

Community-Project Capital Improvement Budget Process

Final Report to the Saint Paul City Council Audit Committee

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Background

As part of the City of St. Paul's Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) process, community projects are developed, selected, and funded through a community-project specific approach that happens every other year. The process offers approximately \$1,000,000 each time the process is deployed to fund a variety of community-identified initiatives aimed at meeting specific needs.

While the selection of community-identified projects was previously a longstanding, labor-intensive process where a small number of community members were deeply involved in selecting projects for funding, starting in 2020, the City of St. Paul and its Office of Financial Services implemented changes in the community-project CIB process. These changes were implemented as a response to community feedback that competing with City Departments was inequitable. These changes were also put into place to enable broader participation of St. Paul residents in the process.

The City of Saint Paul's City Council Audit Committee partnered with Wilder Research to conduct an evaluation of the new process. **The study goals** were to understand whether the process is effective and what improvements in the process might be considered.

Research questions

In partnership with the Audit Committee, as well as the staff from the City of Saint Paul's Office of Financial Services, Wilder developed guiding questions for the project including:

- Is the current community-project CIB process working as intended with the changes in place?
- Is the current community-project CIB process effective?

More specifically, questions centered on three areas, the CIB process itself, the community engagement aspect of the process, and questions around equity in the process and in funding. These focus areas for questions were drawn from an initially brainstormed list of questions from the Audit Committee and from Office of Financial Services staff. Explicit questions guiding the approach are included in Appendix B.

Methods

To conduct this assessment, Wilder used three information gathering activities:

Document review

Wilder collected and reviewed documents provided by the Office of Financial Services (OFS) and the Saint Paul City Council Audit Committee pertaining to the CIB community-project process. These documents included CIB meeting summaries, committee guidelines, public-facing materials, and historical data on project applications and awards. The review helped identify structural elements of the current process, shifts from previous iterations, and areas where clarification or redesign may be needed. A summary of the document review can be found in Appendix A.

Key informant interviews

Wilder conducted key informant interviews with eight community applicants, three CIB committee members, one City council member, one former member of the Mayor's office staff, and four staff from the City of Saint Paul's Office of Financial Services (OFS), identified in collaboration with the Saint Paul City Council Audit Committee and OFS leadership. Interviewees were selected for their firsthand experience with the community-project component of the CIB process.

The key informants brought a different perspective on the process. Together, these interviews helped Wilder better understand how the CIB community process is functioning in practice, including strengths, pain points, and areas for improvement. One interview protocol was used for applicants, committee members, and OFS staff. All interviews were conducted between December 2024 and March 2025. The interview protocol used can be found in Appendix B.

Story map

In addition to interviews and document review, Wilder created an interactive Story Map to visualize the geographic distribution of community-created CIB proposals and awards across Saint Paul. The analysis used data from the 2020–2021, 2022–2023, and 2024–2025 CIB cycles to examine how project applications and funding align with neighborhood demographics, Areas of Concentrated Poverty, and district councils and wards. The Story Map highlights patterns in where proposals originate, where investments are directed, and what disparities may exist across communities. These spatial insights provided important context for understanding engagement

levels, resource allocation, and implications for equity in the CIB process. A link to the Story Map is included in Appendix C.

Key findings

Based on the results of the three activities listed above, Wilder Research identified the following overarching opportunities and challenges, and key observations, for the CIB process. We explore these opportunities in depth in the analysis section and offer recommendations at the end of this report.

Difficult to disentangle as part of this work was the impact of the adjustment made to the 2024 process. At the urging of a Council member and the Deputy Mayor, the application process was reopened to allow for more time from Wards that had not yet submitted proposals. While this reopening aimed to support greater equity, it also created confusion and frustration for participants who had already planned around the initial timeline.

Opportunities

- There is widespread interest across stakeholders in making the CIB process more equitable, accessible, and transparent.
- Committee members are willing to serve as community ambassadors but need better direction and support to do so.
- OFS staff recognize the need to simplify the process and improve alignment between funding cycles, implementation, and communications.
- Many applicants are eager to reapply or support others if better tools, timelines, and outreach are provided.

