

COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

Measure Q FY 2025-26 Grant Program After-Action Review (AAR)

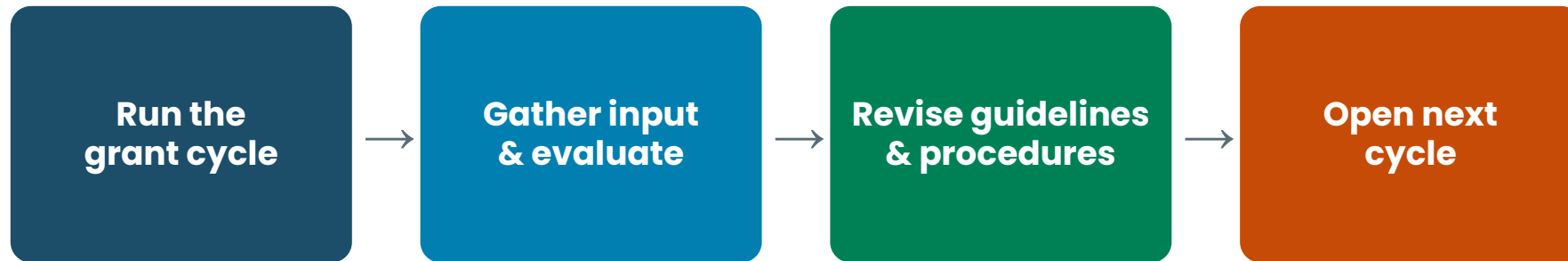
Citizens Oversight Advisory Board
August 19, 2026



Prepared by Parks, Open Space & Cultural Services and OR3

First pass in a continuous improvement process

The AAR is not a report card; it is the first cycle in an annual feedback loop to improve the grant program's performance and ensure alignment with the Vision Plan.



What’s in scope for improvement



Guiding Document

County Code

Vision Plan

Grant Guidelines

Scoring Rubric



Update Cadence

–

5 years

1 year

1 year



Approval Process

County election

Extensive community input;
COAB + BOS approval

COAB + BOS approval

COAB + BOS approval

What's in scope for improvement

Grant Guidelines

- Eligibility parameters
- Tier structure
- Payment terms
- Set-aside structure
- Scoring rubric
- Documentation of process, including qualitative award factors

Other Variables

- Application questions and format
- Overall grant cycle **timeline**
- Number and selection of evaluators
- Score **calibration guidance**
- Internal **scoring procedures** (tiebreaking, variance)
- Structure and content of information presented by staff throughout the decision process

AAR methods and sources of information

- **Applicant survey** – distributed to 94 contacts email addresses registered with the application portal, 24 responses with an even split of funded vs. not funded
- **External evaluator feedback** – Written and oral comments from the two contracted external evaluators who scored applications during the evaluation period.
- **Peer grant agency interviews** – semi-structured interviews with 4 established peer local and state grantmaking agencies
- **Internal staff debrief** – Semi-structured discussion among OR3 and Parks staff who administered the cycle, including internal evaluators.

