

MEASURE Q

**FY 2025–26 Grant Program
After-Action Review (AAR)**

Santa Cruz County Safe Drinking Water, Clean Beaches, Wildfire Risk Reduction, and Wildlife Protection Act



**Submitted by the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board
to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors**

Office of Response, Recovery & Resilience | Santa Cruz County Parks, Open Space & Cultural Services
Report period: July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026

1. Introduction

Measure Q, formally the Safe Drinking Water, Clean Beaches, Wildfire Risk Reduction, and Wildlife Protection Act, is a voter-approved special parcel tax generating approximately \$7 million annually. Forty percent of annual revenue is allocated to a competitive grant program administered by the Office of Response, Recovery & Resilience (OR3) and the Department of Parks, Open Space & Cultural Services.

The FY 2025–26 cycle was the first competitive grant cycle under the program. The cycle received 54 applications requesting \$8.9 million; 18 grants were ultimately awarded funding totaling \$2.74 million, approved by the Board of Supervisors on June 9, 2026.

This after-action review provides a synoptic overview of the grant process and a detailed discussion of four discrete areas of program operations. For each program area, staff identify themes that emerged through the grant cycle and offer recommendations for the FY 2026–27 cycle. It is submitted to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors following review and input by the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board (COAB).

2. AAR Purpose and Methodology

This after-action review (AAR) is the first evaluation of the Measure Q competitive grant program. Staff intend to conduct reviews on a recurring basis, using each cycle to assess program operations, solicit input from applicants and evaluators, present findings to COAB and the Board of Supervisors, and revise grant guidelines accordingly.

The FY 2025–26 AAR evaluates the inaugural grant cycle across four program areas: grant guidelines and pre-application support, application period, scoring and evaluation, and the award decision process.

Sources of information include:

- **Applicant survey.** Following Board approval of awards in June, an anonymous survey was distributed to unique email addresses drawn from the FY 2025–26 Measure Q application platform (n=94), including those who began applications but did not submit. 24 responses were received (26% response rate). Findings are referenced throughout and summarized in greater detail in Attachment A.
- **External evaluator feedback.** Two contracted external evaluators provided written and oral comments to County staff during the scoring period.

- **Internal staff debrief.** County OR3 and Parks staff who supported the FY2025–26 grant cycle, including internal evaluators, conducted a semi-structured discussion to capture observations and areas of improvement across the four identified program areas.
- **Program records.** Application data, scoring records, award decisions, and COAB / Board of Supervisors meeting records from the full cycle were reviewed by staff.
- **Interviews with local and state grantmaking agencies.** Staff held informal interviews with established grantmaking agencies, including the Wildlife Conservation Board, the State Coastal Conservancy, San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority (Measure AA), Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, to gather best practices from more mature programs and inform the recommendations in this review.

This report was prepared in July 2026, immediately following the final Board of Supervisors decision. Future annual review cycles will include an evaluation of the post-award phase currently in process which includes grant agreement execution, reimbursement, and performance reporting and evaluation over the grant life cycle.

3. FY2025–26 Grant Cycle Synopsis

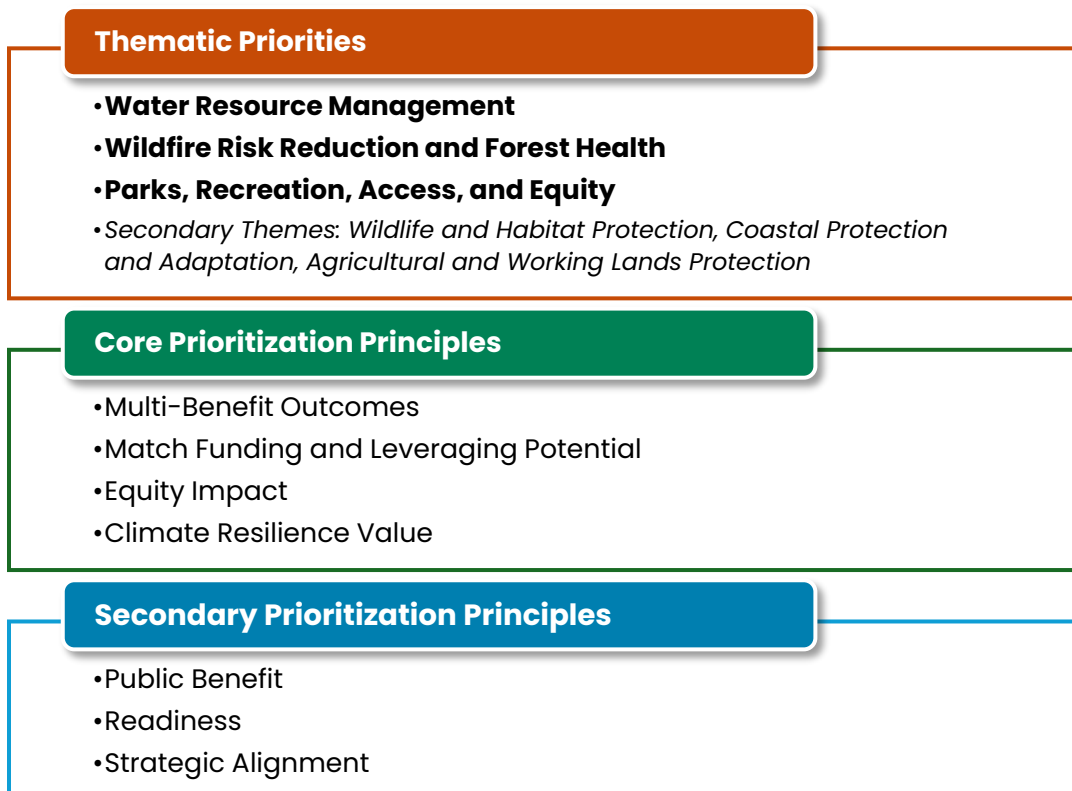
This section documents the FY2025–26 grant cycle chronologically, from program authority and applicant materials through the final award decision. It provides context for the findings and recommendations in the sections that follow.

