support the program's needs
		2	B. The grantmaking program reflects current industry practices and is comparable to peer organizations.

Grantmaking Program Strategic Review

Prepared by Carol Schimke, Grants Program Manager, and
Caitlin Amarillas, Senior Grants Technician
2/21/2025; rev 5/13/25

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    2. Seven Areas of Success and their Outcomes and Recommendations
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Executive Summary

The Board Policy for the Grantmaking Program, (Appendix 1), came into effect in February 2018, replacing the Resource Management Grant Program, which was approved as a Board policy on November 14, 2007. While the Board Policy identified that the Grantmaking Program (GMP) is to be evaluated every three years, this is the first effort to comprehensively assess the GMP.

With the completion of grantmaking cycles in 2019, 2021, and 2023, Midpen sought to understand the cumulative results of each round and how successful it was at accomplishing its purpose. From November 2024 through January 2025, the GMP team undertook a comprehensive study, collecting and analyzing internal and external data, to assess the program's intentions and the degree to which it was successful. This report discusses the findings, analysis, and overall outcomes of this strategic review, and provides program and leadership level recommendations.

Summary by the Numbers: Across the three cycles the GMP received 89 applications and made 22 grants to 18 unique grantees totaling $839,725. The list of all applicants and grantees can be found in Appendix 3. Shown in the table below, there was an increased number of applicants each cycle, growing from 21 to 28 to 40, respectively, with a corresponding increase in the total amount of funding requested.

Totals	**2019**	**2021**	**2023**
# of Applicants	21	28	40
Total amount requested	$762,853	$1,025,35	$1,700,000
# Grantees	7	10	5
Amount awarded	$248,104	$341,852	$249,769

Areas of Success Framework: A framework (shown in the table below) was developed to guide the strategic review, consisting of seven Areas of Success with associated measures. This report discusses each measure's assessment including factual findings and analysis, summarized by an outcome statement and a "success" rating scaled from 1 to 3, where 3 indicates full success.

Overall, the evaluation of the GMP suggests a moderate degree of success, with an outcome rating of 16.4 out of 21 possible points, and an average total score of 2.3. **The program's strengths,** with a score of 2.5 or higher, include **having a clear purpose and funding priorities** (Success Area 1); and **funded programs and activities align solidly with Midpen's annual goals and objectives** (Success Area 2), including the organization's DEI goals. There is also **diversity among the beneficiaries and participants** of the grant-funded activities, as well as the locations of grantee headquarters and services (Success Area 3).

Midpen as an effective partner (Success Area 4) is another area of strength in two ways: 1) Grantees reported the successful completion of their grant-funded work with the provided funding within the

grant period's timeline, and 2) Grantees reported receiving support from Midpen during the application process and timely payments for their work.

Average ratings for Success Areas 5, 6, and 7 (Equitability; Awareness among Stakeholders; and Management System, respectively) fall below 2.5, suggesting opportunities for growth in these areas.

Table: Areas of Success Framework

Areas of Success	Rating Scores 3=Fully successful 2=Moderately successful 1=Not yet successful		Success Measures
	AREAS	MEASURES	
1. Purpose	2.75	2.75	Statement exists of what the GMP is designed to do and the priorities for its work.
2. Organizational goals/objectives	2.75	3	A. Grantees address at least one annual goal • Current year goals and objectives explicitly stated RFP • Evaluations of applications based on these goals/objectives
		2.5	B. DEI objectives are explicitly stated; outreach and proposal evaluation take DEI into consideration.
3. Diversity	2.88	2.75	A. Applicants and grantees are distributed across Midpen's three funding priorities.
		3	B. There is geographical diversity in the location of headquarters, services, and beneficiaries/participants.
4. Effectiveness	2.5	2.5	A. Grantees accomplished all deliverables in time allotted with funding
		3	B. Applicants and grantees respond to questions and reimbursement requests from GMP staff in a timely manner.
		2	C. Midpen grants build the capacity of grantees
5. Equitability	2	2	A. Funding is multi-year and unrestricted
		2.5	B. Paperwork is simple/streamlined to reduce
		1.5	C. Burden of early-stage vetting is on the funder
		2	D. Processes are transparent & responsive
		2.5	E. Processes include solicitation of feedback
		1.5	F. "Support beyond the check" is provided
6.Awareness among stakeholders	1.5	1	A. Presentations to board/staff by GMP staff and grantees
		2	B. Grant outcomes and/or grantee stories distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters
7. Management system	2	2	A.GMP data and document management systems and personnel capacity adequately support the program's needs
		2	B. Midpen's GMP reflects current industry practices and is comparable to peer organizations.

Recommendations Overview

The GMP identified recommendations across the seven Areas of Success. The majority are primarily for consideration at the program level and six are at leadership/policy level. Appendix 2 lists all outcomes and recommendations.

Leadership/Policy Recommendations: Six leadership-level recommendations have been proposed, among which is to develop an impact statement for the GMP. An impact statement is distinct from merely understanding the purpose of the program; it increases a shared understanding of the value and significance of Midpen's investments. Measuring grantmaking impact allows grant makers to identify where and how they can have the most significant effect on the community while aligning with their mission.

Leadership-level recommendations also include considerations to increase the indirect rate allowance, the size of the grant award budget and the amount of individual grant awards. It is also suggested to clarify the funding priority descriptions.

Areas for Improvement: Within the three Areas of Success that fall below 2.5 program-level recommendations include:

- Adoption of practices that increase equitability measures (Success Area 5).
- Improvement in generating greater internal and external awareness of grantees' funded activities and their outcomes (Success Area 6).
- Addressing questions about proposal reviewer capacity; responses to proposals requesting technical support from Midpen staff; and considerations about alignment with industry practices and peer organizations.

An overarching finding highlights that the GMP has previously identified these types of improvements, but the .5 FTE position structure was too limited to fully implement the relevant tasks. With the FY25 expansion of the Senior Grants Technician position from a 0.5 FTE to a 1.0 FTE, many of the related challenges can be better addressed.

Innovation: The GMP strategic review studied if and how the GMP addresses agriculture-based environment education. At this time, analysis suggests that ag-based environmental education aligns with the GMP's funding priority area Access, Interpretation and Education. It is recommended including in the GMP's materials explicit language and project examples in order to generate greater awareness that ag-based environmental education projects and program are aligned with the goals and purpose of Midpen's grantmaking program.

1. Background

Policy Established

The Board Policy for the Grantmaking Program came into effect in February 2018, (Appendix 1), replacing the Resource Management Grant Program, which was approved as a Board policy on November 14, 2007. While the Board Policy identified that it is to be evaluated every three years, this is the first effort to comprehensively assess the Grantmaking Program (GMP).

The Grants Program Strategic Plan 2018 – 2021 did not define a GMP implementation strategy or measures of success against which to assess the three rounds of grant making that have been completed since the GMP's inception. To guide the strategic review effort, following an intensive planning session in November 2024 Grants Program staff developed the GMP Strategic Review Framework.

GMP Strategic Review Framework

The framework outlines a process to answer the following questions.

- What was the GMP intended to do?
- Has the GMP been successful and how is success measured?

There are seven Areas of Success, along with their associated Measures, identified in the framework. The table below highlights the framework and provides an explanation about the purpose of the Success Areas.

Areas of Success, Measures, and Purpose

Areas of Success	Measures of Success	Purpose
1. Purpose	A. Statement exists of what the GMP is designed to do and the priorities for its work.	To understand the broad intention for establishing the GMP.
2. Organizational goals and objectives	A. Goals are incorporated in the application process: ▪ Grantees address at least one annual goal ▪ Current year goals and objectives explicitly stated RFP ▪ Evaluations of applications based on these goals/objectives	To understand how applicants' work align with Midpen's annual goals.
	B. DEI objectives are explicitly stated; outreach and proposal evaluation take DEI into consideration.	To understand how Midpen has incorporated DEI objectives into grantmaking processes.

3. Diversity	A. Applicants and grantees are distributed across three funding priorities.	To understand the extent to which Midpen grants address the breadth of the program's funding priorities, Midpen's jurisdictional reach, and underrepresented groups.
	B. There is geographical diversity in the location of headquarters, services, and beneficiaries/participants.	
4. Effectiveness	A. Grantees accomplished all deliverables in reimbursement period with funding	To understand the extent of grantees success.
	B. Applicant/Grantees received responses from Midpen staff to questions and reimbursement requests in timely manner	To understand grantees' experience working with Midpen.
	C. Midpen grants build the capacity of grantees	To understand Grants Program staff perspectives on the relative robustness of the GMP as an organizational strategy.
5. Equitability	A. Funding is multi-year and unrestricted	These measures (practices), developed by Trust-based Philanthropy Project, provide a lens through which the program can assess its effort to "advance a more just and equitable society by alleviating the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and communities." It has not been an expectation that the GMP employ these practices but understanding that there is a spectrum of equitable grantmaking approaches provides a gauge for staff and the Board to consider and adopt these opportunities.
	B. Paperwork is simple/streamlined	
	C. Burden of early-stage vetting is on the funder	
	D. Processes are transparent & responsive	
	E. Processes include solicitation of feedback	
	F. "Support beyond the check" is provided	
6. Awareness among stakeholders	A. Presentations to board/staff by GMP staff and/or grantees	To understand who the GMP 'story' is being told to, how often, and what is being told.
	B. Grant outcomes and/or grantee stories distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters	
7. Management system	A. GMP data and document management systems and personnel capacity adequately support the program's needs	To understand the extent to which the work of the GMP is supported by appropriate resources.
	B. Midpen's GMP is comparable with peer organizations	

2. Data Collection Methods

Measurement data was collected from December 2024 through January 2025 from existing sources (secondary data) and through surveys and interviews (primary data).

Primary Data

- Staff interviews
    - Ana Ruiz, General Manager
    - Stefan Jaskulak, Chief Financial Officer
    - Samantha Powell, previous Grants Technician
    - Jordan McDaniel, inaugural Grants Technician
- Applicant and Grantee Online Survey
    - The survey was sent to 70 applicants and grantees and had a two-week response period; 16 responded (11 grantees and 5 applicants).
        - Current grantee only: 6
        - Past grantee only: 4
        - Past and current grantee: 1
        - Applicant only: 5
    - Most applicants and grantees responding had applied under the Access, Interpretation and Education funding priority. One, an "applicant only", was under Applied Science. Four were under Network and Partnership Support.
    - Among grantees, most (9) were Tier 2 grantees; two were Tier 1 grantees.
- Proposal Reviewer Online Survey was sent to 12 Midpen staff reviewers

Secondary Data

- GMP files, including previous RFPs, evaluation score sheets, grantee reports
- Board reports, policies, and annual goals and objectives
- General collateral, including Midpen website, newsletters

3. Outcomes and Recommendations

Overview of applications and grant awards

- Across the three grantmaking cycles – 2019, 2021, 2023 – the GMP received 89 applications and made 22 grants to 18 unique grantees totaling $839,725. The list of all applicants and grantees can be found in Appendix 3.
- Shown in the table below, there was an increased number of applicants each cycle, growing from 21 to 28 to 40, respectively.
- With the rise in the number of applicants each cycle the total amount being requested increasingly exceeded GMP's $250,000 award budget.
- In 2021, the Board authorized a one-time award budget increase of about $90,000.

Totals by Cycle:

Totals	2019	2021	2023
# of Applicants	21	28	40
Total amount requested	$762,853	$1,025,35	$1,700,000
# Grantees	7	10	5
Amount and % awarded	$248,104	$341,852	$249,769

Areas and Measures of Success

GMP staff developed the *Areas of Success Framework* to guide the strategic review of the grantmaking program. The framework consists of seven Areas of Success with associated measures.

Overall, the evaluation of the GMP suggests a moderate degree of success, with an outcome rating of 16.4 out of 21 possible points, and an average total score of 2.3. The program's strengths, with a score of 2.5 or higher, include having a clear purpose and funding priorities (Success Area 1); and funded programs and activities align solidly with Midpen's annual goals and objectives (Success Area 2), including the organization's DEI goals. There is also diversity among the beneficiaries and participants of the grant-funded activities, as well as the locations of grantee headquarters and services (Success Area 3).

Midpen as an effective partner (Success Area 4) is another area of strength in two ways: 1) Grantees reported the successful completion of their grant-funded work with the provided funding within the grant period's timeline, and 2) Grantees reported receiving support from Midpen during the application process and timely payments for their work.

Average ratings for Success Areas 5, 6, and 7 (Equitability; Awareness among Stakeholders; and Management System, respectively) fall below 2.5, suggesting opportunities for growth in these areas.

The data are presented in this report by Area of Success. Each of the seven Areas of Success sections includes an overall (averaged) outcome statement and rating, an outline of the findings from the data collected, an analysis of those findings, and recommendations that address some or all of the points of the analysis. Appendix 2 lists all seven Areas of Success and their outcomes and recommendations.

Area of Success	Measures of Success
1. Purpose	Statement exists of what the GMP is designed to do and the priorities for its work.