AAR program areas evaluated

4.1 Grant Guidelines and Pre-Application Support

4.2 Application Period

4.3 Scoring & Evaluation

4.4 Award Decision Process



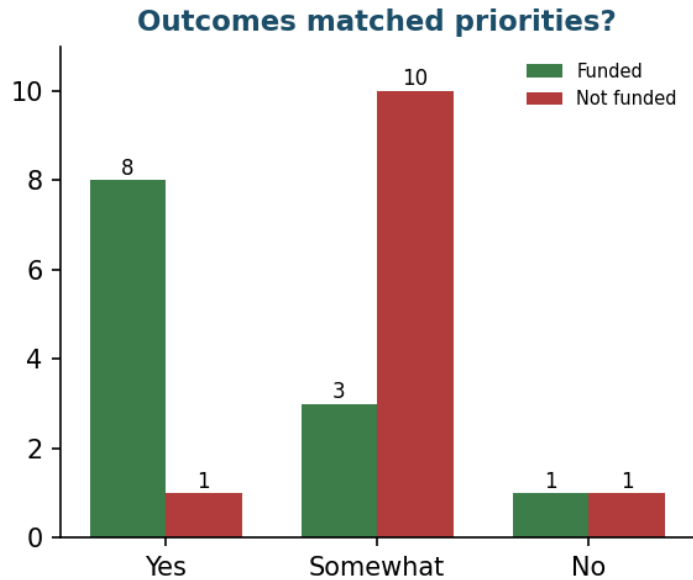
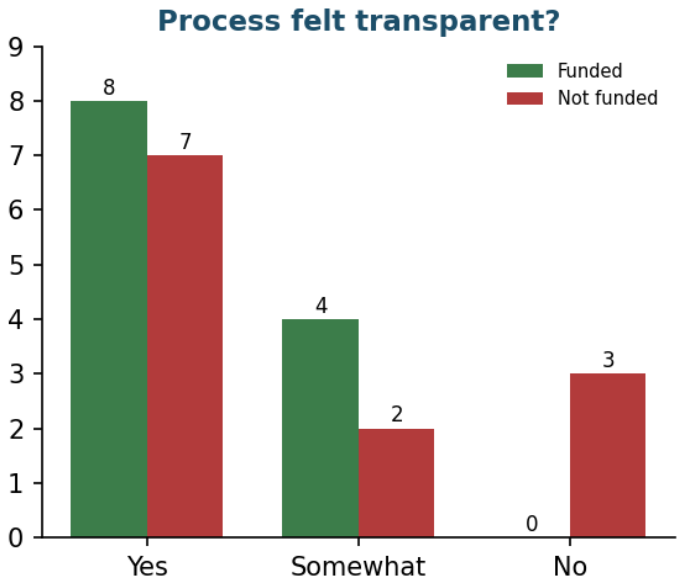
4.1

Grant guidelines & pre-application support

Clear priorities and process to applicants; early opportunity to engage the Board

Early Board engagement and alignment

Survey question: “Looking back, did the process for reaching final funding decisions feel transparent? | Did the outcomes feel consistent with the priorities described in the Vision Plan and grant guidelines?”



“What felt very unfair was the difference between how projects were evaluated initially and who ultimately got funded. There shouldn’t be such a big variance between the recommendations for funding and those final decisions, if we’re to have a transparent process that can be trusted.”

— Tier 2 / Not funded

“Having a decision change during the meeting based on Supervisor priorities, rather than evaluation of the merits, makes the process feel political and devalues the Vision Plan process, COAB, and scoring rubric.”

— Tier 2 / Funded

Early Board engagement and alignment

RECOMMENDATION

Establish an annual Board and COAB review of the guidelines before each cycle opens, to confirm priorities and settle program-design questions ahead of the application period.

FY2026–27 grant guidelines topics:

- Recurring eligibility
- Operating vs. implementation expenses
- Geographic and thematic balance of final award portfolio
- Measuring “community benefit” outcomes across physical implementation vs. educational projects
- Guardrails for award reductions