3.1. Program Authority and 2025–30 Vision Plan

The Measure Q Vision Plan, approved by the Board of Supervisors in October 2025, is the central organizing document for the competitive grant program and is named in the program's authorizing County Code (Santa Cruz County Code § 4.65). It was developed following a public engagement process that included stakeholder interviews, community workshops, and town halls under the direction of OR3 and Parks with consultant support and adoption by the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board (COAB), and ultimately approved by the County Board of Supervisors. The 2025–30 Vision Plan is organized around six thematic areas aligned with the Act. Three thematic areas are designated as priorities: Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health, Water Resource Management, and Parks, Recreation, Access and Equity (Figure 1). Non-prioritized themes include Wildlife and Habitat Protection, Agricultural and Working Lands

Protection, and Coastal Protection and Adaptation. Each thematic area identifies priority geographies and lists examples of eligible project types.

Figure 1 – Vision Plan Thematic Priorities and Prioritization Principles



The Vision Plan also establishes a set of prioritization principles that inform how applications are evaluated within and across thematic areas. Core principles (multi-benefit outcomes, leveraged or matched funding, equity impact, and climate resilience) reflect the highest-order values of the program and are expected to be demonstrated by competitive applications. Secondary principles (public benefit, project readiness, and strategic alignment) provide additional evaluative context. Together, these principles are embedded in the scoring rubric and give evaluators structured criteria for differentiating applications that address the same theme or geography. Alignment with the Vision Plan constituted the single highest-weighted scoring category across both grant tiers.

3.2. FY2025–26 Grant Guidelines and Pre-Application Materials

The FY 2025–26 Measure Q Grant Program Guidelines were approved by the COAB on November 19, 2025 and by the Board of Supervisors on December 16, 2025, and established the inaugural year program structure, eligibility requirements, funding tiers,

allowable costs, compliance requirements, and evaluation criteria for the inaugural competitive grant cycle.

The program offered two competitive funding tiers:

- **Tier 1 – Community Catalyst:** Awards of \$5,000 – \$50,000 supporting smaller-scale projects, stewardship efforts, community education, and pilot approaches
- **Tier 2 – Community Impact:** Awards of \$50,000 – \$500,000 supporting larger projects with broader or more complex scope and measurable environmental or community outcomes

Eligible applicants included nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations, public agencies, and tribal entities. The guidelines established a 100-point scoring rubric applied separately within each tier, with Vision Plan alignment as the highest-weighted category (Table 1). Statutory set-asides for the San Vicente Redwoods and Pajaro Valley were incorporated into the Tier 2 award structure consistent with the requirements of the Act, which establishes minimum annual funding commitments of \$600,000 each for projects serving San Vicente Redwoods, the County’s largest conservation easement; and \$600,000 for projects serving the Pajaro Valley, defined as areas within one mile of the Watsonville Slough System, Pinto Lake, and the Pajaro River and its tributaries.

Table 1 – Grant Scoring Criteria

Tier	Scoring Criteria
Tier 1 – Community Catalyst (100 points)	Alignment with Measure Q Vision Plan – 40 pts Community Benefit – 30 pts Feasibility – 20 pts Innovation or Capacity – 10 pts Bonus (optional) – up to 5 pts
Tier 2 – Community Impact (100 points)	Alignment with Measure Q Vision Plan – 25 pts Community Benefit – 20 pts Wildlife and Environmental Benefit – 15 pts Project Feasibility and Readiness – 15 pts Partnerships and Collaboration – 10 pts Budget, Cost-Effectiveness and Leveraging – 10 pts Long-term Maintenance and Monitoring – 5 pts Bonus (optional) – up to 5 pts

Materials available to applicants prior to submission included the grant guidelines, the Measure Q Vision Plan, an FAQ section on the program website, and a pre-application webinar. A PDF version of the application was made available in addition to the online submission portal.