Challenges

- The process is overly complex and confusing, even for experienced participants and city staff. [Of note, the community process is only one part of the broader CIB process for the city. There are 5 funding deadlines with proposal reviews within each 2-year CIB cycle, a significant impact on the portfolio of already busy city staff.]
- There is no clear owner for public outreach, which has led to inconsistent engagement and missed opportunities.
- The application favors individuals with grant-writing skills and insider knowledge, limiting who participates.

- Equity goals are not clearly defined, and there is no shared understanding of how to prioritize funding for underserved communities.

CIB Process

- The shift to separate community and department proposals was meant to increase fairness but has added complexity.
- Applicants experience the process as opaque; they often don't know who to contact or what happens after submitting. [See above note about context for the 2024 process which may be shaping perspectives of recent applicants.]
- Staff cited the need for better alignment between internal funding timelines and public-facing communication.

Community Engagement

- Most participants, including staff, could not identify who is accountable for engagement.
- CIB committee members and district councils are underused and lack clear guidance.
- Outreach typically starts too late, and communication materials are hard to navigate.

Equity

- There is a shared desire to fund projects in underrepresented areas, but the process still favors repeat applicants from more resourced neighborhoods.
- Equity is interpreted in different ways some view it as equal ward representation, others as need-based investment.
- Data is expected in proposals, but not made accessible or understandable for most applicants.

In-depth analysis

The following section provides a detailed analysis of the Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) community-project process, based on the key informant interviews. While perspectives varied by role and experience, consistent patterns emerged across stakeholder groups. This section outlines findings across these three core areas: CIB Process Design and Implementation, Community Engagement, and Equity.

Key informant perspectives: CIB Process

Seventeen key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. This section focuses on the Capital Improvement Budget process. Participants reflected on how the process is currently experienced, how it compares to earlier versions, and where they believe changes are most needed.

Participants described the CIB process as difficult to navigate due to a lack of structure, unclear timelines, and inconsistent communication. Many noted that they were unsure where to begin or what was expected of them throughout the application cycle. There was no central point of contact, no clear guidance on deadlines or decision-making criteria, and no consistent process for confirming or following up on submissions. Some participants described relying on outdated or secondhand information just to figure out where to start.

While many participants found the process complex, some staff noted that the redesigned process may actually be more accessible than the previous structure, which included lengthy instructions and favored individuals familiar with internal city procedures.

"I sit on the board of a district council in the city, and even I find this extremely opaque... I felt like I was flying blind." – Key informant

"There were a lot of shifting deadlines that were difficult to keep track of and communicate... I think they even had to reopen the proposal period after it had already closed." – Key informant

The tight timeline imposed by the city's budget cycle was seen as a significant barrier to success. Several participants emphasized that the entire process from outreach to application review, feels rushed, leaving little time to build relationships, provide technical assistance, or support thoughtful proposals. Participants noted that while the city has a long planning window, applicants are often given only a few weeks to prepare and submit a detailed application, many for the first time. Others involved in reviewing proposals described receiving submissions with limited context or background and feeling underprepared to assess them fairly.

"I didn't see any of this information until pretty late in the process... I threw mine together rather quickly." – Key informant

"A month is not long enough. I don't really believe that a month is long enough to open a process and have a deadline and to think that all of the marketing and questions can appropriately happen in that time frame." – Key Informant

Communication was another persistent challenge. Participants shared that they often submitted applications without receiving confirmation, updates, or final decisions. Some said they only learned about the outcomes through council meeting notes or informal channels. Those managing aspects of the process noted that communication responsibilities appear to be spread across various offices and groups, but no one is tasked with coordinating or leading those efforts. As a result, the communication infrastructure feels fragmented and reactive.