Overall Success Rating: 2.75

Outcome 1: A statement exists that defines the purpose of the GMP and details the priorities for its work and there are overlaps between the GMP's Access, Interpretation and Education funding priority and the Public Affairs Partnership Program that may suggest opportunities for increased collaboration between the programs. Rating: 2.75

Findings

- Board Policy 3.10, District Grantmaking Program identifies that its purposes are to:
    1. Support projects that further Midpen's mission
    2. Build the capacity of academic and nonprofit institutions in order to sustain and grow the conservation field; and
    3. Facilitate Midpen's mission and work by building and strengthening partnerships.
- The policy also identifies three funding priority areas
    1. **Applied Science,** with a focus on academic or practitioner science projects that support the protection and enhancement of natural resources on Midpen lands. The intent is to develop and disseminate information that advances scientific understanding of natural processes.
    2. **Network and Partnership Support,** with a focus on efforts that cultivate, sustain, or grow established conservation networks that are addressing topics related to land management, conservation, or public access to outdoor recreation.
    3. **Access, Interpretation and Education**, focused on facilitating equitable access and broad opportunity for all residents to experience Midpen lands while fostering an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship.
- The strategic review found several areas between the Public Affairs Outreach Partnership Program and GMP's Access, Interpretation, and Education (AIE) funding priority that create some confusion. The table below compares the key attributes of the Outreach Partnership Program and the AIE funding priorities.

Comparative Measure	Outreach Partnership Program[1]	Funding Priority: Access, Interpretation and Education
Purpose	Expand environmental educational programs to reach underserved communities and provide opportunities to community partners to conduct their educational and enrichment outings and events on Midpen preserves funded by Midpen.	To facilitate equitable access and broad opportunity for all residents to experience Midpen lands while fostering an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship. Services to

[1] Outreach Partnership Program Memo (9/13/2024)

		under-represented communities are encouraged.
Award Budget	$122,000 annually	$250,000 bi-annually
Funding structure	Tier 1: Stipend Tiers 2 & 3: Contract, non-competitive	Reimbursable grants, competitive
Funding length and levels	Funding is annual o Tier 1: $2,500 o Tier 2: $5,000 - $20,000 o Tier 3: $44,000	Grants can be for 1 – 3 years o Tier 1: Up to $25,000 o Tier 2: $25,000 - $50,000
# of Organizations supported	11 o Tier 1: 4 o Tier 2: 6 o Tier 3: 1	5-7 o Award levels vary; in 2023, all grants were $50,000 and five grants were awarded.
Target organizations	Nonprofit organizations	o Nonprofit organizations o Academic institutions, including K-12 schools, colleges, and universities o Fiscally sponsored programs
Activity types	Outings/events	Projects and programs, inclusive of outings/events
Scope of work	Developed in collaboration with Midpen	Not developed in collaboration with Midpen
Results reported	Outputs	Outputs and outcomes (the latter if proposed by the grantee)

Analysis of Findings

- **Interviews with leadership:** To help analyze, at a high level, the success of the program as it relates to its purpose and priorities, GMP staff conducted interviews with General Manager Ana Ruiz and CFO Stefan Jaskulak. The following summarizes those conversations:

  Successes

  - **Partnerships**: The partnership benefit that the program provides to Midpen was noted as the most important outcome of the program; it is a "bridge to connect Midpen with new and existing partners" and through this "Midpen expands its impact."
  - **Community engagement**: It has created connections with communities that were previously challenging to engage with and has provided a platform for smaller organizations to contribute to Midpen's goals.
  - **Research support**: The program has catalyzed additional research benefiting both Midpen and other land managers.
  - **Enhanced visibility**: Grantee activities have increased Midpen's visibility in the region.

  Areas of Improvement

  - **Long-term partnerships**: The program has not consistently resulted in lasting support or partnerships beyond individual grant periods.
  - **Mutual learning**: There's potential to enhance the program by facilitating presentations to the board.
  - **Funding priorities**: Questions have been raised about the relevance of the Network and Partnership Support priority, suggesting a need for modification or better outreach.
  - **Academic outreach**: There's a need for improved outreach to academic institutions for the Applied Science priority.
- **Measuring impact:** There should be a shared understanding that the *purpose* of the GMP is distinguished from understanding its *impact*, i.e., the value and significance of Midpen's investments. Measuring grantmaking impact helps grant makers learn where and how they can have the most impact in the community that also aligns with its mission.
  - The Board Policy does not provide guidance on the kind of impact envisioned for its grantmaking (see 4.C. for discussion).
  - Grantees have not been required to articulate the near-term outcomes of their funded programs.
  - With an award budget of $250,000 distributed across three funding priorities every two years, it is challenging to draw inferences or conclusions about impact without an impact statement.
- **Overlaps with Outreach Partnership Program**: The board has identified two strategies to engage underrepresented constituents in Midpen preserves: the Public Affairs Outreach Partnership Program (OPP) and the Grant Making Program (GMP).
  - **OPP:** Targets nonprofit organizations, collaboratively developing a specific scope of work focused on outings/events. The process is prescriptive and less competitive, with Public Affairs identifying and inviting nonprofits to partner with. Reporting is simple, involving participant counts, event descriptions, and a brief survey.
  - **GMP:** Conducts broad outreach, soliciting funding proposals from organizations, and offers support through workshops and consultations. Nonprofits propose their own scopes of work, which are reviewed by a panel. The process is competitive, involving a detailed reimbursement procedure and thorough reporting on deliverables.

  Key differences lie in the selection and reporting processes, with OPP being less competitive and more prescriptive, while GMP requires a more detailed and competitive application and reporting process.

  Key overlaps include organizations served, purpose, budget, funding levels, and results.

  - **Organizations served:** Both programs serve environmentally-focused nonprofit organizations.
  - **Purpose:** Both programs (specifically GMP's Access, Interpretation and Education funding priority) share the purpose to support environmental learning and enrichment particularly for populations who are not traditional users of Midpen preserves.

- **Budgets:** OPP's budget is $122,000 annually and in practice, GMP's budget is $250,000 every other year.[2]
- **Funding levels:** Funding levels for both programs are on par: up to $25,000 and $20,000 for GMP's Tier 1 and OPP's Tier 2, respectively; and up to $50,000 and a flat $44,000 for GMPs' Tier 2 and OPP's Tier 3, respectively.
- **Results**: Both programs expect activity output reports (counts of people served, events held, etc.); neither program requires outcome reports (the change that occurred as a result of the funded activities.

Sustaining two programs with similar structures demonstrates Midpen's strong commitment to supporting under-represented communities. However, the effort required by external GMP stakeholders to secure funding comparable to OPP is considerably more. There is also a higher demand of internal resources to identify, engage, and manage grantees—all for outcomes that are not notably distinguishable from those achieved by the OPP program.

Recommendations:

- Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss
  - A GMP impact statement
  - Approaches that enhance the "comparative advantage" of the GMP, such as higher grant award levels and funded activity outcomes.

Areas of Success	Measures
2. Organizational goals/objectives	A. Grantees address at least one annual goal i. Current year goals and objectives explicitly stated RFP ii. Evaluations of applications based on these goals/objectives
	B. DEI objectives are explicitly stated; outreach and proposal evaluation take DEI into consideration.

Overall Success Rating: 2.75

Outcome 2.A. – The GMP's three funding priority areas address nine organizational objectives across three organizational goals. Grantees are solidly aligned with Midpen's goals and objectives. Grantees' funded activities most frequently support the objectives of Goal 3, "Connect people to open space and agricultural lands, and a regional environmental protection vision." Rating: 3

Findings

- Each RFP included a link to Midpen's mission and to current fiscal year Strategic Plan goals and objectives, as well providing an outline of the scoring categories, which includes assessing how well a proposal aligns with Midpen's mission and goals and advances the applicable funding

[2] As stated in the 2019 board report establishing GMP policy, Requests for Proposals will be issued every year or every other year, depending on staff time and budget available for the program. To date, RFPs have only been issued bi-annually.

priority (applied science; network and partnership support; or access, interpretation, and education).

- The table below shows the FY25 Strategic Goals and Objectives that align with the three funding priority areas and the number of grantees who identified that their grant-funded activities address those.[3] It does not appear that the board has been routinely apprised of grantees' alignment with the goals and objectives; GMP presentations to the board have not included this information.

FY25 Strategic Plan Goals & Objectives	GMP Funding Priority Alignment	# of 2021 and 2023 Grantee alignment with objectives[4]
Goal 1 – Promote, establish, and implement a regional environmental protection vision with partners		
Objective 1 – Continue implementation of the District's Vision Plan and communicate progress on projects…		
Objective 2 – Build and strengthen diverse partnerships to implement a collaborative and science-based approach to regional environmental protection.	• Network and Partnership Support	3
Objective 3 – Take a leadership role in advocating for environmental protection goals…		
Objective 4 – Preserve and connect open space and agricultural lands of local and regional significance		
Goal 2 – Protect the positive environmental and biodiversity values of open space and agricultural lands		
Objective 1 – Take a regional leadership role in promoting the benefits of open space	• Access, Interpretation, and Education • Network and Partnership Support	
Objective 2 – Protect and restore the natural environment to preserve healthy natural systems and implement wildlife corridors to preserve healthy natural systems and biodiversity	• Access, Interpretation, and Education • Applied science • Network and Partnership Support	1
Objective 3 – Lead by example to reduce the impacts of climate change…		

[3] Each year, the board reviews and generally makes minor adjustments to the annual goals and objectives. For ease of cross-year comparison, this exercise refers only to the most recent fiscal year goals and objectives.
[4] In the inaugural grantmaking cycle, grantee applications did not identify alignment with objectives

Objective 4 – Work with fire agencies and surrounding communities to strengthen the prevention of, preparation for and response to wildland fires for enhanced ecosystem resiliency and public safety	• Network and Partnership Support	1
Objective 5 – Support the viability of sustainable agriculture and protect the character of rural communities	• Access, Interpretation and Education	0
Goal 3 – Connect people to open space and agricultural lands, and a regional environmental protection vision		
Objective 1 – Engage the public in realizing the benefits and responsibilities of a regional environmental protection vision to further the District's achievements in protecting open space and agricultural lands	• Access, Interpretation and Education	3
Objective 2 – Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies to build and strengthen partnerships, increase broad and inclusive public outreach and engagement, engage tribal groups in the District's work, and instill DEI values across all levels of the organization	• Access, Interpretation and Education • Network and Partnership Support	4
Objective 3 – Expand opportunities, including multimodal options, to equitably connect people to their public open space preserves and enhance the visitor experience in balance with the protection of natural resources	• Access, Interpretation and Education	5
Objective 4 – Develop strategies to reflect the diverse communities we serve in the District's visitors, staff, volunteers, and partners.	• Access, Interpretation and Education • Network and Partnership Support	3
Goal 4 – Strengthen organizational capacity and long-term financial sustainability to fulfill the mission.	• Network and Partnership Support	2

Analysis of Findings

- Most grantee applications explicitly identified how their proposed work aligned with one or more Midpen goals and objectives.
- All proposals selected for awards received highest ratings for alignment with Midpen goals.
- The majority of grantees identified alignment with Goal 3 objectives.

Recommendations

- When recommending grant awards to the board, include a brief analysis about how grantees align with and support Midpen's strategic goals and objectives.

Outcome 2.B. - DEI objectives have been explicitly identified/referenced for the GMP and within the most recent RFP. Consideration of DEI in outreach and evaluation of proposals are present but limited. Rating: 2.5

Findings

- **DEI and Organizational Goals:** In FY25, Midpen maintained a DEI-related goal and objective: *Goal 3, Objective 2 – Implement DEI strategies to build and strengthen partnerships, increase broad and inclusive public outreach and engagement, engage tribal groups in the District's work, and instill DEI values across all levels of the organization.*

  There are two references that align the GMP with Goal 3, Objective 2:

  1. The GMP Board Policy 3.10 (2/28/2019): *The District values diversity and encourages residents of all socio-economic backgrounds to enjoy their public preserves. The District also focuses on developing partnerships with organizations that help welcome and excite diverse and underserved residents to experience their preserves. Consequently, the District will be committed to soliciting proposals from a diverse range of organizations. Application solicitations will be broadly disseminated with the assistance of groups that hold connections to underserved audiences, such as the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.*
  2. Midpen's DEI webpage: There is a statement that identifies the GMP as one strategy by which Midpen seeks to provide for all members of our community "opportunities to engage in the healing power of nature in our public open space lands."
- **DEI and the RFP**:
  - The RFP requires applicants to explain in their proposal how their projects align with one of the goals and objectives in Midpen's current fiscal year Strategic Plan, which includes the DEI goal and objectives.
  - In 2023, across all three funding priorities, the RFP included updated language and example projects intended to improve an applicant's understanding of Midpen's interest in supporting projects that addressed DEI barriers in general and explicitly identifying native groups (see sidebar). Previous RFPs omitted specific mention of supporting Indigenous communities.
- **DEI and Outreach**: The outreach plan in 2023 involved the same methods used in 2021.[5] All

Updated RFP Language:

Applicants are encouraged to emphasize if and how the proposal bridges gaps in access, widens equitable participation, supports indigenous communities, or otherwise helps lower barriers to traditionally underserved or under-represented communities.