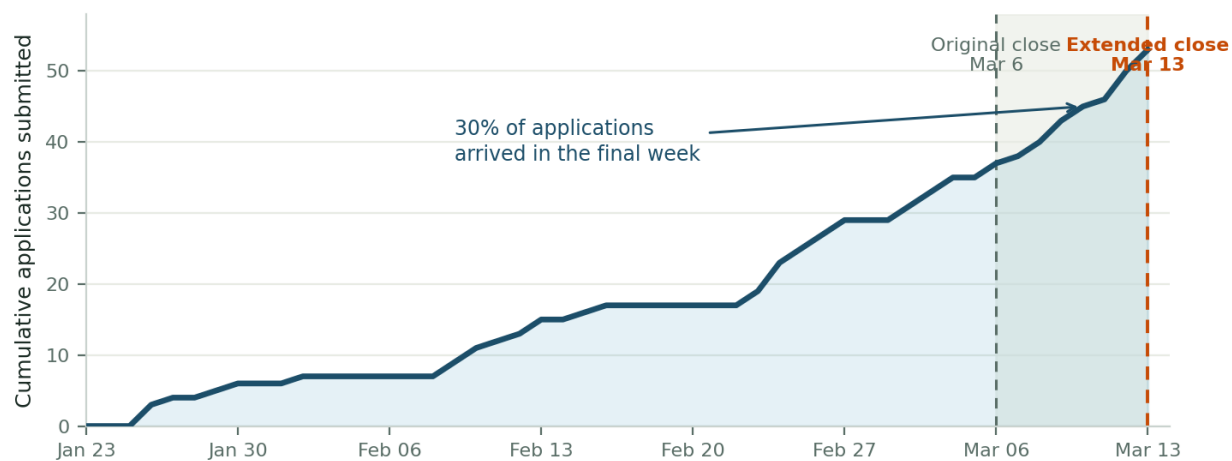
3.3. Application Period

The application portal opened January 23, 2026 and closed March 13, 2026, a period of seven weeks. Applications were submitted through an online platform operated by a third-party contractor engaged by the County for grant administration purposes. The portal experienced several technical issues during the application period, including instances where entered text and field entries were not preserved between sessions, challenges adding collaborators to a single application, and formatting changes on submission. County staff responded to applicant-reported issues as they arose and extended the application deadline by one week to accommodate platform difficulties, which were ultimately resolved by the contractor. A significant majority of applications were received in the final week of the application period, consistent with competitive grant programs generally, but which compressed staff support needs during the peak submission window and delayed the ability of staff to initiate the completeness review and evaluation process, shortening an already fixed evaluation window (see Table 2).

Table 2 – FY2025–26 Grant Cycle Timeline

Milestone	Date
Application period	Jan 23 – Mar 13, 2026
Completeness review	Mar 15–22, 2026
Project scoring by internal and external evaluators	Mar 15–Apr 14, 2026
Analysis of scoring results and development of funding scenarios	Apr 14–22, 2026
Publication of preliminary funding recommendations	Apr 24, 2026
COAB Meeting 1 – Preliminary funding recommendations	May 6, 2026
Incorporation of May 6 feedback; revision of funding recommendations	May 6–22, 2026
Publication of final funding recommendations	May 22, 2026
COAB Meeting 2 – Approve final funding recommendations	May 27, 2026
Board of Supervisors – Approval of grant awards	Jun 9, 2026
After-action review presented to COAB and Board of Supervisors	Aug 2026

Figure 2 – Application Submission Timing



54 applications were received, 30 under Tier 1 and 24 under Tier 2, requesting a combined total of \$8,892,077, a demand ratio of approximately 3.3 to 1 relative to available grant funds.

Following the close of the application period, County staff conducted an initial completeness review from March 15–22, 2026. All applications were reviewed against minimum eligibility and completeness requirements. One application was determined to be incomplete; the applicant did not respond to a request for information (RFI) and the application was not advanced to scoring. 53 applications were advanced for formal evaluation and scoring.

3.4. Scoring and Evaluation

From March 15 through April 14, 2026 (30 days), County staff led an evaluation process guided by the scoring rubric approved by the COAB and Board of Supervisors. The evaluation team consisted of two internal County staff reviewers and two external evaluators; each of the 53 eligible applications received one internal and one external review. Final scores were calculated as the average of the two reviewers' scores.

Evaluators scored independently; staff did not share internal reviewer scores or comments with external evaluators during the scoring period. Prior to scoring, staff developed supplemental calibration guidance to support consistent application of the rubric. The calibration document defined score-value bins for each scoring category (Table 1), establishing point ranges an application could receive based on how well it addressed the elements within each criterion (See Attachment B). This guidance improved scoring consistency across applications and evaluators. After a first round of

scoring, staff identified high-variance pairs and gave evaluators the opportunity to discuss differences in interpretation and revise scores where appropriate. Some variance nonetheless persisted across the scored pool and carried through to final averaged scores (Figure 3). Reviewer disagreement was concentrated among lower-ranked applications outside the funding range; the top 10 scoring applications in each tier, from which awards were drawn, showed comparatively strong agreement, though several applications near the funding line still carried spreads of 15 points or more. (Figure 4).