"You don't hear what happens. Nobody loops back to tell you what the CIB committee recommended... Trying to weed through a budget and figure out if your project is included or not is difficult." – Key informant

"There's a gap in communication... Just because I'm on the committee doesn't mean I have ownership to communicate with the mayor's office." – Key Informant

"There wasn't a consistent point of contact, and that created gaps." – Key Informant

Key informant perspectives: Community Engagement

Seventeen key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. This section focuses on community engagement

Key findings

Participants consistently expressed a desire for the process to reflect more genuine, community-centered engagement. However, in practice, engagement efforts were described as inconsistent, under-resourced, and lacking a clear strategy. Many felt that the opportunity to apply was not widely known or broadly accessible, especially among those with limited prior involvement in city processes. Some learned about the process too late to participate, while others were unsure how their voices would be heard once they did.

"You didn't always know about the committee hearings right away... sometimes it was like, 'Oh, there's a meeting tonight—can someone go?'" – Key informant

"There are a lot of community groups that just don't know this process exists... It can't always be on the committee to get the word out." – Key informant

"You have to be part of a district council or have inside knowledge. It's hard for someone new to know how to even begin." – Key Informant

There was widespread uncertainty around who is ultimately responsible for engagement. Participants described a process in which responsibilities are

distributed across departments, offices, and volunteers but without clear ownership or accountability. This has led to an engagement structure that is uneven across neighborhoods and dependent on individual initiative rather than a coordinated citywide strategy. For some, the absence of clarity resulted in missed opportunities to connect with interested community members.

“Who is accountable for engagement? Of all the questions in the section, that’s the one I struggle with the most.” – Key informant

“There’s been confusion about who owns what piece of communication... We imagined Finance would lead, but the Mayor’s Office became more involved.” - Key Informant

Several participants reflected on the potential role of community partners and committee members in improving outreach, but noted that these individuals are not given sufficient support, training, or tools to fulfill that function. While some community-based groups were active and visible in their districts, others were not involved at all. Participants agreed that more consistency, direction, and investment in these partners would help extend the reach and credibility of the process.

“We should be clearer about committee members’ roles... They’re supposed to represent their communities and share information back, but many don’t know that or have the support to do so..” – Key informant

“We do ask committee members to talk with neighbors, community groups, and district councils. Some of that definitely happens. But these are volunteers—many with full-time jobs and families—and they only receive a \$25 meeting stipend” – Key Informant

Key informant perspectives: Equity and Inclusion

Seventeen key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. This section focuses on equity.

Key findings

Although equity was frequently named as a goal of the CIB process, participants shared that it is not yet consistently reflected in how the process functions. Many expressed that the structure still favors those who have existing relationships with the city or prior experience navigating similar systems. First-time applicants or those with less familiarity were often unsure whether their ideas qualified, how to meet application expectations, or where to turn for help. Some participants reported abandoning the process altogether due to lack of clarity or support.

"It was hard to know where to start or whether I was even allowed to apply. It feels like it's not really meant for us unless you already know the system." – Key informant

"People who know how to navigate City Hall—those are the ones who get through. It shouldn't be that way." – Key informant

Concerns were also raised about whether funding decisions are aligned with community need. Participants questioned whether projects from high-need neighborhoods are being prioritized, or whether decisions are overly influenced by political balance or application polish. Some voiced frustration that communities with fewer resources or less institutional support are at a disadvantage, despite being the intended beneficiaries of the community track.

"It feels like the projects that get picked are from places where people already know how to talk to the city. What about neighborhoods that don't have that kind of access?" – Key informant

"I don't know if the decisions are based on who needs it most. I've seen great ideas from smaller organizations that don't go anywhere, and I don't know why." – Key informant

"There's always a tension between wanting geographic diversity and wanting to fund the highest-quality proposals. But those don't always come from high-need neighborhoods—and we don't have a system in place to bridge that gap." – Key informant

Finally, participants highlighted a gap between the equity values articulated by the city and the tools available to achieve them. While there was support for using data to guide investments, several participants noted that most community members do not have access to the kinds of information needed to create "data-driven" proposals. Others emphasized that lived experience should carry equal weight in decision-making, and that the process needs to be designed in a way that actively includes and supports underrepresented communities not just invites them.