Example Project:

Support for forums, site visits, and other convenings for capacity building for indigenous knowledge, revitalization of Native American land management practices, and related partnership development

[5] Outreach included direct notifications to partners, announcements for the GMP webpage, a press release, a Public Affairs managed e-news article and social media posts. GMP staff also hosted a proposal workshop.

outreach was in English. On the webpage, Spanish interpretation services were offered, noted in Spanish at the bottom of the page.

- **DEI and Proposal Evaluation:** The 2023 proposal scoring criteria included an "Engagement" guideline to evaluate a project's ability to "reach underserved communities, broaden the range of organizations served by Midpen, has strong public support and/or was developed with widespread community participation, or involves one or more partner agencies or organizations."

Analysis of Findings

- With the revised language and inclusion of example projects, the GMP has made strides to reflect Midpen's expectation that it serves as a bridge to groups that may not traditionally seek funding from a public agency and/or that serve individuals or groups that are underrepresented users of Midpen's preserves.
- Proposal reviewers had limited guidance to evaluate submissions from a DEI perspective; the criteria were very broad and it was not consistently clear if/when a proposal was noted to align with Midpen's DEI-related Goal 3, Objective 2.
- Despite limited DEI-explicit outreach and proposal evaluation, in the 2023 grantmaking cycle the majority of proposals submitted had 'elements of engagement' with people of color or socioeconomic disadvantaged groups.
    - Three proposals served tribal groups, one of which was, for the first time, from a tribal group. Midpen funded the three proposals serving tribal groups.

Recommendations

- Continue to include the revised language and example projects to highlight the types of projects Midpen is interested in supporting.
- Make available on-demand written material in Spanish and other languages as applicable.
- Make readily visible the availability of interpretation services; ensure easy accessibility.
- Conduct outreach to networked organizations, such as the members of the Environmental Education Funders Collaborative, that reach organizations with which Midpen does not have direct connections.
- Provide clear guidance to proposal reviewers for assessing DEI-elements of a proposal; consider a specific DEI-related scoring criterion.

Area of Success	Measures of Success
3. Diversity	A. Applicants and grantees are distributed across the program's three funding priorities.
	B. There is geographical diversity in the location of headquarters, services, and beneficiaries/participants.

Overall Success Rating: 2.88

Outcome 3.A. – Midpen applicants and grantees have been largely distributed across the three funding priority areas, but only the Access, Interpretation and Education funding priority areas has had a grantee every cycle. Rating: 2.75.

Findings

- Applicants identify the funding priority area they are applying to in their applications. There were applications received in all priority areas across all cycles. The table below shows the number of applicants and grantees by priority area.
- Applicant Data
    - The most common priority area each cycle was Access, Interpretation and Education (AIE); the number of applicants grew each year from 14 in 2019, to 17 in 2021, to 27 in 2023.
    - Applied Science (AS), while there were significantly fewer applications in this priority area than AIE, it was the second most common in 2019 and 2021, and the least common in 2023.
    - There were few Network and Partnership Support (NPS) applications in 2019 and 2021; the number tripled in 2023.

Table: Number of Applicants and Grantees by Funding Priority Areas

Funding Priority Areas	# of Applicants				# of Grantees			
	2019	2021	2023	Total by Area	2019	2021	2023	Total by Area
Access, Interpretation, and Education	14	17	27	58	4	6	3	13
Applied Science	5	8	4	17	2	4	0	6
Network and Partnership Support	2	3	9	14	1	0	2	3
Total by Year	21	28	40		7	10	5	

- Grantee Data
    - Most grants were awarded each cycle to AIE applicants (4, 6 and 3 respectively). AIE was the only priority area with grants awarded each cycle.
    - AS grants were made in 2019 (2) and 2021 (4).
    - NPS grants were made in 2019 (1) and 2023 (2).
    - Across the 22 grants awarded three grantees, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory (SFBBO), Vida Verde Nature Education, and Saved by Nature each received more than one grant.
        - SFBBO: 3 awards (two in 2019 and one in 2021).
        - Vida Verde Nature Education: 2 awards (one each in 2019 and 2021).
        - Saved by Nature: 2 awards (one each in 2021 and 2023).

Analysis of Findings

- Based on interviews from leadership, there is a sense that that NPS funding priority may be missing the mark; there are questions about whether it is relevant enough, or that the evaluation criteria is not well aligned and/or more outreach is needed to generate greater awareness of the opportunity.
- Interviews with leadership, and anecdotal insights from Natural Resources department staff, suggest that the low number of applicants to the AS funding priority is due to the size of the grants and/or too limited of an outreach plan.

Recommendations

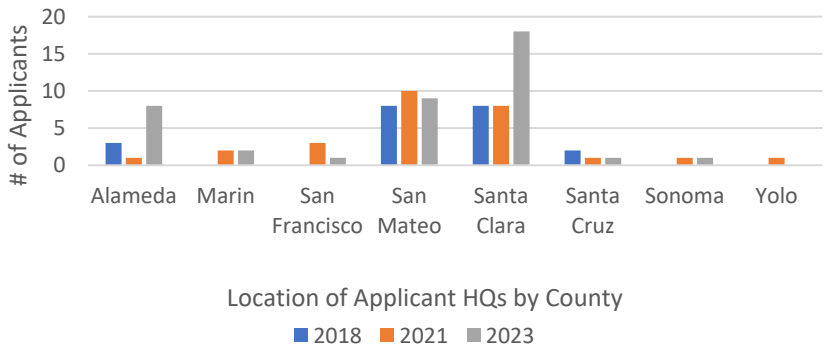
- Utilize the LFPAC study session to review descriptions of all three funding priorities.
- To improve outreach to AS application prospects, engage university Foundation Relations offices and survey them about grant size implications.

Outcome 3.B. – The geographic locations of Midpen applicants and grantees have been largely diverse. Rating: 3

Findings

- Across 89 Applications: Locations by Headquarter.
    - Exhibit 1 shows the location and number of applicant headquarters by county across the three grant cycles. In 2021, applicant headquarters spanned the most counties (8); applications were received from applicants in seven and four counties in 2023 and 2019, respectively.

Exhibit 1 - Locations of Applicant Headquarters by County Each Cycle

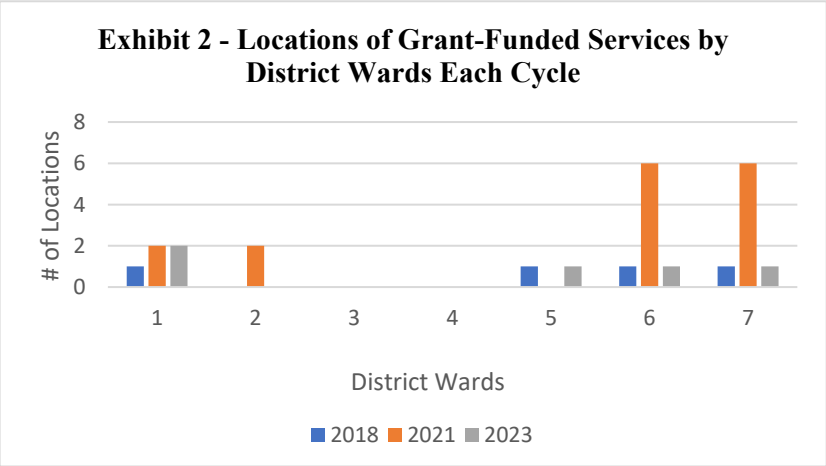


- Across 89 Applications: Locations of Headquarter by City.
    - Applicant headquarters were located in 13 cities:

Berkeley	Half Moon Bay
Campbell	Los Gatos
Davenport	Milpitas

Palo Alto	San Gregorio
Pescadero	San Jose
Redwood City	San Rafel
	Santa Cruz

- Across 22 Grants: Location by Service Delivery.
    - The locations of services delivered varied significantly. A given grantee may have multiple delivery sites.
    - On the Coast: Seven grant-funded projects conducted services at specific locations on the San Mateo coast: Half Moon Bay, Pescadero, San Gregorio, and Tunitas Creek Beach County Park. Other locations included Los Gatos, East Palo Alto, and San Mateo County, and more generally across Midpen Preserves.
    - By Ward: Exhibit 2 shows, by District Ward, where grant-funded activities took place each grant cycle. Appendix 4 is a map of the seven wards.



- Across 22 Grants: Beneficiaries/participants locations.
    - Most grant-funded activities served beneficiaries/participants sourced from a variety of locations in the Bay Area. A few served beneficiaries/participants from specific location, which included East Palo Alto, San Jose, Half Moon Bay, and Pescadero High School.

Analysis of Findings

- The geographies (headquarters, service and beneficiary locations) were diverse across each cycle, which reflects the solid execution of RFP guidelines that state that pre-proposals and full proposals reviews will take under consideration, among other factors, "balance/distribution of funds by geographic area…".
- For field-based activities, the RFP guidelines state that they must be conducted within Midpen preserves, and projects that involve transportation costs for bringing participants to activities must be to and from activities on Midpen preserves.
    - A few proposal reviewer survey respondents commented having confusion about the requirement to conduct activities on Midpen land.

  - Only the full proposal asks for specific location of services.
- The data suggests that there was an improved outreach plan implemented that helped to diversify the pool of applicant prospects across the grant cycles.
- By wards, there has been less diversity, which reflects that Midpen preserves are predominately in Wards 6 and 7.
- The location of most beneficiaries/participants of grant-funded activities has been varied, but the data was not sufficient or accessible to determine how diverse the locations were.

Recommendations

- Continue to diversify the pool of applicants, review and refresh the outreach plan, identifying new communication platforms, especially in person and on the coast.
- Incorporate into the pre-proposal form an explicit request to identify the location(s) of the proposed activities.
- Clarify and/or confirm the RFP requirement that grant-funded *field* services be conducted on Mipen's preserves and communicate to proposal reviewers.

Area of Success	Measures of Success
4. Effectiveness	A. Grantees accomplished all deliverables in reimbursement period with funding
	B. Applicant/Grantees received timely responses from Midpen staff to questions and reimbursement requests
	C. Midpen grants build the capacity of grantees

Overall Success Rating: 2.5

Background: Midpen awards grants on a reimbursable basis.[6] Whenever a grantee submits a request for payment, the grantee also submits an Approved Work Plan progress report, including an actuals-to-budget expenditure report,. Tier 2 grantees, those with awards over $25,000, must also submit an annual report by June 30 and include responses to four prompts listed in the Reimbursement Requirements attachment to their grant agreement.

Outcome 4.A. – Midpen grantees have accomplished their Approved Work Plan within the project budget, but the information is incomplete. Rating: 2.5

Findings

- Across the 22 funded projects/programs no funding has been withdrawn from any grantee to date due to work plan non-completion or other non-compliance conditions.

[6] Grantee may request up to 15% of the award up front.

- As part of every Approved Work Plan, in addition to grantee-identified tasks, are Midpen-identified "Project Deliverables":
    - Provide project photos and necessary photo releases.
    - Provide meeting agendas or summary of events and attendance numbers for all events that took place during the grant period.
    - Following project completion, give a presentation to Midpen's Board of Directors on project outcomes.
- While confirming the fulfilment of the first two deliverables for all grantees is not feasible for this strategic review, GMP staff has assessed that no grantee to date has presented to the Board (see Outcome 6.A for details on board presentations).

Analysis of Findings:

- **Compliance:** The finding that no grant funding has been withdrawn means that no grantee met a condition that could result in a loss of funding, as outlined in the RFP (see sidebar).
- **Outcomes:** It is not always clear what changes occurred as a result of the grant-funded activities. **Understanding both the quantity and quality of** grantees' accomplishments would help tell the complete story about what was accomplished and how those accomplishments contribute to Midpen's strategic goals and objectives.
- **Opportunity:** Since launching, the GMP has consistently grown and adapted, and this strategic review recommends additional refinements. This is an ideal time to consider incorporating an impact statement and measurements for future grant making cycles to support the further development of the GMP.
- **Challenge:** Currently, all grantee data is stored as files in SharePoint. Not having a grant award management structure makes it impracticable to comprehensively assess grantees' work plan accomplishments (see Outcome 7.A. for details).

Loss of Funding Conditions

Grantee fails to obtain a grant agreement.

Grantee fails to complete the funded project (conform substantially to the agreement).

Grantee fails to submit all documentation within the time periods specified in the grant agreement.

Grantee fails to secure environmental clearance to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) or other necessary project permits.

Grantee changes the project scope without the concurrence of Midpen.

Grantee terminates the project by written notice 30 days in advance.

