Community-Project Capital Improvement Budget Process Review

Presentation to the City of St. Paul Audit Committee

April 22nd, 2025

AMHERST H. WILDER FOUNDATION
Here for good.
Wilder Research.

Appreciation

- From the **City of St. Paul**: Office of Financial Services – Nichelle, Shannon, Madeline, John; applicants, CIB committee members, City staff and Council members; as always, Nhia

- From **Wilder Research**: Audrey & Justin

Goals & Research Questions

- **Goal:** To identify effectiveness and improvement opportunities in the community-project CIB process
  - **Focus Areas**: CIB process, community engagement, equity in the process and in funding
- **Questions**: Is the current community-project CIB process working as intended with the changes in place? Is the current community-project CIB process effective?

Methods

- **Document review**: Collection and review of relevant documents provided by Office of Financial Services (summary in Appendix A)
- **Key informant interviews**: **17** interviews including 4 OFS staff, 8 community applicants, 3 CIB committee members, 1 City Council member, 1 former member of the Mayor's office staff (interview guide in Appendix B)
- **Story map**: Interactive Story Map to visualize distribution of community-created CIB proposals and awards from the 2020-2021, 2022-2023, and 2024-2025 cycles (link in Appendix C)

Key Findings: 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.

Key Findings: Challenges

- The process is overly complex and confusing, even for experienced participants and 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.

Key Findings: 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.
- Staff cited the need for better alignment between internal funding timelines and public-facing communication.

Experiences: CIB Process

“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

“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

Experiences: CIB Process

“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 Findings: 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.

Experiences: Community Engagement

“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

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

Experiences: Community Engagement

“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

“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 Findings: Equity & Inclusion

- 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.

Experiences: Equity

“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

“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

Experiences: Equity

“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

“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

Experiences: Equity

“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

High Priority Recommendations

- Clarify roles and responsibilities across the process.
- Document the current process and its components for regular future updates.
- Launch a pre-application phase to screen for feasibility and increase accessibility.
- Assign a lead for outreach and communication.

High Priority Recommendations

- Reinforce and enhance the availability of direct technical support to applicants.
- Improve the structure and support for CIB committee members.
- Make the application process more transparent and predictable.
- Simplify and standardize the application.

Secondary Priority Recommendations

- Strengthen engagement infrastructure beyond district councils.
- Align funding and implementation timelines.
- Use objective data to prioritize funding equitably.
- Improve internal coordination and long-term planning.
- Reframe the CIB process for accessibility and inclusion.

Future Consideration Recommendations

- Develop a five-year strategic planning cycle that engages residents in long-term capital investment priorities.
- Separate large-scale infrastructure proposals from smaller community-driven projects to reduce competition and clarify expectations.
- Consider restriction of community projects to certain types of activities in order to focus funding, manage breadth of implementation, and navigate overall budget constraints.

Future Consideration Recommendations

- 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.
- Create a public-facing project dashboard to visualize all submitted and funded proposals over time, supporting transparency and equity analysis.

Story Map Exploration

- https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/831f440a52894a3c8ea78e513285c36d

Thank you!