BWSR grant supports pollinator habitat in Brooklyn Center community



Pollinators visited native plants in August during a community event at Brooklyn Center Elementary School. **Photo Credits:** Erin Loeffler, BWSR

A Lawns to Legumes Demonstration Neighborhood grant awarded to the Trust for Public Land (TPL) by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in June 2022 has helped install 39 pollinator plantings in and around schools and other properties in Brooklyn Center, creating more than 2,300 square yards of new pollinator habitat.

Demonstration Neighborhood grants* are intended to enhance pollinator habitat in key corridors, raise awareness about residential pollinator protection and showcase best practices through community projects. TPL allocated its $40,000 grant to support the 39 pollinator habitat projects at two Brooklyn Center schools, on privately owned land and on city property. The grant supported the installation of one bee lawn, six pocket plantings and 32 rain gardens.

TPL is a national nonprofit that connects people to the benefits of the outdoors. For more than two decades, TPL has partnered with schools across the country to redesign schoolyards as quality outdoor spaces to address health, equity and climate issues through its Community Schoolyards program. Projects are designed through a community-led participatory design process. The goal is to create a place where students can learn, connect and recreate during the school day, where community members can visit during non-school hours.

"Our Community Schoolyard program helps to close the 10-minute walk gap in communities where they lack park access within a 10-minute walk of their home," said Anna Callahan, Minnesota-based TPL community powered parks and schoolyards senior program manager.

Brooklyn Center Elementary School was selected as the pilot site for the Minnesota Community Schoolyards program — the Minnesota-based program under TPL's Community Schoolyard program. Brooklyn Center has a population of nearly 34,000, and according to the Metropolitan Council, is the most diverse city in the state, with 65% of its population being non-white.

In fall 2021, TPL and Brooklyn Center Elementary School, in collaboration with the city of

***BWSR recently renamed the Demonstration Neighborhood grants to Pollinator Pathway grants. The grant was still referred to as a Demonstration Neighborhood grant when it was initially awarded to the Trust for Public Land in 2022.**

Brooklyn Center, Hennepin County Master Gardeners, Three Rivers Park District, Hennepin County, students, parents and neighbors, launched an effort to revamp the school's outdoor learning space as a healthy community schoolyard.

Project partners saw an opportunity to use Demonstration Neighborhood grant dollars to augment the existing Minnesota Community Schoolyard project by funding the installation of a pollinator pocket planting at Brooklyn Center Elementary School. In April, two second-grade classes helped Three Rivers Park District staff to seed and install plants as part of an annual pollinator curriculum. Almost 3,000 square feet of pollinator habitat was installed.

"We were able to leverage the funding that we received from BWSR to bring additional resources to the project," Callahan said, adding that the Demonstration Neighborhood funds allowed TPL to achieve its broader goal of transforming the site into a community hub with quality green spaces for everyone to enjoy.

BWSR awarded $1.1 million for Pollinator Pathways grants, formerly known as Demonstration Neighborhood grants, to 10 organizations in August. Tribal governments, soil and water conservation districts, watershed districts, counties, municipalities, non-government organizations and pre-K through 12th grade schools (public and non-profit) were eligible to apply for the most recent round of funding. Learn more about 2024 grant recipients.

Elsewhere in the school district, TPL used the grant funds to install a pocket planting at Brooklyn Center Middle & High School. In April, nearly 3,000 square feet of pollinator habitat was installed adjacent to the school garden.

Garden interns — students under the school district's Growing Brooklyn Center program — designed the space with Three Rivers Park District staff and Hennepin County Master Gardeners. Eighth-grade science students worked with park staff to plant seeds. Three Rivers Park District donated and helped to plant close to a dozen chokecherry shrubs. Students and future garden interns will use and maintain the garden.

The Demonstration Neighborhood grant also supported five residential projects — a bee lawn, pollinator pocket plantings and rain gardens — installed through TPL's Lawns to Legumes pollinator cost-share program. Applicants were reimbursed up to $750 for eligible expenses associated with their project and were required to provide a 10% match. Landowner match — in the form of in-kind time spent on coordination and installation of the project — was approximately $2,700 in total, according to Callahan.

TPL selected projects located near the schools to maximize pollinator habitat corridors. Hennepin County Master Gardeners mentored participants in TPL's cost-share program through the garden design process, which started with a workshop that was open to the public.

"Participants had a working session with their Hennepin County Master Gardener to talk about their site. They brought in photos of the site, so they could talk about sun and shade access on the site and what they wanted to achieve," Callahan said. "Hennepin County Master Gardeners also did site visits with the program participants and worked with them to develop a planting plan."

After residents installed their pollinator projects, TPL hosted a workshop where participants shared what they learned.

As part of the project, TPL partnered with the city of Brooklyn Center to use the Demonstration Neighborhood grant funds to install 32 rain gardens totaling 14,666 square feet on city property. The city contributed an additional $950 for that project.

Rain gardens can help to improve water quality by collecting and filtering runoff from impervious surfaces, which reduces how much sediment and nutrients enter lakes, rivers and streams. Plants' deep roots curb erosion, holding soil in place while feeding pollinators such as birds and butterflies.

"Program participants had a really positive experience across all of the different sites," Callahan said. "It was great to be able to advance the work at our schoolyard project, while also connecting the schoolyard into a broader community-building opportunity."