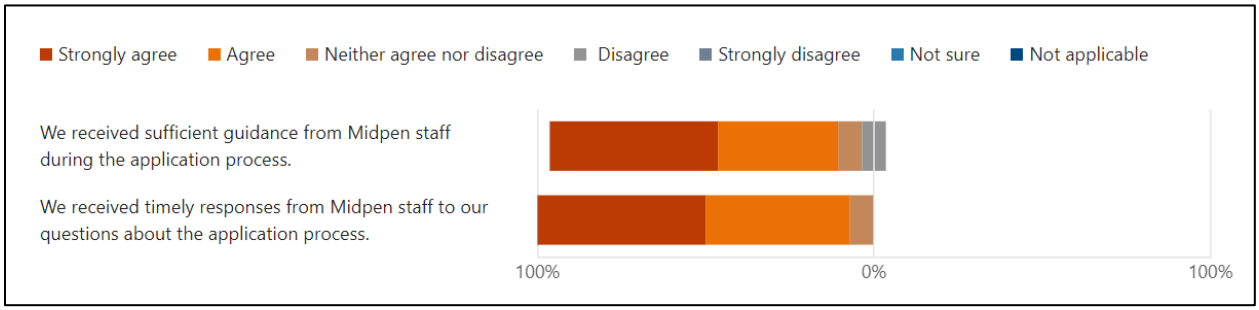
Recommendations

- Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss grantmaking impact.

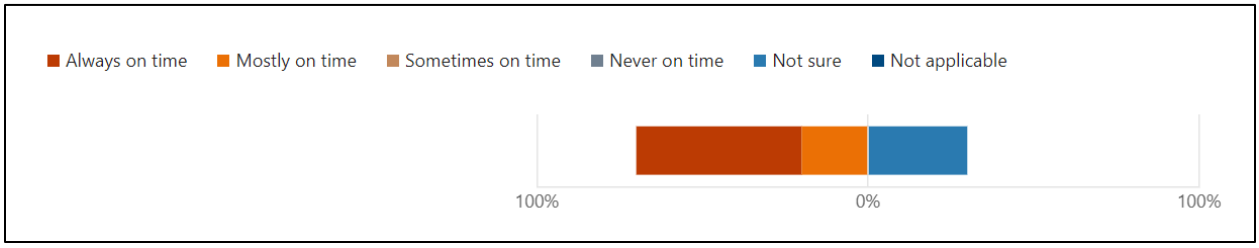
Outcome 4.B. – The majority of applicants and grantees agreed that Midpen provided sufficient guidance and timely responses to application questions, and grantees mostly agreed that reimbursement payments were received promptly. Rating: 3

Findings

- **Application support:** Applicant and grantee survey respondents (14) were asked how much they agreed with two statements about receiving application support and timely responses from Midpen. As shown in the graphic below, the large majority agreed or strongly agreed with both statements. One indicated that they did not agree that enough application guidance was provided.



- **Timeliness of reimbursements**: Grantees were asked about their experience with the timeliness of payments received from Midpen. As shown in the graphic below The majority indicated that payments were mostly or always on time; 3 grantees were unsure.



Analysis of Findings

- Based on the survey responses, most applicants indicated being most supported by the application stage processes, methods of communication, and/or scheduling.
- This also held true for the grantees' experiences with the timeliness of processing reimbursement requests.

Recommendations

- Continue to utilize GMP's previous applicant support and reimbursement work plans.

Outcome 4.C. – The effect of Midpen grants on grantees' capacity suggests mixed results. Rating: 2

Background: One of the purposes of the GMP as outlined in the discussion of Outcome 1 is to *build the capacity of academic and nonprofit institutions in order to sustain and grow the conservation field*. The Applicant and Grantee Survey included questions about the effort to apply for and manage a grant, the relative size of the grant awarded, and the percentage of indirect cost the grant covers. These effort-related questions, for the purposes of this report, serve as proxy indicators for whether a grant builds a grantee's capacity.

The underlying assumption is that the receipt of a Midpen grant outweighs the effort to pursue and manage a Midpen grant, thereby building grantee capacity. [7]

Findings

- Grantee survey responses to question related to the effort to apply for a Midpen grant:

Measure	Grantee Responses (N=11)
Effort to apply, as compared to other applications	A majority reported that the effort to apply was manageable. • Extra Effort: 1 • Manageable Effort: 6 • Some Effort: 3 • Not Sure: 1
Survey Respondent Comments on Effort to Apply for a Midpen Grant Award *"For the scope and amount of the grant, I thought that the application effort was just right. I also liked the criteria you use, and I appreciate that your application does not ask for the same info in different questions."* *"I appreciate having the pre-proposal stage to help reduce effort if the project is not a fit from the start. However, the proposal process was definitely more effort than a typical proposal that we see in this funding range ($25-50K), and more comparable to the proposal process that I see frequently for projects in the range of $100-250K."* *"We've been so grateful for the opportunities to apply for Midpen grants, but the eligibility requirements and applications seem to get harder to comply with. We recognize that those eligibility requirements are needed to focus on Midpen priorities, but this is not an easy grant to apply for."* *"An every-other-year RFP is too challenging."*	

- Grantee survey responses to questions related to the effort to manage (through reimbursements and reporting) a Midpen grant:

Measure	Grantee Responses
Reporting on Progress, as compared to other grant reporting process	The vast majority reported that the level of effort to report on progress was the same or less than other grant reporting processes. • Exceeds effort: 1 • Same effort: 7 • Less effort: 2 • Not sure: 1
Reimbursement Timeline	All respondents reported that the grantee-defined, flexible reimbursement timeline between 1 and 3 years was somewhat to very effective. • Very effective: 9 • Somewhat effective: 2
Survey Respondent Comments on Effort to Manage a Midpen Grant Award	

[7] "Capacity" is not defined but for the purposes of this review it is being interpreted broadly, i.e., it is inclusive of the grantee's ability to fulfill its mission effectively and sustainably.

> *"We like the length of reimbursement…it allows us to be flexible with our partners to either increase or decrease programming. In an effort to have a long-term impact on the community, we allocate Midpen grant funds throughout a two-year period and that fits with our budget. If we had more funds, we would then adjust to perhaps a three-year reimbursement period and provide more programming."*
>
> *"Reimbursements create more work for grantees and potentially cause issues with cash flow management."*

- Grant size:
  - Half of 10 grantee survey respondents indicated that their grant size was smaller than most grants they receive; five reported that the size was about the same as other grants; and one indicated that it was larger.[8]
- Indirect rate:
  - Midpen grants allow for a 10% indirect rate, as a percentage of the total program cost.

Analysis of Findings

- **Effort and Capacity**: While the data suggests a few exceptions, it can be interpreted that in general the added value of receiving a grant outweighs grantees' effort to apply for and manage a Midpen grant. From this perspective, as a result of receiving a Midpen grant the organization gains greater capacity to fulfill its mission.
- **Grant Size and Capacity**: Interpreting survey respondents' perspectives on grant sizes requires an understanding of the intended impact of Midpen as a grant maker, which is not currently clear. Questions of interest include:
  - Is it Midpen's strategy to focus on providing smaller, targeted grants? This could align with a strategy to support early-stage initiatives, grassroots organizations, or specific projects that require less funding. Or is the strategy reflecting a preference for spreading resources across a larger number of grantees to maximize reach and impact?
  - Does Midpen see itself as a supplemental supporter rather than a primary source of funding? For example, aiming to provide gap funding or match other sources of revenue. Or does Midpen's grant sizes simply reflect a competitive grantmaking process, where limited resources are divided among many applicants?
- **Indirect Rate and Capacity**: Indirect rates recognize that not all costs to run a program or project are directly related to the program or project. Paying an indirect rate is an organizational capacity building practice. Midpen has always allowed for a 10% indirect rate. The GMP reviewed the rates set by government agencies that often guide local reimbursement rates.
  - According to the National Council of Nonprofits, in October 2024 the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) raised its *de minimis* indirect rate from 10% to 15%.
  - The California Association of Nonprofits reports that the state congress is examining a bill that could raise the minimum indirect rate to 15%.

[8] The question was, "Thinking of your most recent grant and considering the length of your reimbursement period, how would you characterize the size of the award compared to your other grants?"

- An analysis of peer and near-peer organizations (Appendix 5) shows a large majority have adopted a rate above 10%.

These findings suggest that at 10%, Midpen's allowance would be considered low, and the funded organization may be challenged to cover the true costs of project implementation.

Recommendations

- Continue to explore ways to reduce grant application administrative burdens for the applicant to help increase the value of the grant.
- To help inform appropriate grant size, utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss grantmaking impact, and evaluate award amounts in light of the year over year increases in Midpen's property tax revenues and against peer grant makers.
- Consider increasing the indirect rate allowance to a minimum of 15%.

Areas of Success	Measures of Success
5. Equitability	A. Funding is multi-year and unrestricted
	B. Paperwork is simple/streamlined
	C. Burden of early-stage vetting is on the funder
	D. Engagement transparent
	E. Feedback is solicited
	F. Support beyond the check is provided

Overall Success Rating: 2

Background: The six Measures of Success associated with this Area of Success were developed by the Trust-based Philanthropy Project (TBP) to "advance a more just and equitable society by alleviating the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and communities."

There was not an expectation that the GMP would employ the TBP model. Rather they are offered here as one framework to build awareness that grantmaking processes and principles do impact equitability, and this intersects Midpen's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) objective:

- Goal 3, Objective 2 (FY25) – Implement DEI strategies to build and strengthen partnerships, increase broad and inclusive public outreach and engagement, engage tribal groups in the District's work, and instill DEI values across all levels of the organization.[9]

Outcome 5.A. – The GMP does support multi-year grant periods and GMP grants are not unrestricted. While restricting the use of funds is a standard approach for a public funding agency, it is less equitable, according to TBP best practices. Rating 2

[9] Findings and analysis related to the GMP's contribution to Midpen's DEI objective are discussed with Area of Success #2: GMP Partnerships support Midpen goals and objectives.

Findings

- Multi-year funding (see sidebar)
    - A Midpen grant period can be for up to three years. The applicant proposes the length of the grant period.
    - Most grantees establish a multi-year grant period. According to grantee survey respondents, four had a 3-year grant period, four had a 2-year period and 2 had a one-year period.[10]
- Restrictions
    - Midpen grant awards are not unrestricted. The grant agreement describes that funds can "cover expenses related to the implementation of proposed projects within the approved project budget." These are identified as salaries/wages and benefits of those directly engaged in the execution of the grant project; travel; consultants/contractors; equipment and supplies; and indirect costs, capped at 10%.

From Stanford Social Innovation Review: "Distinct from continuous funding (a series of grants provided to the same recipient on an annual basis) multi-year funding is a firm commitment to at least two years of funding, ideally more."

Analysis of Findings

- Multi-year funding
    - Self-determined, multi-year grants support the specific needs of the grantee and is especially helpful for grantees' budget forecasting.
    - One grantee survey respondent commented: "We like the Midpen (multi-year funding) as it allows us to be flexible with our partners to either increase or decrease programming. In our case, in an effort to have a long-term impact on the community we allocate Midpen grant funds throughout a two-year period and that fits with our budget. If we had more funds, we would then adjust to perhaps a three-year reimbursement period and providing more programming."
- Restricted funding
    - It is highly unusual for a public funding agency to provide unrestricted grants. In stewardship to the public dollar that it manages, a public funding agency has an interest to ensure that funds are allocated to specific purposes aligned with their priorities and objectives. However, from the grantee's perspective, unrestricted funding is usually preferred as it supports their ability to direct revenue to where it's needed most.

Recommendations

- Continue employing the approach to multi-year and restricted funding.
- Consider limiting the reimbursement period to two years to align with the bi-annual release of RFPs, thereby supporting the grantee's opportunity to apply for a follow-on grant.

[10] It was not feasible, given the limitations of the current data management system, for this strategic review to analyze all grantees' reimbursement period.

Outcome 5.B. – While establishing a pre-proposal step meaningfully streamlined administrative efforts there are opportunities to consider more ways to decrease administrative burdens. Rating 1.5

Findings

- Policy
  - The GMP strives to reduce paperwork burdens on grantees. Board Policy 3.10 states that "the application and reporting structure (ensures) that smaller grantees are not prohibited from applying due to cumbersome application and reporting requirements in relation to the funding received." As noted in the grant agreement Midpen "designed the forms and procedures to keep organizational effort to the minimum for grantees."

- Proposals
  - The GMP provides two award levels: Up to $25,000 (Tier 1) and $25,001 to $50,000 (Tier 2). Table shows the proposal and reporting expectations for each Tier.

Proposal and Reporting Expectations by Tier

	Pre-Proposal	Full Proposal	Progress Updates	Annual Report
Tier 1	x	x	x	
Tier 2	x	x	x	x

- Proposals
  - Pre-Proposals were introduced in 2021 and are the first step in the application process for both Tier 1 and Tier 2 applicants. As stated in the RFP, the pre-proposals help the review committee to "(1) develop an understanding of interested organizations and potential grant applicants across the three funding priorities, and (2) ensure appropriate project endeavors and a balance across the three grantmaking priorities."
  - Tier 1 and Tier 2 applicants with high enough review scores are invited to submit a Full Proposal.
- Reports
  - Progress updates are expected of both Tier 1 and 2 grantees and generally happen when a grantee submits a reimbursement request.
  - An annual report (maximum of 5 pages) is only required of Tier 2 grantees and these have been required to be submitted by June 30.
- Reimbursements
  - When requesting reimbursement, a grantee completes the Payment Request Form, which includes a section on progress updates, the Budget Tracking Sheet, and all meeting agendas, associated invoices, receipts of expenditures, and/or timesheets.