Figure 3 – Distribution of Reviewer Score Variance by Tier

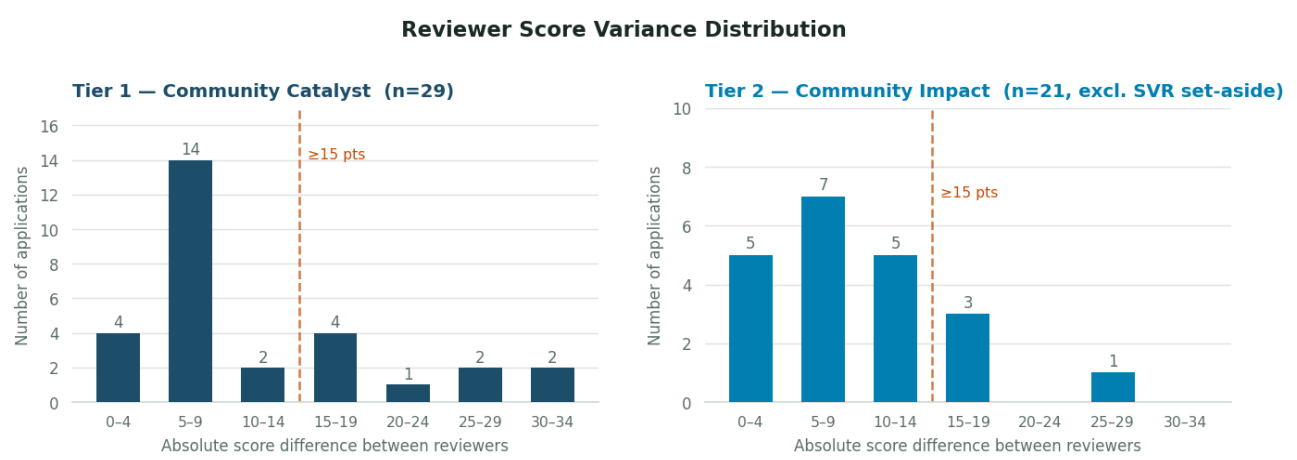
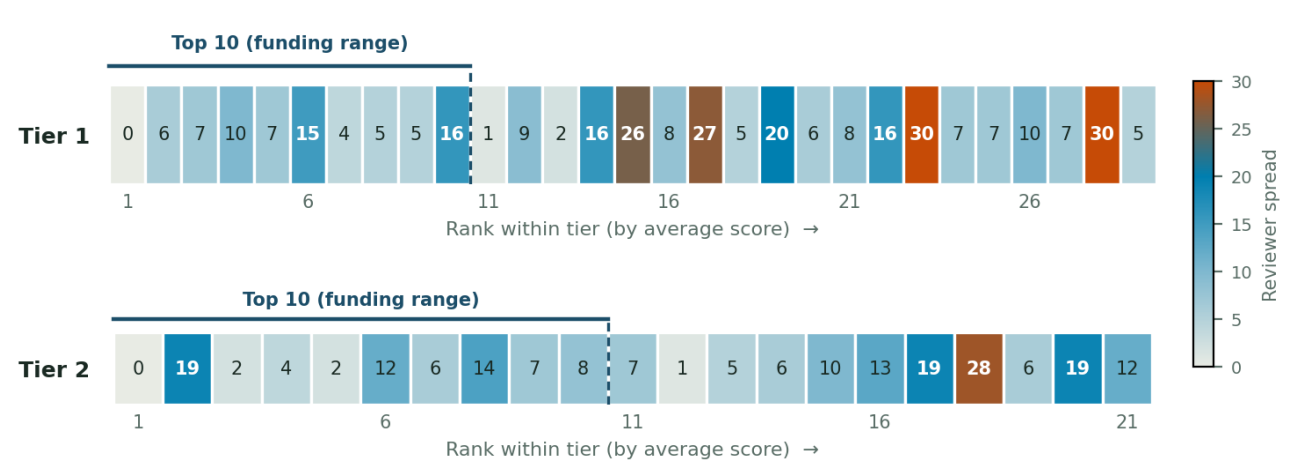