"The data piece is really missing from the current community proposal process... They are encouraged to bring in data, but we don't give them any signposts or help finding it." – Key informant

"I think we should be careful not to dismiss a project just because it doesn't come with crash statistics or citations. A lot of what people are responding to is what they see every day in their neighborhoods." – Key informant

"We say we want equity-driven proposals, but we haven't created a user-friendly way for community members to plug in. The platform still favors people who've done this before." – Key informant

Recommendations

Based on participant interviews, document review, and spatial analysis, Wilder Research, in partnership with the Saint Paul City Council Audit Committee, has identified a set of actionable recommendations to improve the CIB community-project process. These recommendations aim to address the core issues raised around process clarity, engagement, and equitable access, and are categorized by priority level to support implementation planning.

The prioritization of recommendations is based on the following criteria:

- **Urgency** – Does the issue require immediate attention?
- **Impact** – Will addressing it improve outcomes for applicants, staff, and the broader public?
- **Feasibility** – Can the recommendation be implemented with available resources?
- **Stakeholder Support** – Is there broad agreement on the need for change?
- **Alignment with Goals** – Does the recommendation reflect the City’s vision for a more transparent, equitable, and community-centered process?

High priority recommendations

While all recommendations aim to improve the process, it is important to note that implementing these changes would require more resources to be dedicated to the CIB program. This includes increased staff time and capacity across OFS and other departments, where existing responsibilities already stretch available resources. Without this added support, meaningful implementation of these recommendations may be limited. The high priority recommendations represent more immediate action items with broad support and high potential impact.

Clarify roles and responsibilities across the process. (Resource Dependent)

Participants emphasized the need for clarity about who is responsible for outreach, engagement, communications, technical assistance, and decision-making. Currently, responsibility is spread across multiple departments and offices without formal structure. Creating a clearly documented process defining timelines, handoffs, and responsibilities would reduce confusion and improve coordination.

*Document the current process and its components for regular future updates.
(Feasible within Existing Resources)*

Spending time now to capture the specific steps and procedures used in the current CIB process would allow for documentation that could be revisited with future improvements and enhancements. Ensuring documentation is available to OFS staff, as well as other City staff needing to better understand the process, would help create consistency in understanding across individuals touching the process.

*Launch a pre-application phase to screen for feasibility and increase accessibility.
(Resource Dependent)*

Introducing a simplified pre-application step would help applicants understand if their proposals meet eligibility and feasibility thresholds before investing significant time. This could include a brief form or checklist reviewed by City staff to flag common issues, confirm alignment with City priorities, and identify potential barriers (e.g., ownership issues, zoning concerns, budget feasibility). This could also allow staff to provide early-stage technical assistance and connect applicants with appropriate departments.

Note that a pre-application phase was previously implemented and produced a wide range of submissions, including ideas outside the scope of CIB funding. To be effective, a future pre-application phase would need to clearly communicate what constitutes a CIB-eligible project and what the submission process entails.

Assign a lead for outreach and communication. (Resource Dependent)

There is a strong need for a designated office or individual to coordinate citywide communications about the process. This would ensure consistent messaging, timely updates, and better alignment with application timelines. Outreach materials should be multilingual, user-friendly, and distributed through trusted community networks. This lead would be able to leverage the variety of existing engagement avenues already present across the City of St. Paul (e.g., district councils, ward organizations, City department engagement activities).

Reinforce and enhance the availability of direct technical support to applicants. (Need for Resources Mixed: some support exists, expansion may require more resources)

Participants frequently requested hands-on support, especially for applicants without grant-writing experience. From the perspective of applicants, this could include application workshops, office hours, translated materials, examples of past applications, and access to data (e.g., crash stats, project maps). A centralized FAQ hub and guidance library could serve as an ongoing resource. Because many of these resources already exist, including the FAQ hub and guidance library, grading rubric and process explanation, public-facing project tracker, examples of past successful

projects, and application workshops (see <https://engagestpaul.org/cib2024> for examples), continuing to reinforce the availability of these resources through outreach mechanisms will be critical. Enhancing this support via the additional suggested mechanisms is worthy of consideration.