Analysis of Findings

- The pre-proposal step is a streamlined application step and benefits all applicants as well the Midpen's internal stakeholders.
- The annual report, which provides a more detailed analysis of the funded work than the progress updates, is only an expectation of a grantee receiving more than $25,000; grantees receiving less than $25,000 do not have this requirement.
- Maintaining the proposal and report requirements for Tier 1 grantees is counterproductive to Midpen's interest to reduce barriers for grantees, and especially small organizations. While Tier 1 grantees have not been required to submit an annual report, they are required to fulfill both a pre and full proposal and reimbursement and progress update requirements.
- Reimbursement requests are paperwork heavy, time consuming and resource-intensive for both the grantee and Midpen.
    - Paperwork demands are more burdensome for small organizations.
    - Ensuring accurate and timely reimbursement, grantees managing reimbursable grants need financial systems capable of handling fund accounting, time tracking and staff allocations across different grants.
    - Failure to meet reimbursement rules and requirements can result in audits or loss of funding.
    - Grantees have commented that the reimbursement approach to distributing funding is not ideal.

Survey Respondent's Comments on Reimbursements

Please switch to making up front grant awards :)

Is there a world in which you don't make reimbursable grants, but traditional pay-up-front grants?

- Findings from research conducted on public agency grant reimbursement practices for this strategic review suggest that there is no universal legal requirement that public grants must be reimbursable.
- Although reimbursements can be a challenge because they can strain an organization's cash flow, it is helpful that 15% of a Midpen grant award can be requested up front, equating to $3,750 of a $25,000 grant and $7,500 of a $50,000 grant, with the stipulation that these funds be spent within six months. GMP staff are aware of only one request for up-front funding.
    - In 2023, a new California law (AB 590) designed to improve equitable access to state funding allows state agencies to advance up to 25% of the total grant amount to qualifying nonprofits, with provisions for larger advances in some cases.

Recommendations

- Continue the use of pre-proposals.
- Change the annual report submission date to 12 months from the date of the executed agreement.

- Consider exempting Tier 1 applicants from submitting a full proposal; identify modifications to the pre-proposal to support this innovation.
- Consider using an up-front full payment model for Tier 1 grantees or provide half of the grant up front and the other half upon completion, and/or increase advanced payment to 25% to be aligned with state and federal agencies.

Outcome 5.C. – Early-stage vetting, as an equity practice, has been very limited. Rating 1.5

Background: Similar to 'streamlined paperwork' approaches, early-stage vetting involves a funder's method of getting to know an applicant. As an equity measure, the TBP Project asserts that it is "the funder's responsibility to get to know the issues and organizations in their funding landscape, saving nonprofits time in the early stages of the vetting process." Early-stage vetting strategies include the following:

- Research available public records (e.g., information on their websites) to understand a prospective grantee's purpose, programs, leadership, and financial standing; explore others doing similar work; talk with other funders and collaborators who might have insights.
- Meet with highly qualified prospective grantees and, if possible, observe their programming.
- Look beyond usual circles to identify organizations that are aligned with the grantor's values and vision, but that may be overlooked due to implicit bias.
- Revisit grantmaking criteria to understand how it may be giving preference to more established or well-funded organizations, with the goal of having it center the needs, experiences, and priorities of the people closest to the issues.

Findings

- Previous RFP outreach plans have included applicant workshops and consultations to support their efforts.
- Interviews with previous GMP staff have noted that limited staff time has prevented GMP staff from deepening efforts with early-stage vetting processes.

Analysis of Findings

- GMP staff time has been too limited and/or the timeframe has been insufficient for early-stage vetting. Increasing the Senior Grants Technician from a .5 FTE to a 1 FTE is expected to provide additional capacity to execute early-stage vetting.

Recommendations

- Build in time during the pre-proposal review process to support GMP staff to conduct in-depth research on applicants.
- Conduct in-person outreach in locations where Midpen may be less familiar in the community.
- Review proposal templates to ensure that the information being requested is not otherwise publicly available.
- Leverage the Environmental Education Funders Collaborative membership to identify new applicants.

Outcome 5.D. – The level of transparent engagement is moderate. Rating 2

Background: According to Candid, a nonprofit leader supporting grantees and funders with access to comprehensive data and insights about the local communities, grant making transparency can help establish credibility and increase public trust, improve grantee relationships, lessen redundancy and increase collaboration, and build a community of shared learning.

Transparent measures include:

- Make publicly accessible all information to support applicant prospects' decision making and processes (see sidebar for details).
- Use e-newsletters, blogs, social media.
- Be clear up front about what is and is not fundable; let potential applicants know if meetings are not a good use of their time.
- Give grantees ample notice if making any changes that will affect their funding.
- Be open and honest about internal organizational struggles, questions, and thought processes.
- Invite grantees to share their own challenges.
- Conduct grantee surveys.

Accessible information includes:
- Contact information
- Mission and purpose
- Names/bios of key staff
- Board list, with affiliations
- Grantmaking strategies and policies
- DEI policies
- Grantmaking priorities, selection criteria and process, including guidelines
- List of past grants made, which should include recipient name, grant amount, and recipient location information.
- Assessment of overall grantmaking performance and effectiveness.
- Knowledge center
- Feedback mechanism

Findings

- **Accessible Information**
  - **Website:** Midpen maintains a website through which visitors can reach the mission and purpose of Midpen, access background and contact information about Board Members and the General Manager. There is a dedicated DEI page accessible from the Who We Are drop-down menu: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at Midpen | Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.
  - **Webpage:** The GMP maintains a webpage, Grantmaking Program | Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, that includes information about the program's history, mission, purpose, funding priorities, and the amount that can be applied for. Also referenced is the most recent Request for Proposals, which details applicant guidelines, scoring criteria, the pre-proposal and full proposal templates, the grant agreement template, reimbursement processes and expectations, and program contact information. Additionally, the webpage includes the status of the most recent or current applicant period, notification sign-up form, contact information (noted also in Spanish), and the list of previous grantees by each grantmaking cycle. Each listing includes the grantee's name, a short description of the funded project, including the grant period length, the amount of the grant awarded and their awards, the amounts they received, and brief descriptions of their projects. The webpage also includes grantee stories.

  - **E-newsletters, blogs, social media/networking**: GMP highlights grantees' work in the internal Bi-Weekly newsletter.
- **Grantee survey**: For this strategic review, all grantees and applicants from the 2021 and 2023 rounds were invited to respond to a survey, with questions about clarity of guidelines and scoring, support provided, effort to apply and report, etc. While this is the first time a formal survey has been conducted, feedback has been solicited during application workshops and consultations.

Analysis of Findings

- The website and GMP webpage address the majority of the information that Candid posits as important for transparency.
- RFPs provide applicants with information about what is and is not fundable and how proposals are evaluated. The RFP process incorporates opportunities for prospective applicants to meet with GMP staff and ways to contact staff is provided enabling stakeholders to reach staff outside of planned meetings.
- What is not available, based on Candid's list of accessible information to include, is an assessment of overall grantmaking performance and effectiveness; a knowledge center; and a standardized feedback mechanism.
  - With only a 7-year history, the GMP is just now undertaking a review of its grantmaking performance and effectiveness. Being a young grant maker and also that the GMP is a small program, building a knowledge center, i.e., a repository of grantmaking lessons learned, program evaluations and reports, has not previously been considered.
- Two primary barriers to transparency were identified:
  1. Accessing the GMP URL, https://www.openspace.org/what-we-do/projects/grantmaking-program is unusually opaque. There is no direct link from the website homepage, and it does not appear on any drop-down menu. A visitor might attempt to look under the "Projects and Programs" menu option, but once there will find there are no pre-set search filters. The only way to find the webpage is through the search function.
  2. Inconsistent timing of the openings of each of the three grantmaking cycles (Cycle 1 opened February 2019, Cycle 2 opened August 2021, Cycle 3 opened June 2023) is a barrier because it reduces a nonprofit's ability to budget forecast.

Recommendations

- Work with Public Affairs to create greater visibility for/improve access to the GMP webpage.
- Consider distributing, and posting to the GMP webpage, this programmatic strategic review.
- Incorporate multiple, consistent, accessible, and easy to use stakeholder feedback mechanisms. See recommendations to 5.E. for details.
- Identify and implement ways to more frequently promote grantees through Midpen's external communication platforms.

Outcome 5.E. – Soliciting feedback happens, although inconsistently. Rating 2.5

Background: A grant maker's work will be inherently more successful if it is informed by the expertise and experience of grantee partners and communities. Insights gained can help a funder better serve grantees; encourage mutual trust and authenticity; and improve a funder's practices and policies. Informing stakeholders about actions taken as a result of the feedback is also important.

Findings

- There are multiple ways the GMP has solicited feedback, including informal notes, formal surveys, site visits, and professional learning experiences.
    - **Informal notes**: Feedback from applicants was welcomed during applicant webinar workshop, individual consultations, and via email upon confirmation of receipt for pre-proposal and proposals. Suggestions from GMP staff and from feedback from 2021 and 2023 proposal reviewers collected through GMP staff's pre and post proposal evaluation discussions has been captured in an "improvement notes" file on SharePoint. Input from proposal reviewers may also be found in their scoring evaluation notes (for example, one reviewer commented that the Engagement criteria was hard to apply to Applied Science applicants).
    - **Surveys**: This strategic review is the first formal survey conducted with applicants, grantees and proposal reviewers.
    - **Site visits**: A limited number of site visits have been conducted. The objective of site visits is generally to deepen the funder's understanding of the grantee's work and impact, and address questions and concerns from either party, and generally build relationships.
    - **Professional Learning:** Midpen has been a member of the Environmental Education Funders Collaborative (EEFC), an initiative designed to advance learning and conduct joint action to increase access to environmental education and outdoor experiences for all young people in the Bay Area. As a professional network that meets bi-monthly, engagement with EEFC supports the GMP through sharing environmental education funding experiences and the potential for incorporating learnings into grantmaking processes and goals. EEFC uses an annual 'learning agenda' to focus its conversations. The themes of the most recent years have focused on equity. There has been no reporting out by GMP of EEFC learnings (see 2024 Highlights as an example) and no known action taken as a result of the learnings.

Analysis of Findings

- While soliciting feedback happens, with limited GMP staff time it has not been implemented consistently. Soliciting feedback through more time-intensive methods, such as site visits and formal surveys, is challenging. In general, the GMP would benefit from a standardized practice of soliciting feedback.

Recommendations

- Establish formal feedback opportunities within existing processes. For example, a link to a short questionnaire in an auto-response confirmation email, or a short survey to all proposal reviewers.
- Be transparent with action taken as a result of feedback and other learning. Look for opportunities to share learning with others.
- Continue participation with EEFC and explore ways to strategically leverage the resources available through the network.

Outcome 5.F. – It has been the intention of the GMP to offer and provide resources beyond grant funds. Staffing limitations have prevented the successful implementation of this. Rating 1.5

Background: Funders have more to offer than dollars alone. Responsive, adaptive, non-monetary support bolsters leadership, capacity, and organizational health. Examples of such support can include invitations to trainings and workshops, providing subject matter expertise, sponsoring a service/subscription and meeting space, and/or connecting grantees with other funders.

Findings

- Providing 'support beyond the check' has been an objective of the GMP as a way to encourage organizations with limited or minimal organizational capacity to apply, as demonstrated by the question on the proposal form, which asks, "Does your organization require support from Midpen to achieve the project as described in this proposal? If so, describe or discuss your support in addition to grant funding (e.g., subject matter expert input, technical data, reporting assistance) needed from Midpen."
    - Many grantee survey respondents (5 of 11) noted that they did not receive support from Midpen in ways that go beyond financial support. Three responded, "yes" and three were "not sure".
- Anecdotally, at the time of this analysis, GMP staff is aware only of Applied Science applicants' request for help from Natural Resources staff; it is understood that one request was fulfilled.

Analysis of Findings

- Offering support beyond grant funding helps expand Midpen's relationship from grantor to partner. It suggests an investment in the success of the organization and not just the grant-funded project.
- While it appears that requests for support have been limited to Applied Science applicants, it is not clear what help was provided and how this might differ from other engagement with Natural Resource staff. For example, it is noted that on the pre-proposal form that Applied Science applicants are required to consult with Midpen staff prior to full proposal submittal for the narrowly stated purpose of determining whether faculty sponsorship is required. As well, debrief notes from previous GMP staff indicate that more communication with Natural Resources staff about permitting needs is needed.

Recommendations

- Assess the inclusion of offering Midpen resources and how to engage those resources. Considerations: Develop a process that includes the would-be impacted staff to discuss the commitment; ensure that any offer of support is clear, equitable, and optional; expand beyond "subject matter expert input, technical data, and reporting assistance" to include non-technical support such as invitations to Midpen-hosted trainings and/or workshops, use of space, etc.; if a proposal is funded, ensure that staff will deliver to the grantee on all requests for support.