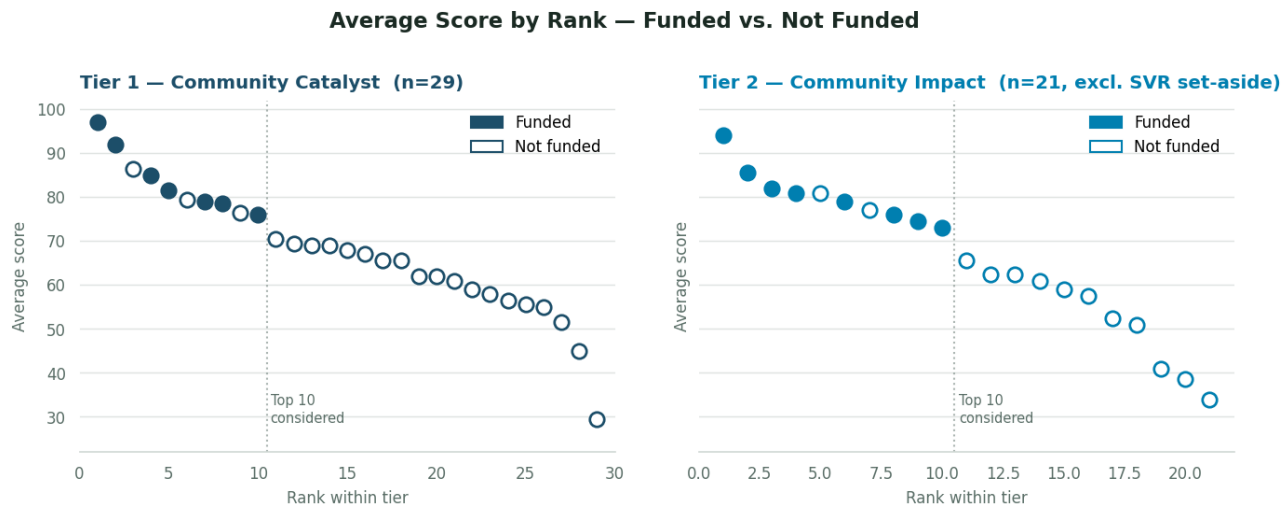
Figure 4 – Reviewer Score Variance by Rank



The three San Vicente Redwoods set-aside applications submitted requested a combined total of \$600,000, exactly meeting the statutory minimum, therefore all three were recommended for funding without competitive evaluation. The remaining 50 applications were ranked by average score separately within each tier.

Score distributions were broad across both tiers, with a meaningful breakpoint between the top 10 ranked applications and the rest of the pool (Figure 5) The top 10 applications in each tier formed the basis for all subsequent funding scenario development.

Figure 5 – Average Score by Rank and Tier



The thematic and geographic composition of the top scoring group largely reflected the composition of the base applicant pool in both tiers. Non-priority themes were somewhat underrepresented among top scoring applications, consistent with the rubric's scoring structure. (Figure 6).

Geographically, projects serving the Pajaro Valley represented 41% of all Tier 2 dollars requested and 50% of top scoring dollars. This includes projects that applied under the Pajaro Valley set-aside as well as those that applied under the general pool; in practice, staff exercised discretion in evaluating which projects qualified for set-aside designation regardless of how applicants applied. The concentration was present in the base applicant pool before scoring was applied and increased modestly through the competitive process (Figure 7).

Figure 6 – Thematic Composition of Top Scoring Projects and Underlying Application Pool