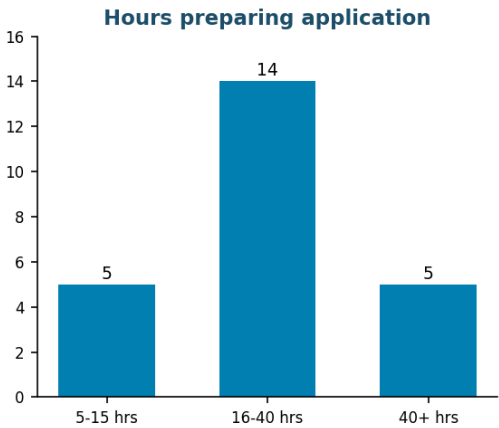
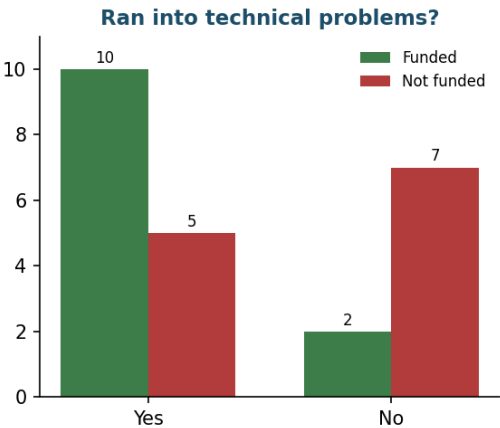
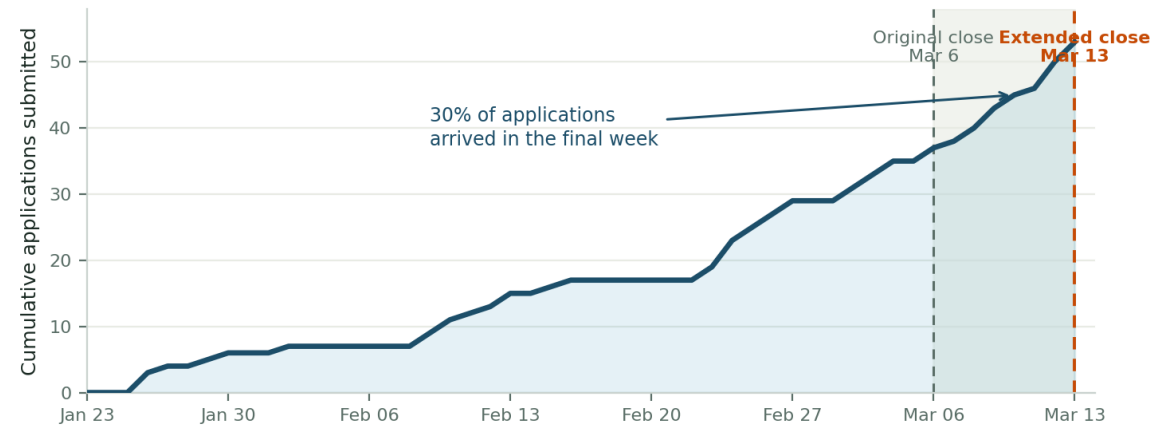
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Application period

A fixed annual window concentrates the load. Structure and platform must set applicants and reviewers up to succeed.

APPLICATION PERIOD

Managing limited administrative resources



RECOMMENDATION

Open the application window earlier and extend it and enable completeness review and evaluation on a rolling basis during the application period.

RECOMMENDATION

Resolve outstanding technical issues with the contractor and provide a downloadable version of the application that matches the online form.