Areas of Success	Measures
6. Awareness among Stakeholders	A. # of Presentations to board/staff by GMP staff and/or grantees
	B. Grant outcomes[11] and/or grantee stories distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters

Overall Success Rating: 1.5

Outcome 6.A. – No outcome presentations to board/staff by GMP staff and grantees have been made. Rating: 1

Findings

- One of Midpen's grant agreement project deliverables is for grantees to give a presentation to Midpen's Board of Directors. To date, no presentations to either board or staff about grant-funded activities have been made. It is not clear how many grantees report outcomes.
- Previous GMP staffing limits suggest that it was challenging to prioritize scheduling and working with grantees to make presentations and tracking outcomes.

Analysis of Findings

- GMP staff have always made board presentations about the results of the latest grantmaking round, including an overview of the grantmaking program, updates on the current year's RFP process, and details about the organizations and projects of the grantees being selected for awarded. The presentations have not included reports on grant activity outcomes, which can be understood in that there has not been an expectation of applicants and grantees to identify and report outcomes, which restricts Midpen's understanding of the impact of its grant making.
- With the increase from .5 to a 1 FTE for the Senior Grants Technician position it is expected that some time can be used to coordinate grantee presentations.

Recommendations

- Remove the reference to making presentations as a "project deliverable" requirement in the grant agreement and consider including a statement of invitation. In practice, many grantees welcome the opportunity to present their work to a funder.

[11] Outcomes refers to the near-term qualitative changes that resulted from a grantee's grant-funded activities.

- Utilize the increased GMP capacity to schedule and support grantees to make presentations to board and staff; consider a more casual "lunch and learn" presentation format instead of, or in addition to, board presentations.
- Enable a process to collect outcome information from grantees and analyze that information for reporting to the board.

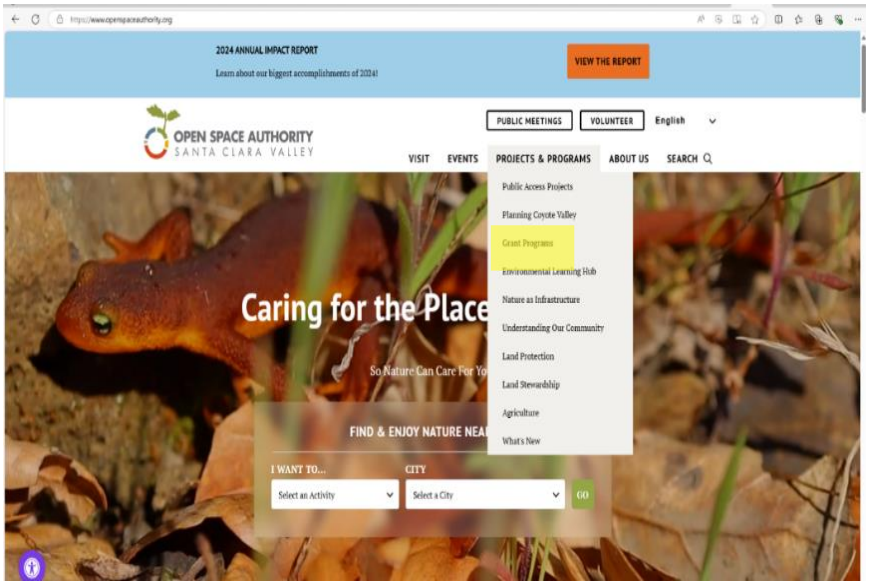
Outcome 6.B. – Grant outcomes and/or grantee stories are distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters) but the content is not easily accessible on the website and is not robust in newsletters. Rating: 2

Findings

- As noted in the discussion about transparency (see Success Area 5) GMP makes available comprehensive information on the program's webpage, Grantmaking Program | Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. However, grantee stories have not been updated regularly.
- There are two e-newsletters where GMP has published information about the program and grantees and includes a link to GMP's webpage. Newsletter content about grantees is developed from a grantee's progress reports, which are submitted when the grantee requests reimbursements, and/or a grantee annual report, the latter applicable only to grantees with a total award amount above $25,000. Grantees are featured in Midpen's internal *Bi*-Weekly newsletter, and the external quarterly newsletter, *Views.* Since the Winter 2020 edition, grantees have been highlighted in *Views* at least three times.

Analysis of Findings

- While the GMP webpage offers valuable information, the location of the GMP's webpage is obscure. By contrast, our peer grantmaking organization, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, features their grantmaking program prominently on their homepages, making the work of the grantees more accessible to the public (see screenshot below).



- Receiving content from grantees is sporadic, and by design, the progress reports are meant to be brief. Grantees' annual reports are detailed but are also received infrequently. As a result, grantees do not have a consistent presence in our newsletters and when they are featured may not showcase the richness of their grant-funded activities.

Recommendations

- Work with Public Affairs to create greater visibility for/improve access to the GMP webpage.
- Develop with the Senior Grants Technician a workflow to regularly refresh the webpage.
- Consider proactively engaging with grantees to develop articles about their grant-funded activities.
- Request annual reports for 12 months from executed agreements, not annually in June.

Areas of Success	Measures
7. Management System	A. GMP data and document management systems and personnel capacity adequately support the program's needs
	B. Midpen's GMP is comparable with peer organizations

Overall Success Rating: 2

Outcome 7.A. – There are efficiency challenges with the current GMP data management system. The timeframe for proposal review has been hard for reviewers to balance with other responsibilities. Offers of extra support, through subject matter expertise and/or one on one application guidance, have been hard to follow through on. Rating: 2

Findings

Data Management Systems

- GMP has experimented with two grant award management systems, Fluxx and Amplifund, and both were not adopted for long-term use. Previous GMP staff described them as "promising a lot but not delivering" and being expensive.
- GMP currently uses Excel (for proposal scoring) and SharePoint (for file storage) as the program's data and document management tool.

Personnel Capacity[12]

- GMP Staffing Structure
    - The Grants Program staffing has grown consistently with the growth of the program. Beginning in FY25, the team grew to 3 FTE, up from 2.5 FTE, and includes three full time positions: Grants Program Manager, Grant Management Analyst, and Senior Grants Technician. The Manager and the Technician are responsible for the GMP

[12] It is beyond the scope of this review to conduct a staffing audit. For the current purposes, the data collected reflects anecdotal experiences that could inform, if warranted, future analysis.

- It is estimated that .4 FTE between the Grants Program Manager and the Senior Grants Technician is adequate to conduct GMP activities as the program is currently structured. This time allocation, however, is not distributed across a fiscal year. Rather staff time has spiked to >1 FTE when issuing and managing an RFP cycle.
- Insights from interviews with Midpen's CFO and GM (leadership) reflect an interest to further capitalize on the program to enhance the visibility of Midpen by strengthening connections with community groups and expanding the GMP's role as a platform for engagement. Leadership also commented that the GMP has required more time and effort than originally anticipated.
- Previous GMP staff noted that engagement with grantees, through presentations and site visits, had been very limited, primarily because of time constraints and, with regard to site visits, the pandemic.

- Extra support for applicants:
  - Subject Matter Experts: Applicants have had the option to include a "capacity building" request as part of their application. Examples provided in the RFP include Midpen subject matter expert input, technical data, and reporting assistance. While the number and type of capacity requests were not evaluated for this strategic review, previous GMP staff noted that, in general, subject matter experts could not fit capacity requests received into their workload and that there was insufficient time for staff to review the capacity requests.
  - 1:1 support to applicants: The Board and leadership have expressed interest to ensure that smaller-sized organizations are encouraged and supported to apply. In 2023, the Board inquired as to why there were no grant award recommendations for Tier 1 applicants (requests for $25,000 or less), wondering if the effort exceeded the value.[13]
    - Discussion notes indicated that staff capacity was the primary barrier to providing more outreach to and support of small-resourced agencies.
- Proposal review effort:
  - Review Timeline: While the use of pre-proposals benefited GMP staff and proposal reviewers,[14] previous GMP staff noted that the timeframe for both pre and full proposal reviewing was too fast and put too much of a burden on staff reviewers. This awareness is reflected by 5 of the 9 proposal reviewer survey respondents who indicated that they did not have enough time to go through each pre-proposal. Five of the 9 reviewer survey respondents also said they did not have enough time to adequately review the full proposals.
  - Reviewer Competency: Most (6 of 9) proposal reviewer survey respondents indicated that they felt they had the competency to evaluate all proposals. Among the other three, one said no, and two were unsure, if they had the competency. Comments from

[13] In the 2023 grantmaking cycle, 25% of applicants (10) were in Tier 1; 3 were invited to submit a full proposal.
[14] As a best practice and reflecting the intentions of trust-based philanthropy, the use of pre-proposals helps to reduce the barrier to applying for grants and enables the grant funder to grow its awareness of organizations and programs addressing matters of interests.

two respondents noted that natural resource-related subjects were challenging, one stating that they "felt out of my league."

Analysis of Findings

Data Management

- Current GMP staff are new to the program and have not yet implemented a grantmaking cycle to fully experience the effectiveness of the current data and document management structure to manage a proposal submission process. When there were fewer proposals to manage (21 in 2019; 28 in 2021) a more sophisticated system, like Fluxx and Amplifund, likely did not make sense. The management of the increased number of proposals in 2023 (from 28 to 40), however, may have benefited from a more robust system.
- As well-organized as the storage/filing system appears to be, it is inefficient for data analysis. Preparing for this strategic review GMP staff experienced the time-intense effort to manually collect and develop methods to analyze applicant and grantee data.

Personnel Capacity

- The increased FTE of the Grants Technician position, from a .5 FTE to a 1 FTE, is anticipated to support leadership's interest to "capitalize on the GMP by strengthening connections and expanding its role as a platform for community engagement" and "foster mutual learning" through grantee presentations to the Midpen audience. The increased capacity is also expected to allow GMP staff more flexibility to provide support to applicants through the application process, as well as conduct more research about grantees as part of the pre-proposal review stage (refer to discussion in 5.C. about the benefits of early vetting by funders) and work with grantees to make presentations.
- An average .4 FTE GMP staffing level may be adequate, but it should be understood that the time is unequally distributed across a fiscal year will still impact GMP staff availability for other Grants Program tasks. To help mitigate the 'RFP spike' the GMP envisions an extended timeline (~9 months) to complete the full cycle (i.e., through executed agreements).
- There is broad agreement that the timeline for proposal review and the ability to address applicant requests for subject matter support needs improvement.
- This strategic review did not include a process to evaluate proposal reviewers' scoring and associated comments, which limits the understanding of why Tier 1 applicants were not recommended for grant awards. A brief assessment identified that some proposal reviewers expressed a lack of clarity about what was proposed and/or that there was insufficient information provided to adequately score the proposal against the criteria. Comments made by proposal reviewer survey respondents indicated that the criteria did not always seem applicable for each funding area. Also, it should be noted again that Tier 1 applicants, just like Tier 2, must submit both a pre- and full-proposal.[15]

[15] For reference, the main difference in terms of effort between a Tier 1 and Tier 2 grantees is that Tier 1 grantees are not required to submit an annual progress report, which asks for detailed information.

Recommendations

- GMP staffing structure: Maintain the newly established 1 FTE for the Senior Grants Technician position; evaluate impacts of efforts to expand the responsibilities.
- Data management
    - Before the next RFP release,
        - Evaluate the demands on data and document management and assess the 'tipping point' for when a robust system should be implemented.
        - Initiate a review of grant award management systems.
- Proposal review process
    - Evaluate the application review process to
        - Explore the role of the GMP team as lead reviewers;
        - Assess the appropriate number of staff reviewers; and
        - Consider creating 'proposal portfolios' by funding priorities and assigning reviewers to the portfolio(s) that align with their area(s) of expertise.
    - Build more time for the entire RFP planning, release and grant agreement execution processes.
    - Explore if/how proposal reviewers should account for their time as part of the annual resource loading exercise.
    - Limit Tier 1 applicants' effort to only pre-proposals, as a strategy to reduce demands on GMP and Midpen reviewer staff time, in addition to serving as an equitable practice to reduce administrative burdens on applicants.
- Capacity building requests
    - Deepen GMP staff's understanding of the nature of the requests and the process of evaluating subject matter experts' availability to support such requests.

Outcome 7.B. – Midpen's grantmaking program is comparable/shares many similarities with its closest peer organization, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (OSA), although a key exception is the funding levels. Midpen's allowable indirect rate is considered low within the grantmaking industry, but is higher than OSA's. Rating: 2

Background: Comparative analysis of peer organizations is a valuable tool for benchmarking and evaluating an organization's performance relative to similar entities. It allows organizations to gain a deeper understanding of their standing within their industry and identify opportunities for growth and enhancement.

GMP staff identified Santa Clara County Open Space Authority, Grant Programs | Open Space Authority, as a peer organization: OSA is a public land management agency that makes grants in the San Francisco Bay region. The comparison draws from OSA's 2022-2023 grantmaking cycle. OSA's grantmaking program informed Midpen's 2021 grantmaking cycle.