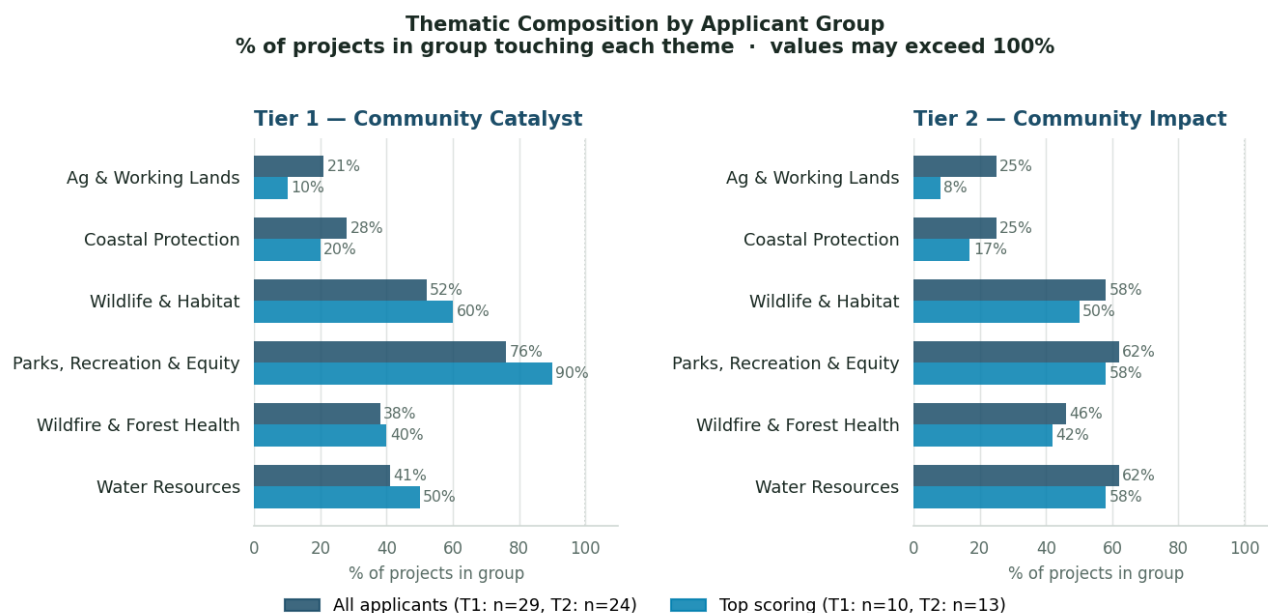
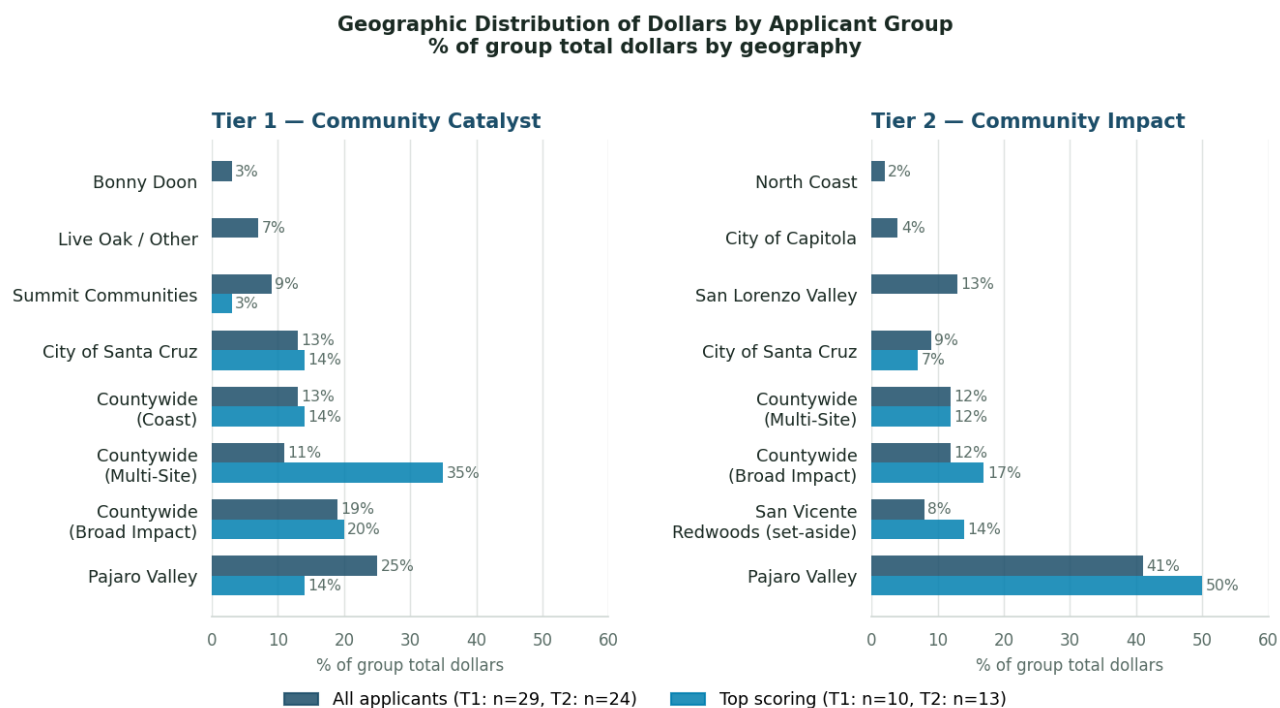


Figure 7 – Geographic Composition of Top Scoring Projects and Underlying Application Pool



3.5. Award Decision Process

3.5.1. Scenario Development

Following scoring, County staff reviewed the ranked pool in each tier against the broader program values and priorities established in the Vision Plan. Rather than presenting a single ranked list, staff developed three alternative funding scenarios for the inaugural cycle. Presenting three scenarios was intended to present various value trade-offs visible to the COAB and Board, to prompt deliberation on which program values should guide selection, and to surface preferences that could inform future guidelines and rubric revisions. Drawing from the top 10 scoring applications in each tier, portfolios were organized around the following values:

- **Scenario A – Score-Driven:** Projects funded in strict rank order by average score
- **Scenario B – Geographic Balance:** Adjusted rank order selection by drawing from the top 10 to achieve greater countywide geographic distribution of awarded dollars
- **Scenario C – Scale of Impact:** Adjusted rank order selection to prioritize projects from the top 10 with the largest measurable outcomes

Across all three scenarios, strategic award reductions were applied to individual projects to maximize the number of funded projects within the available budget. These strategic reductions were intended to be limited to the greatest extent possible. Complete application content, evaluator scores and comments, and the three funding scenarios were published on April 24, 2026.

3.5.2. COAB Deliberation

The COAB reviewed grant funding recommendations across two public meetings in May 2026. The May 6 meeting was a preliminary review of the three funding scenarios. The May 27 meeting was the final deliberation, during which the COAB approved a recommendation for transmittal to the Board of Supervisors.

At the May 6 meeting, deliberation organized around portfolio-level values, requests for additional data, and program design questions deferred to this after-action review. A central question was how to weigh geographic equity against geographic balance and the visibility of a broad countywide impact in the inaugural grant cycle. South County and Pajaro Valley projects were strongly represented among top scoring Tier 2 applications, partially reflecting the underlying composition of the applicant pool; the statutory Pajaro Valley set-aside further concentrated dollars in that geography regardless of competitive outcomes. However, small adjustments in selection among the top 10 could meaningfully shift the geographic distribution of the discretionary

competitive awards. Members also engaged on fidelity to the published scoring process, institutional balance between public agencies and nonprofits, and thematic representation, particularly for wildfire risk reduction and forest health. The COAB directed staff to return on May 27 with a revised recommendation and additional data.