Improve the structure and support for CIB committee members. (Resource Dependent)

Committee members are interested in serving as community ambassadors but are not currently set up to succeed in this role. The City should offer training, clear expectations, outreach materials, and potentially increased compensation or stipends. Members should be equipped with clear communication tools, contact lists, and talking points, and granted the authority and encouragement to engage directly with district councils, local organizations and underrepresented neighborhoods.

Make the application process more transparent and predictable. (Feasible within Existing Resources)

The process should include clearer guidance on how proposals are evaluated, including how cost estimates are determined and how equity is considered. Applicants should be informed when proposals are received, where they are in the process, and why they were or weren't selected. A public-facing project tracker could support transparency. Typically applicants are informed about when proposals are received, where they are in the process, and why there are or are not eligible, but the adjustments in the 2024 process presented complications in this process. Further, refreshing awareness about the public-facing project tracker is clearly critical.

Simplify and standardize the application. (Feasible with Moderate Effort)

The current application was widely described as overly complex and inaccessible to those unfamiliar with city processes. Recommendations include simplifying language, offering tiered application options (e.g., small, medium, large projects), and reducing repetition. Making the application available in multiple languages would further reduce barriers.

Recommendations marked as resource-dependent may require additional funding, staffing, or technology to implement. Without this support, departments may struggle to take action. We encourage the City to identify which departments will be responsible for leading each recommendation and to define a time frame (e.g., short-term within 6 months, medium-term within a year, long-term over 1 year) for implementation.

Secondary priority recommendations

Strengthen engagement infrastructure beyond district councils.

- Partner with schools, faith-based institutions, cultural organizations, and community groups to reach a broader audience.
- Provide these partners with resources to support outreach and engagement.

Align funding and implementation timelines.

- Improve coordination between funding cycles and departmental capacity to ensure timely project delivery.
- Consider whether projects are realistically implementable within current city staffing and infrastructure timelines.

Use objective data to prioritize funding equitably.

- Focus funding in neighborhoods with higher need based on public safety data, infrastructure gaps, or past underinvestment.
- Balance data-informed decision-making with geographic and political considerations.

Improve internal coordination and long-term planning.

- Facilitate more cross-department collaboration in reviewing and implementing projects.
- Establish a long-term planning cycle (e.g., every five years) to reassess goals and community needs with broad input.

Reframe the CIB process for accessibility and inclusion.

- Consider renaming the program to make it more intuitive and approachable for community members.
- Replace technical jargon with clear, everyday language in all materials.

The secondary priority recommendations focus on strengthening infrastructure, coordination, and accessibility within the existing system. They emphasize

expanding outreach beyond district councils, better aligning timelines with departmental capacity, incorporating accessible data to guide equitable funding, enhancing cross department planning, and making the process easier to navigate through clearer language and materials.

Future consideration recommendations

In addition to the high- and secondary-priority recommendations outlined above, participants shared several forward-looking ideas that could strengthen CIB process over time. These suggestions focus on building long-term capacity, improving alignment with broader city planning efforts, and embedding continuous learning into the process. Implementing these forward-looking strategies will require additional staffing, time, and resource investments. These recommendations reflect a shared interest in continuing to evolve the CIB process toward a more sustainable, inclusive, and community-centered system.

- Develop a five-year strategic planning cycle that engages residents in long-term capital investment priorities.
- Separate large-scale infrastructure proposals including those submitted by community members from smaller-scale, community-driven projects to reduce competition and clarify expectations. .
- Consider restriction of community projects to certain types of activities such as improvements to public gathering spaces, pedestrian infrastructure, or safety enhancements in order to focus funding, manage breadth of implementation, and navigate overall budget constraints.
- Continue to build internal staffing capacity dedicated to managing community engagement, technical assistance, and CIB coordination.
- Explore reducing the number of CIB program types in operation. The current structure includes various parallel processes such as the Department Process, Annual Programs, Capital Maintenance, and CDBG each with distinct timelines, eligibility criteria, and applications. Streamlining the portfolio of CIB processes may reduce burden on city staff and improve clarity for applicants.
- Create a public-facing project dashboard to visualize all submitted and funded proposals over time, supporting transparency and equity analysis.