Findings

Comparative Measure	**OSA**	**Midpen**
Source of revenue	Voter-approved Measures Q and T property tax assessment that provides for up to 25% of tax revenues for the grantmaking program	Voter-approved Measure R property tax assessment
Amount available	$750,000 (for programs)	$250,000
Grant award sizes	$20,000 - $100,000	Tier 1: ≤$25,000 Tier 2: $25,001 - $50,000
# of Grants awarded, estimated	11 – 15	5 – 7
Advance payment amount	None.	15%, to spend within 6 months
Frequency of grant cycle	Bi-annual	Bi-annual
Grant performance period	2 years	1 – 3 years
Funding structure	Reimbursement basis	Reimbursement basis
Indirect rate allowed	5%	10%
Eligible applicants	• Public Agencies • Schools and School Districts • Nonprofits	• Public Agencies • Schools/ Academic institutions • Nonprofits • Fiscally sponsored programs
Match requirement	25% for organizations with a revenue budget over $10 million	None
Pre-application step	Yes	Yes
Funding areas	• Environmental Stewardship & Restoration • Parks, Trails, and Public Access • Environmental Education • Urban Agriculture / Food Systems	• Applied Science • Access, Interpretation and Education • Network and Partnership Support
FTEs – estimated; excludes non grantmaking staff	.7 FTE	.4 FTE

Analysis of Findings

- Midpen's grantmaking program shares many similarities with OSA. A key exception is the grant award budget, funding levels and, correspondingly, the number of grant awards made.
    - OSA's grants range from $20,000 to $100,000 across 2 years and Midpen's awards are capped at $50,000, which could be distributed across 3 years.

- It is unclear how Midpen determined to set $250,000 award budget. OSA set its benchmark in the text of Measures Q and T. OSA's grantmaking for programs was restricted to $200,000 until 2023 when the agency raised its budget dramatically for programmatic grants to $750,000.
- Two other differences of note are the advanced payments and match requirement.
    - OSA does not make advance payments.
    - Until 2023, OSA required matching funds for all grantees. OSA notes that removing the match for smaller organizations was an equity strategy.

Recommendations

- Continue allowance for advance payments and no match requirement.
- Consider increasing the indirect rate allowance to a minimum of 15% (see Outcome 4.C. for discussion about indirect rate and organizational capacity), which aligns with most peer and near-peer organizations (see comparisons in Appendix 5).
- Discuss the size of Midpen awards and the award budget
    - To help inform appropriate grant size,
        - Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss grantmaking impact.
        - Evaluate award amounts in light of the year over year increases in Midpen's property tax revenues and against peer grant makers.

4. Innovation

Support for Ag-based Environmental Education

Background: Conducting a strategic review of the GMP presented an opportunity to consider programmatic innovations. Ag-based environmental education was identified as an area that, in light of Midpen's presence on the San Mateo County coast where farming and ranching are active, was under-recognized in Midpen's grantmaking.

Two policy-based statements framed the exercise of studying ag-based learning as an environmental education strategy: Midpen's coast-side mission statement, and the Access, Interpretation and Education (AIE) funding priority description.

- Coast-side mission statement: *To acquire and preserve in perpetuity open space and agricultural land of regional significance, protect and restore the natural environment, preserve rural character, encourage viable agricultural use of land resources, and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.*
- AIE funding priority description: *…(T)o foster an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship…(through) projects that contribute an understanding and appreciation of our natural systems, restore indigenous knowledge, facilitate opportunities for outdoor engagement and nature-based experiences, or provide nature-based educational and interpretive experiences for children and/or adults.*

While the AIE statement broadly aligns with the coast-side mission statement, it does not specifically identify agricultural-based learning as an approach.

To understand if and how ag-based learning contributes to the AIE purpose of fostering an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship, GMP staff met with program staff of two nonprofits based on the San Mateo coast recommended by Midpen Ward 7 Director Zoe Kersteen-Tucker: the HEAL Project and UC Elkus Ranch. Both organizations offer, respectively, crop and animal-focused programming to children and youth and describe their work as promoting environmental stewardship.

- *The HEAL Project seeks to* foster *students' connection between food, health and the environment grows the next generation of environmentalists, scientists, sustainable farmers and change-makers.*
- *UC Elkus Ranch, aims to provide hands-on environmental education opportunities to learn about the production of food and fiber, the inter-relationships of plants and animals in their natural habitats, and the importance of environmental stewardship.*

Findings

The key takeaway from the conversations with the nonprofits' program staff was that an environmental stewardship mindset is developed when, through experiential learning opportunities, young people become comfortable in nature, recognize where their food comes, and experience the inter-relationship of plants and animals in their natural habitats.

The HEAL Project's Theory of Change graphically illustrates this:

GMP staff conducted online research to further understand how the ag-based learning and environmental education overlap.

- **Hands-On Learning and Place-Based Education**: Farm-based education often uses "place-based" learning, where students engage directly with their surroundings, such as farms and natural ecosystems, to construct knowledge. Activities like planting, harvesting, or composting allow learners to explore the interconnectedness of agriculture and the environment. This is similar to the HEAL Project's curriculum, which emphasizes sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship while fostering curiosity about food systems and nature.
- **Building Agricultural and Environmental Literacy**: Both fields aim to enhance literacy in their respective areas—agricultural literacy focuses on understanding food and fiber systems, while environmental literacy emphasizes ecological awareness and problem-solving skills. When combined, these literacies empower individuals to critically analyze agricultural practices' environmental impacts and advocate for sustainable solutions. For example, UC Elkus Ranch provides hands-on opportunities to learn about the production of food and fiber ("While brushing a goat, meeting a chicken, or exploring our bone and fossil collections in our historic barn, students learn about adaptations, predator/prey relationships and food chains") helping to bridge the gap between food production and environmental sustainability.

In summary, farm-based education combines agricultural literacy with environmental stewardship, fostering a deeper understanding of sustainable practices and ecological systems. This synergy creates

opportunities for learners to engage with the natural world, understand food systems, and develop environmental responsibility skills.

Analysis of Findings

- This strategic review confirms that a shared understanding of the alignment of ag-based environmental education with the AIE funding priority fosters an appreciation for open space protection, nature study, and environmental stewardship.

Recommendations

- The GMP would like to encourage more ag-based environmental education programs to apply for funding and suggests that, in the near term, the AIE funding priority description explicitly identify this as an AIE approach and include an example of the kind of project in this field that Midpen would be interested in funding.
- The study did not include a landscape analysis of nonprofit organizations working in this field within Midpen's jurisdiction. If such analysis were done, it would indicate the scale of potential demand for ag-based environmental education funding. Such information could be used to consider if a new ag-based environmental education funding priority area is warranted.

5. Appendices

Appendix 1 - District Grantmaking Program Policy, effective 2/28/2018

District Grantmaking Program	**Policy 3.10** **Chapter 3 – Fiscal Management**
Effective Date: 02/28/2018	Revised Date: N/A
Prior Versions: 11/17/2010; 11/14/2007	

Purpose

The purposes of the District's Grantmaking Program are to a) support projects that further the District's mission, b) build the capacity of academic and nonprofit institutions in order to sustain and grow the conservation field; and c) facilitate the District's mission and work by building and strengthening partnerships.

Grantmaking programmatic focus areas

Programmatic priorities

The District's Grantmaking Program will include a broad focus to ensure a range of projects are considered and reflect the diversity of work in which the District engages. Grantmaking will be guided by an emphasis on investments that reflect a regional focus and provide avenues for partnership, both with the District as well as among other stakeholders.

Using these guiding principles, eligible project categories will include proposals focusing on applied science; networks, partnerships; and access, education and interpretation. General grant parameters for each grant proposal category are outlined below, with the grant solicitation providing additional detail for each category.

Applied Science

Research proposals will include academic or practitioner science projects that support the protection and enhancement of natural resources on District lands. The purpose of this support is to develop and disseminate information that advances scientific understanding of natural processes. Projects with potential to increase the effectiveness of applied stewardship of resources on District lands will be preferentially considered. Types of projects may include applied academic research or proof-of-concept, with focus areas including topics such as integrated pest management, species habitat, restoration, or similar topics relating to natural resource management. Faculty at accredited academic institutions must sponsor research-related projects and field research must take place on District lands. Practitioner science projects other than peer-reviewed research may require faculty sponsorship, and will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Network and Partnership Support

In order to broaden its impact and ensure District priorities are aligned with multi-jurisdictional conservation and recreation plans, grant proposals that cultivate, sustain, or grow established conservation networks will be accepted. Network or partnership support could take the form of

facilitation or other consulting support, staff time for network participation, outreach, meeting supplies, etc.

Access, Interpretation and Education

Funding for access, environmental interpretation and education will be directed towards ensuring equal opportunity for all residents to take advantage of District lands while fostering an appreciation for open space protection, outdoor recreation, and environmental stewardship. The focus will be on funding projects that encourage access to and use of District preserves by all and in creating and executing nature-based educational and interpretive experiences for children and adults. Funding can be used for staff time to create or execute programming, transportation, educational and interpretive programming materials or supplies, facilitate knowledge of outdoor recreational opportunities, access to the outdoors, and environmental stewardship activities.

Grant management and internal controls

Program administration

The Grants Specialist will oversee the grant solicitation, selection, and grant management once selected. Other departments, including Visitor Services and Natural Resources, will be brought in for technical expertise to assist in evaluating proposals through a review committee. Once the grants have been selected, the Grants Specialist will oversee the administrative requirements for grant management, with at least one technical content expert from the relevant department assigned to assist in evaluating grant progress.

Proposal solicitation, selection and due diligence

The District is committed to soliciting proposals from a diverse range of organizations and application solicitations will be broadly disseminated to encourage organizations that reach underserved communities to apply. Additionally, the District will consider past District funding in its scoring criteria in order to increase the competitiveness of organizations that have not previously received District funding.

Eligible grantees will include accredited academic institutions, 501(c)(3) nonprofits, or public entities. Organizations without an IRS-designated status will be eligible for funding if a fiscal sponsorship is established prior to application submittal. A formal evaluation criteria will be used to select proposals for funding, including the organization's ability to administer the grant. Example evaluation categories include the applicant's ability to successfully complete the proposed work in the anticipated timeline and budget, past District funding, fit with District's mission, Board priority, and potential to develop new partnerships.

Grant terms and internal controls

The maximum award for individual grants will be $50,000. The award can be expended as necessary within a three-year grant term, contingent on satisfactory progress on grant objectives. Grants will be administered on a reimbursement basis, with up to 15% available up front if the grantee has a demonstrable need. Grantees will be eligible for reimbursement costs up until the original grant amount, contingent on satisfactory progress toward grant goals.

Grant applications and reporting

Grantees will be responsible for submitting annual or semi-annual reports that summarize activities and any relevant findings, alongside periodic check-ins with District staff. Additionally, grantees may also be asked to present the grant outcomes to the District staff and/or the Board in addition to formal reporting. Additionally, reimbursement submissions will require expenses to date recorded against the budget, along with invoices and accomplishments and milestones achieved during the reimbursement period.

The application and reporting process will be specific to a) the grant category, and b) the dollar amount awarded. Applications and reporting procedures will have two tiers of requirements (up to $25,000 and up to $50,000). This structure will ensure that smaller grantees are not prohibited from applying due to cumbersome application and reporting requirements in relation to the funding received. Additionally, the District will require that grantees make any acquired data, educational/interpretive materials, or conclusions available to the public. The Board will receive updates on the status of the grants and outcomes through an annual report.

Additional grant requirements and process

- Application solicitations will be released every year or every other year when funding is available and the District Grantmaking Policy will be evaluated every three years and updated as necessary. Grantees will continue to be eligible for additional application cycles, with no funding tenure limit.
- Eligible projects must not result in permanent damage and/or impairment to habitats or natural resources on District lands and will be in compliance with the District's Permit to Enter procedures (required for research projects).
- If indirect costs are costs incurred that do not have directly attributable expenses, they may be charged at no more than 10% of total grant cost. Examples include general and administrative costs, general equipment purchase or maintenance, and salaries and benefits of executive or administrative personnel who may not be directly engaged in the project. Subcontractors are excluded from indirect cost calculations.

Appendix 2 - Seven Areas of Success and their Outcomes and Recommendations

Area of Success 1: Purpose.

Outcome 1 – A statement exists that defines the purpose of the GMP and details the priorities for its work. There are potential redundancies between the GMP and the Public Affairs Partnership Program that may create confusion. RATING: 2.75

Recommendations:

- Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss
    - A GMP impact statement; and
    - Approaches that enhance the "comparative advantage" of the GMP, such as higher grant award levels and funded activity outcomes.

Area of Success 2: Organizational goals/objectives.