Between the two meetings, staff prepared a balanced portfolio recommendation incorporating COAB feedback. The revised recommendation applied portfolio-level values including geographic distribution, thematic balance, and institutional diversity to the top 10 scoring applications in each tier. At the May 27 meeting, members divided: some supported the balanced staff recommendation on the basis that portfolio-level values were a legitimate and important complement to score order; others favored strict rank order, citing fidelity to the published process and transparency to applicants. With one member absent, the balanced staff recommendation failed to achieve a majority. Following a split vote, the COAB approved a rank-order-based recommendation, which concentrated Tier 2 awards more heavily in the Pajaro Valley. Staff transmitted the approved recommendation of 17 projects totaling \$2,740,000 to the Board of Supervisors.

3.5.3. Board of Supervisors Award Decision

The Board of Supervisors considered the COAB's recommendation at its June 9, 2026 regular meeting which drew extensive public comment, with 18 speakers addressing the Board in chambers and remotely.

For Tier 1, the Board approved the COAB recommendation presented in the staff report.

For Tier 2, the Board departed substantially from the COAB's recommendation and constructed a final portfolio through a series of motions at the dais that included modifying award amounts and adding awards from the top 10 ranked list, arriving at its own funding determination rather than approving or amending the recommendation as presented. Discussion centered on the geographic concentration of the COAB's rank order recommendation in South County and on the level of investment in wildfire risk reduction. The Board ultimately approved a Tier 2 portfolio that resembled the May 27 "balanced" staff recommendation to the COAB, with the addition of a project by the Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association that required reductions to several other awards at below what was requested. The approved portfolio passed with a 4 to 1 vote, with the District 1 dissenting, and met the statutory set-aside minimums.

Table 3 – Final FY2025-26 Tier 1 Grant Awards

Project Title	Organization	Award
Tier 1 (7)		\$266,897
River Stewards	Coastal Watershed Council	\$50,000
Pinto Lake Water Quality Monitoring	Santa Cruz County Parks	\$48,000
Kids2Parks	Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks	\$14,915
Real-Time Digital Signage for Wildfire Preparedness	Santa Cruz County Fire Department	\$43,982
Expanding Coastal Access, Ocean Safety, and Surf Education	Black Surf Santa Cruz Inc	\$50,000
Creating Accessible Park Experiences for the Blind and Visually Impaired	Vista Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired	\$50,000
Las Cumbres Shaded Fuel Break Project	South Skyline Firesafe Council	\$10,000

Table 4 – Final FY2025-26 Tier 2 Grant Awards

Project Title	Organization	Award
Tier 2 (11)		\$2,473,103
SVR Set-Aside (3)		\$600,000
SVR — Targeted Stream Crossing Repairs to Protect Water Quality	Peninsula Open Space Trust	\$425,000
SVR — Botanical Resource Management Planning	Peninsula Open Space Trust	\$75,000
SVR — Public Access Improvement Project	Peninsula Open Space Trust	\$100,000
PV Set-Aside (3)		\$804,500
Pajaro Valley Watershed Stewardship, Habitat Restoration and Outdoor Access and Equity Project	Watsonville Wetlands Watch	\$300,000*
Watsonville City Plaza Revitalization Project	City of Watsonville	\$275,000*
Mesa Village Park Phase 1: Equitable Access to Nature and Play	Friends of Santa Cruz County Parks	\$229,500*
General Tier 2 Pool (5)		\$1,068,603
Pajaro River Bridge to Bay Feasibility and College Lake Borrow Study	Pajaro Regional Flood Management Agency	\$150,000*
San Lorenzo Flood Control System — Debris Boom Project	City of Santa Cruz	\$100,000*
Resilience-Ready SCC: Zone-0 Equity and Workforce Initiative	Long Term Recovery Group of Santa Cruz County	\$308,266*
Rural Lands Assistance Program Pilot	Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County	\$270,337*
Wildfire and Ecology Resilience via Beneficial Fire	Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association	\$290,000*

* indicates award reduction relative to grantee request

4. Discussion and Recommendations

Drawing on the sources described in Section 2, this section expands discussion of emergent themes across the four program areas evaluated in this review and offers specific recommendations for each. Recommendations are summarized and prioritized for incorporation into the FY2026–27 grant cycle in Section 5.

4.1. Grant Guidelines and Pre-Application Support

The Vision Plan, adopted by the Board of Supervisors, sets the five-year priorities for the grant program, while the Grant Guidelines serve as the operational document. Across the peer grant programs interviewed for this review, communicating clear and transparent funding priorities was consistent theme in attracting quality applications and supporting applicants during the early stages of project development. Survey respondents rated the Guidelines as the clearest of the three core documents, and applicants across both funding outcomes reported using them to scope their projects, indicating the document served its purpose regardless of whether an applicant was funded.