Appendix

A. Document review

To inform the assessment, Wilder Research conducted a review of key documents related to the City of Saint Paul's Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) community proposal process. These materials provided important background on how the current process is structured, how projects are evaluated and funded, and what guidance is provided to applicants.

The following documents were reviewed:

- **2024–2025 Community Proposals Applications and Committee Recommendations**
This document includes detailed information about all submitted proposals, CIB Committee scoring, and final recommendations to the Mayor. It outlines the timeline, eligibility review, cost estimates, and reprogramming of prior funds. It also highlights projects selected for funding and those not recommended.
- **2024 CIB Community Proposal Scoring Guide**
This guide describes the scoring rubric used by the CIB Committee to evaluate community proposals. Projects are rated across five categories: Condition, Usage, Equity and Inclusion, Strategic Investment, and CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design). Each category includes qualitative descriptions aligned to numeric scores ranging from “Very Poor” to “Very Good.”
- **City of Saint Paul Capital Improvement Budget Community Proposal Application Questions**
The application form outlines the information required from community members submitting a proposal. It emphasizes public safety, equity, and community impact. It also asks applicants to describe their project's relationship to CPTED principles, data-supported need, and community use.
- **Community Proposal Committee Recommendation (Council Update)**
This spreadsheet summarizes recommendations from the CIB Committee, including funding allocations, department involvement, and proposal status. It also includes Ward and district-level data for each project.

- **Project Locations History**

This dataset tracks the locations of funded projects from prior CIB cycles, which helped the team identify historical funding patterns across wards and neighborhoods.

B. Interview protocol

The Saint Paul City Audit Committee is working with Wilder Research to understand how the community-project CIB process is working, whether the process is effective, and what improvements in the process might be considered. Wilder will assess the process from the lens of various stakeholders and make recommendations around continued improvement.

To inform the work, we are interviewing key individuals from the City of St. Paul and across the community. You were identified as one of these individuals to interview.

We will combine your feedback with that of others, to look for themes, as well as gather information about any questions that emerge. The results will be combined with others' perspectives from the interviews and shared in a report to the Audit Committee.

We know we have 1 hour so we may need to move to the next question to be sure we get through the main questions.

Before we start, do you have any questions?

In addition, would you be OK with us recording this so we can reference it when taking notes?

Participation in this survey will not impact your relationship with The City of St Paul.

Individual quotes will be de-identified and results from the survey will be reported in aggregate. Please indicate the level of confidentiality you would like us to maintain for your own responses in our report:

- ☐ *Do not share any of my open-ended responses. Only combine my feedback with others.*
- ☐ *Share my de-identified open-ended responses: You can share key quotes, but any other information that will identify me will be removed.*

Process Questions

- How did the CIB process shift from its previous delivery?
 - What does success look like now? What did it look like then?

- What are the characteristics of the current process (including participants, investments, committee members, applications, distribution of spend)?
- What process steps could be improved for the next CIB round?
- What communications support for the variety of partners/owners is needed in the future?

Community Engagement Questions

- What are the overarching goals for the CIB process related to engagement?
- Who is ultimately accountable for the CIB community engagement approach? What changes might need to be pursued in the future?
 - How is ownership currently shared and how should it be shared between the Departments (including Public Works and Parks & Recreation), Mayor's Office, OFS, and the community?
- How are CIB committee members acting as community ambassadors? How might the City better support their work?
- How are district councils and other organizations in the City involved in the community engagement work?
- What additional tools would help with CIB community engagement?
- How can the application process continue to be adapted to meet City and community needs?
- How can the City balance a data-driven approach and ongoing needs around community engagement?

Equity Questions

- In what ways could the CIB process be adapted to focus funding more equitably?
 - What does it mean for the community process funding to be equitable?
- How might the CIB process be evolved to move from a complaint-based or a process-knowledge-based orientation?
- How can everyone assembling the CIB process work toward centering community more in the process so that it does not feel as much like an 'insider' process?
 - Where are there opportunities for departments to work together to support the community process?

C. Story Map

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/831f440a52894a3c8ea78e513285c36d>

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Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

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