Outcome 2.A. – The GMP's three funding priority areas address nine objectives across three goals. Grantees are solidly aligned with Midpen's goals and objectives. Grantees' funded activities most frequently support the objectives of Goal 3, "Connect people to open space and agricultural lands, and a regional environmental protection vision." RATING: 3

Recommendations:

- When recommending grant awards to the board, include a brief analysis about how grantees align with and support Midpen's strategic goals and objectives.

Outcome 2.B. – DEI objectives have been explicitly identified/referenced for the GMP and within the most recent RFP. Consideration of DEI in outreach and evaluation of proposals are present but limited. RATING: 2.5

Recommendations:

- Continue to include the revised language and example projects to highlight the types of projects Midpen is interested in supporting.
- Make available on-demand written material in Spanish and other languages as applicable.
- Make readily visible the availability of interpretation services; ensure easy accessibility.
- Conduct outreach to networked organizations, such as the members of the Environmental Education Funders Collaborative, that reach organizations with which Midpen does not have direct connections.
- Provide clear guidance to proposal reviewers for assessing DEI-elements of a proposal; consider a specific DEI-related scoring criterion.

Area of Success 3: Diversity.

Outcome 3.A. – Midpen applicants and grantees have been largely distributed across the three funding priority areas, but only the Access, Interpretation and Education funding priority areas has had a grantee every cycle. RATING: 2.75

Recommendations:

- Utilize the LFPAC study session to review descriptions of all three funding priorities.
- To improve outreach to AS application prospects, engage university Foundation Relations offices and survey them about grant size implications.

Outcome 3.B. – The geographic locations of Midpen applicants and grantees have been largely diverse. RATING: 3

Recommendations:

- Continue to diversify the pool of applicants, review and refresh the outreach plan, identifying new communication platforms, especially in person and on the coast.
- Incorporate into the pre-proposal form an explicit request to identify the location(s) of the proposed activities.
- Clarify and/or confirm the RFP requirement that grant-funded *field* services be conducted on Mipen Preserves and communicate to proposal reviewers.

Area of Success 4: Effectiveness.

Outcome 4.A. – Midpen grantees have accomplished their Approved Work Plan within the project budget, but the information is incomplete. RATING: 2.5

Recommendations:

- Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss grantmaking impact.

Outcome 4.B. – The majority of applicants and grantees agreed that Midpen provided sufficient guidance and timely responses to application questions, and grantees mostly agreed that reimbursement payments were received promptly. RATING: 3

Recommendations:

- Continue to utilize GMP's previous applicant support and reimbursement work plans,

Outcome 4.C. – The effect of Midpen grants on grantees' capacity suggests mixed results. RATING: 2

Recommendations:

- Continue to explore ways to reduce grant application administrative burdens for the applicant to help increase the value of the grant.

- To help inform appropriate grant size, utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss grantmaking impact, and evaluate award amounts in light of the year over year increases in Midpen's property tax revenues and against peer grant makers.
- Utilize the LFPAC study session to discuss increasing the indirect rate allowance to 15%.

Area of Success 5: Equitability.

Outcome 5.A. – The GMP supports a multi-year grant period. GMP grants are not unrestricted; while restricting the use of funds is a standard approach for a public funding agency, it is a less equitable practice. RATING: 2

Recommendations:

- Continue employing the approach to multi-year and restricted funding.
- Consider limiting the reimbursement period to two years to align with the bi-annual release of RFPs, thereby supporting the grantee's opportunity to apply for a follow-on grant.

Outcome 5.B. – Paperwork has been modestly streamlined, enabling grantees to more efficiently apply for and manage a Midpen grant. There are opportunities to consider more ways to decrease administrative burdens. RATING: 2.5

Recommendations:

- Continue the use of pre-proposals.
- Change the annual report submission date to 12 months from the date of the executed agreement.
- Consider exempting Tier 1 applicants from submitting a full proposal; identify modifications to the pre-proposal to support this innovation.
- Utilize the LFPAC study session to consider using an up-front full payment model for Tier 1 grantees or provide half of the grant up front and the other half upon completion, and/or increase advanced payment to 25% to be aligned with state and federal agencies.

Outcome 5.C. – Early-stage vetting, as an equity practice, has been very limited. RATING: 1.5

Recommendations:

- Build in time during the pre-proposal review process to support GMP staff to conduct in-depth research on applicants.
- Conduct in-person outreach in locations where Midpen may be less familiar in the community.
- Review proposal templates to ensure that the information being requested is not otherwise publicly available.
- Leverage the Environmental Education Funders Collaborative membership to identify new applicants.

Outcome 5.D. – The level of transparent engagement is moderate. RATING: 2

Recommendations:

- Work with Public Affairs to create greater visibility for/improve access to the GMP webpage.
- Consider distributing, and posting to the GMP webpage, this programmatic strategic review.
- Incorporate multiple, consistent, accessible, and easy to use stakeholder feedback mechanisms. See recommendations to 5.E. for details.
- Identify and implement ways to more frequently promote grantees through Midpen's external communication platforms.

Outcome 5.E. – Soliciting feedback has not been a formal process. RATING: 2.5

Recommendations:

- Establish formal feedback opportunities within existing processes. For example, a link to a short questionnaire in an auto-response confirmation email, or a short survey to all proposal reviewers.
- Be transparent with action taken as a result of feedback and other learning. Look for opportunities to share learning with others.
- Continue participation with EEFC and explore ways to strategically leverage the resources available through the network.

Outcome 5.F. – It has been the intention of the GMP to offer and provide resources beyond grant funds. Staffing limitation have prevented the successful implementation of this. RATING: 1.5

Recommendations:

- Assess the inclusion of offering Midpen resources and how to engage those resources. Considerations: Develop a process that includes the would-be impacted staff to discuss the commitment; ensure that any offer of support is clear, equitable, and optional; expand beyond "subject matter expert input, technical data, and reporting assistance" to include non-technical support such as invitations to Midpen-hosted trainings and/or workshops, use of space, etc.; if a proposal is funded, ensure that staff will deliver to the grantee on all requests for support.

Area of Success 6: Awareness among Stakeholders.

Outcome 6.A. – No outcome presentations to board/staff by GMP staff and grantees have been made. RATING: 1

Recommendations:

- Remove the reference to making presentations as a "project deliverable" requirement in the grant agreement and consider including a statement of invitation. In practice, many grantees welcome the opportunity to present their work to a funder.
- Utilize the increased GMP capacity to schedule and support grantees to make presentations to board and staff; consider a more casual "lunch and learn" presentation format instead of, or in addition to, board presentations.

- Enable a process to collect outcome information from grantees and analyze that information for reporting to the board.

Outcome 6.B. – Grant outcomes and/or grantee stories are distributed electronically (on website and through newsletters) but the content is not easily accessible on the website and is not robust in newsletters. RATING: 2

Recommendations

- Work with Public Affairs to create greater visibility for/improve access to the GMP webpage.
- Develop with the Senior Grants Technician a workflow to regularly refresh the webpage.
- Consider proactively engaging with grantees to develop articles about their grant-funded activities.
- Request annual reports for 12 months from executed agreements, not annually in June.

Area of Success 7: Management System.

Outcome 7.A. – There are efficiency challenges with the current GMP data management system. The timeframe for proposal review has been hard for reviewers to balance with other responsibilities. Offers of extra support, through subject matter expertise and/or one on one application guidance, have been hard to follow through on. RATING: 2

Recommendations

- GMP staffing structure: Maintain the newly established 1 FTE for the Senior Grants Technician position; evaluate impacts of efforts to expand the responsibilities.
- Data management
    - Before the next RFP release,
        - Evaluate the demands on data and document management and assess the 'tipping point' for when a robust system should be implemented.
        - Initiate a review of grant award management systems.
- Proposal review process
    - Evaluate the application review process to
        - Explore the role of the GMP team as lead reviewers;
        - Assess the appropriate number of staff reviewers; and
        - Consider creating 'proposal portfolios' by funding priorities and assigning reviewers to the portfolio(s) that align with their area(s) of expertise.
    - Build more time for the entire RFP planning, release and grant agreement execution processes.
    - Explore if/how proposal reviewers should account for their time as part of the annual resource loading exercise.
    - Limit Tier 1 applicants' effort to only pre-proposals, as a strategy to reduce demands on GMP and Midpen reviewer staff time, in addition to serving as an equitable practice to reduce administrative burdens on applicants.

- Capacity building requests
    - Deepen GMP staff's understanding of the nature of the requests and the process of evaluating subject matter experts' availability to support such requests.

Outcome 7.B. – Midpen's grantmaking program is comparable/shares many similarities with its closest peer organization, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (OSA), although a key exception is the funding levels. Midpen's allowable indirect rate is considered low within the grantmaking industry but is higher than OSA's. Rating: 2

Recommendations

- Continue allowance for advance payments and no match requirement.
- Utilize the LFPAC study session to
    - Consider increasing the indirect rate allowance to a minimum of 15% (see Outcome 4.C. for discussion about indirect rate and organizational capacity).
    - Discuss the size of Midpen awards and the award budget
        - To help inform appropriate grant size, evaluate award amounts in light of the year over year increases in Midpen's property tax revenues and against peer grant makers.

Appendix 3 – Applicants and Grantees by Grant Cycles

Names of Applicant & Grantee Organizations	Type	2019	2021	2023
Amah Mutsun Land Trust	Applicant	x		
Bay Area Older Adults	Applicant	x		x
Bay Area Ridge Trail Council	Applicant			x
Bay Nature	Applicant		x	
Belmont Parks & Rec	Applicant		x	
Boys & Girls Club of the Coastside	Applicant			x
Canopy	Grantee			x
Climate Resilient Communities	Applicant			x
Coastside Land Trust	Grantee		x	
Coastside Land Trust	Applicant			x
Creekside Science	Grantee		x	
Dominican University/OHG Lab	Grantee		x	
Each Green Corner	Applicant			x
El Concilio of San Mateo County	Applicant			x
Environmental Volunteers	Applicant			x
Felidae Conservation Fund	Applicant		x	x
Filoli Center	Applicant		x	
Golden Gate and San Mateo MPA Collaboratives	Applicant			x
Golden Hour Restoration Institute	Applicant	x		
Grassroots Ecology	Grantee			x
Grassroots Ecology	Applicant	x		
Green Foothills	Applicant			x
Greenbelt Alliance	Applicant		x	
GreenTown Los Altos	Applicant			x
Groundswell Coast Ecology	Grantee	x		
Groundswell Coastal Ecology	Applicant		x	
Heirs to Our Oceans	Applicant		x	
Hidden Villa	Applicant	x	x	
Hidden Villa & Acterra	Applicant			x
Justice Outside	Applicant			x
Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful-Coyote Meadows	Applicant			x
La Honda Pescadero Unified School District	Applicant	x		
Latino Outdoors	Applicant	x		
LD Ford Rangeland Conservation Science	Applicant			x
Living Classroom	Applicant		x	
Marine Science Institute	Applicant	x		
Mike Kahn/Embracing the Bear	Applicant			x
Olimpico Learning	Applicant	x		
Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council	Applicant			x

Pie Ranch	Grantee		x	
Point Blue	Applicant		x	
POST	Grantee		x	
PUENTES	Applicant			x
Ridge Trail (Hwy 17)	Applicant		x	
Riekes Center for Human Enhancement	Applicant			x
San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory	Grantee	x	x	
San Jose Conservation and Charter School	Applicant	x		
San Jose Conservation Corps	Applicant			x
San Jose State University	Grantee		x	
San Mateo County Parks and Recreation Foundation	Applicant	x		x
San Mateo Resource Conservation District	Applicant	x	x	
Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network	Applicant	x		x
Saved by Nature	Grantee			x
Sempervirens Fund	Applicant			x
SF Bay Bird Observatory	Applicant			x
SF Bay Bird Observatory and Sequia Consulting	Applicant			x
SF Bay Wildlife Society	Applicant			x
Siena Youth Center of St. Francis Center	Applicant	x		
Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter	Applicant			x
Strategic Energy Innovations	Applicant			x
Summit Public Schools	Applicant		x	
Sun + Earth Certified	Applicant			x
Tamien Nation	Grantee			x
The HEAL Project	Applicant			x
The Student Conservations Association	Applicant			x
Thrive Alliance	Grantee	x		
Thrive Alliance	Applicant		x	
TOGETHER Bay Area	Grantee			x
UC Davis	Applicant		x	
UC Elkus Ranch	Grantee		x	
UC Santa Cruz	Grantee	x		
Vida Verde Nature Education	Applicant			x
Vida Verde Nature Education	Grantee	x	x	
Walden West Foundation	Applicant		x	

Appendix 4 - District Wards Map

Appendix 5 – Peer Grantmaker Indirect Rates

Organization	Public	Private	Indirect Cost Rate
City of San Jose	X		15%
SF Bay Restoration Authority	X		15%
City of Santa Clara	X		15-20%
Valley Water	X		10%
Coastal Conservancy	X		20%
Calfire Wildfire Prevention	X		12%
FEMA/BRIC	X		15%
Hewlett		X	No limit
Packard Foundation Policy		X	No limit
Heising-Simons		X	15%
Ford Foundation		X	25%
Kresge		X	20%
MacArthur		X	29%