4.3

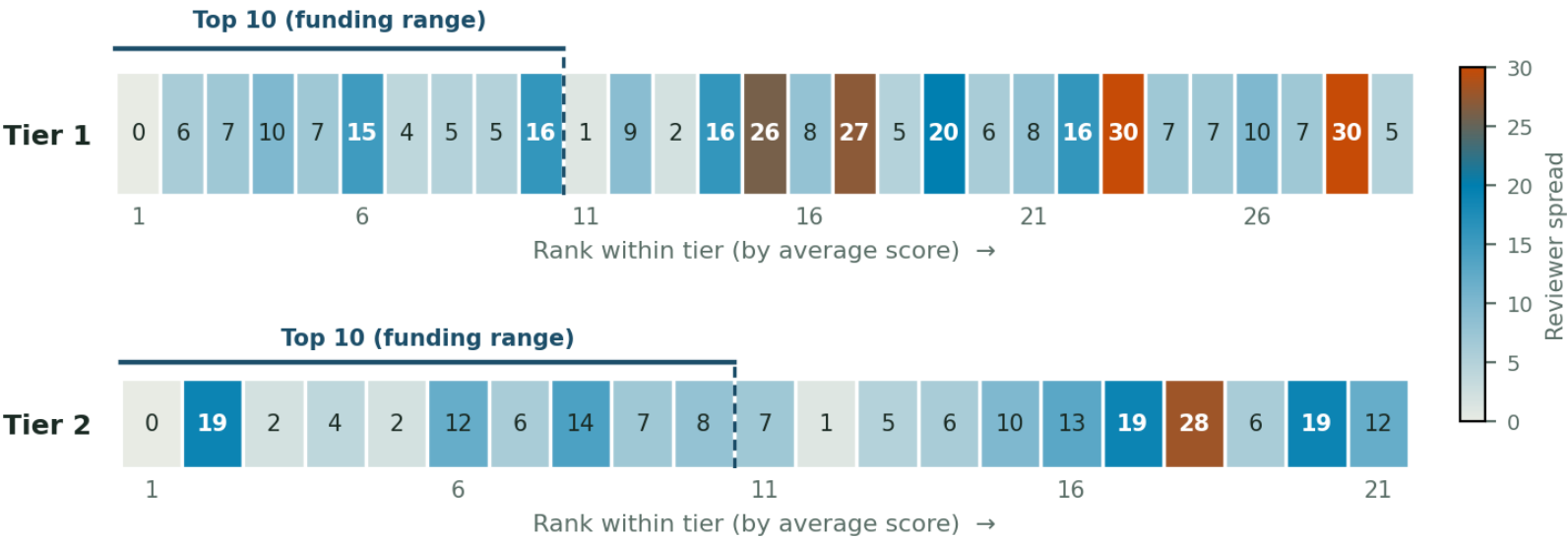
Scoring & evaluation

Calibration improved consistency, but the highest-weighted criteria still moved scores the most.

SCORING & EVALUATION

Addressing score variance

“There appeared to be strong variability between scoring on the applications. May be helpful to have 3+ reviewers in the future to better average the scoring.”
— **Tier 2 / Funded**



RECOMMENDATION

Add a third review score and a step to flag and reconcile applications whose scores diverge beyond a set threshold, separating genuine differences in judgment from noise.

SCORING & EVALUATION

Calibration guidance

23–25	2+ priority themes, both VP project type and named geography, 3+ Core and 2+ Secondary Principles
18–22	1–2 themes, VP project type and named geography, 2 Core and 1 Secondary Principle
10–17	1 theme, VP project type OR named geography, 1 Core or 2 Secondary Principles
0–9	Little or no VP connection. Hard ceiling of 9 for non-priority themes only.*

RECOMMENDATION

Add conditional alignment logic so full Parks points require a demonstrated multi-benefit nexus or address a second Vision Plan theme such as habitat, water, or wildfire and forest health.

** Wildlife & Habitat, Agricultural Lands, and Coastal projects are capped at 9 regardless of how many principles are demonstrated.*

Competitive scoring for set-asides

FINDING

The set-asides functioned differently across geographies. Where Pajaro Valley demand exceeded the minimum, some projects applied under both the set-aside and the general pool to maximize competitive opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION

Limit each project to a single pool and apply set-aside designation during portfolio review; clarify that statutory set-aside minimums are floors, not ceilings.

To publish or not to publish scores?

FINDING

Publishing all scores and evaluator comments was a deliberate transparency choice that applicants and Board members valued, but featuring scores prominently drew scrutiny of small point differences and can invite project-by-project advocacy that favors well-resourced organizations.

RECOMMENDATION

Weigh full numeric publication against foregrounding the staff recommendation and qualitative results (high / medium / low priority), while keeping all scoring content available as public records.



4.4

Award decision process

Anchoring the final award to a published process builds trust in an oversubscribed program.

Award modifications and budget realignment

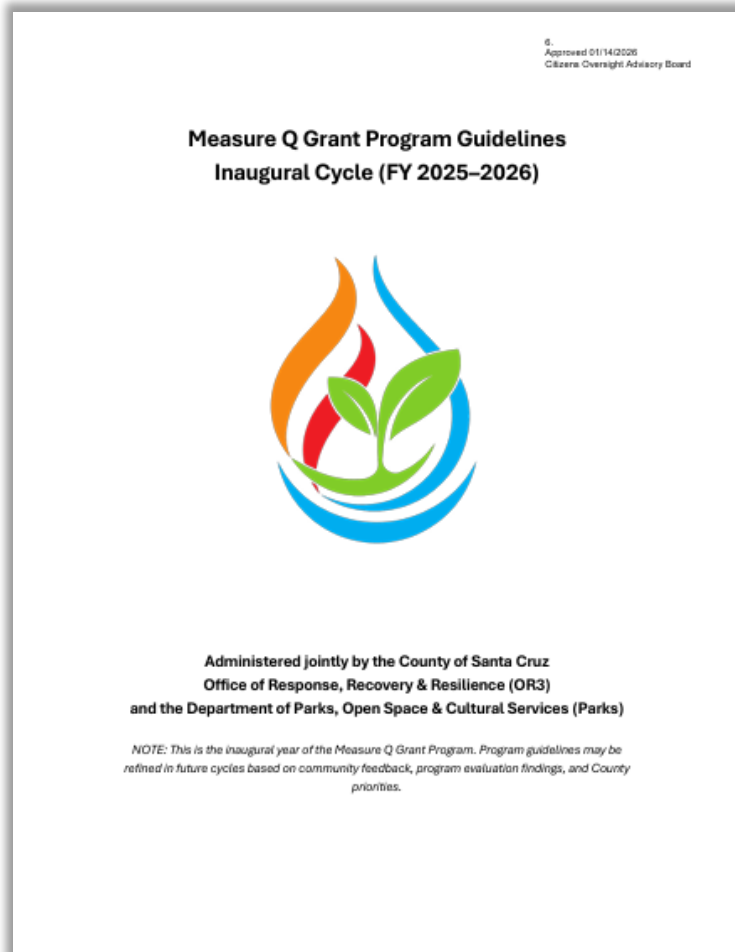
FINDING

Reductions applied at final Board approval were not vetted with applicants and have complicated project scopes set at full budget, eroding perceptions of fairness.

RECOMMENDATION

Determine award reductions in advance with staff and applicant input, and resolve late funding gaps through staff rather than adjusting awards at final Board approval.

Building trust in the process



RECOMMENDATION

Document the full award decision process in the guidelines, including how portfolio-level factors shape final awards and what the Board's role is at the award stage.

Scenarios and a strong staff recommendation

FINDING

Three funding scenarios were difficult for the COAB to act on and created anchor points that carried into split motions at both the COAB and Board stages. The debrief and peer programs pointed toward a single recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION

Given scoring and application breakdown, aim to bring a single, well-supported staff recommendation to the COAB and Board, with the scoring and portfolio rationale documented, rather than multiple competing scenarios.

Where this points for FY 2026–27

1 Set expectations for applicants up front

Annual Board and COAB guidelines review; document how portfolio factors and the Board's role shape final awards, before the cycle opens.

2 Spread the administrative load

Open the window earlier, enable rolling review, and resolve the platform so staff and applicants are not compressed at the deadline.

3 Take steps to control for scoring variance

Conditional alignment logic, a third reviewer with divergence reconciliation, and a shared equity framework.

4 Bring one clear recommendation

A single, well-documented staff recommendation for the Board to accept, refine, or return, rather than competing scenarios. Encourage the Board to provide early input on the guidelines to shape the process.

Full prioritized recommendations appear in Section 5 of the AAR. Survey detail in Attachment A.