Theme: Pre-application support resources

The pre-application webinar drew strong positive feedback in both the survey and the staff debrief. Peer programs support early scoping in different ways. Some use a formal pre-application or letter of interest to steer projects before applicants commit to a full submission, while others offer an optional pre-application to channel earlier-stage planning funder staff technical support. Both approaches are staff lifts but could increase accessibility and improve the quality of incoming projects. At minimum, publishing the Guidelines, application questions, and scoring rubric in advance, alongside a recorded webinar, enables applicants to scope projects against the criteria before the cycle opens. We do expect that over time, the applicant pool will learn and refine their applications through lived experience which may reduce the need for up-front administrative support over time as well.

RI. *Host a pre-application webinar and publish the Grant Guidelines, application questions, and scoring rubric in advance of the application window, so applicants can scope projects against evaluation criteria.*

R2. *Consider an optional pre-application or early scoping consultation to support earlier-stage projects and applicants with less capacity.*

Theme: Early opportunities for Board engagement and alignment

While most applicants rated the Vision Plan clear, the most common survey theme was a perceived disconnect between the published process and the final award decisions. Peer programs address this by engaging their governing board early to articulate priorities in general terms, rather than at the award stage, and by preparing board members ahead of public meetings to surface major questions before the recommendation becomes public.

The Grant Guidelines are the more responsive of the two documents to shift in Board priorities as they emerge. While the program cannot diverge from the Vision Plan, the Guidelines are an appropriate place to reflect ongoing conversations about program design, several of which surfaced during the FY 2025–26 cycle: whether organizations or projects should be eligible for funding in consecutive years; how to treat ongoing program operating costs relative to discrete project implementation; how education and planning outcomes are weighed against implementation, particularly in Tier 2; and whether to set guardrails for geographic or thematic distribution of funds. An annual review would give the Board and COAB a structured opportunity to take up questions like these and settle them in the Guidelines before each cycle opens, rather than at the award stage.

R3. *Establish an annual Board and COAB review of the Grant Guidelines before each cycle opens, to confirm priorities and address program-design questions ahead of the application period.*

4.2. Application Period

A fixed request-for-proposals (RFP) process concentrates staff effort into a defined window, unlike the rolling programs staff interviewed, which spread intake and review across the year. An RFP structure suits an annual award cycle, but results in a concentrated administrative lift. During this critical window, the overall application structure and submission platform must position both applicants and the evaluation team for success.

Theme: Managing administrative resources

An annual solicitation cycle concentrates staff effort, and two factors intensified the load this year. Submissions clustered heavily at the deadline, with nearly half of all applications arriving in the final two weeks and 30 percent in the final week alone. This compressed staff support and delayed completeness review, which platform limitations pushed until after submissions closed. Opening the window earlier and resolving the platform issues would let staff begin review during the application period and spread the load more evenly.

R4. *Open the application window earlier in the annual grant cycle and extend its length, and ensure completeness review and evaluation can take place on an ongoing basis during the application period rather than after it closes.*

Theme: Application platform improvements

Technical problems experienced during the launch of the application platform negatively affected staff and applicants. Documented issues included progress not saving, formatting changes on submission, disappearing attachments, and field truncation. Staff are working with the contractor to comprehensively improve and test the grants management platform user experience ahead of the next solicitation. A downloadable PDF application that matches the online form would further reduce the risk that platform behavior affects submission and allow applicants to draft materials in an offline, collaborative, and flexible environment.

R5. *Work with the grant management software contractor to improve user experience and resolve outstanding technical issues and provide a downloadable version of the application to applicants.*

Theme: Accessibility and institutional equity

Among survey respondents, no outside grant writing resources were reported. This placed the full application burden on an organization's own capacity, and smaller and volunteer-run applicants reported that application length and complexity were barriers, especially for Tier 1 awards. Institutional capacity also appeared to shape where organizations competed and how they fared. Public agencies, which more often carry in-house grant-writing experience and implementation-ready projects, made up about half the Tier 2 pool but a much smaller share of Tier 1, and in Tier 1 they were more somewhat over-represented in top-scoring applications than their share of the base applicant pool. Peer grant programs address this range of applicant capacity through

dedicated tracks for community-based and economically disadvantaged applicants, paired with earlier-stage planning and application-development support.

Theme: Grant application structure

Both applicants and evaluators identified questions in the application that asked for similar information in different forms. Applicants noted that the Vision Plan alignment questions were repetitive, and that permitting questions suited implementation projects but not many of the education and stewardship projects submitted under Tier 1. Evaluators saw the same redundancy from the review side, noting that repetitive prompts tended to invite recycled responses that added unnecessary length or appeared to contain AI-generated text that restated components of the Vision Plan without strengthening applications against the rubric.

Aligning the application structure more closely with the scoring criteria is a central aim for the next cycle. When each question reflects how the application will be scored, applicants have a clearer sense of what a strong response requires, and evaluators receive material that maps more directly to the rubric.

R6. *Review the application questions in each tier to remove narrative that adds length without evaluation value and realign each question to a scoring criterion.*

Theme: Metrics and measurable outcomes

Success metrics played an important role in competitive evaluation and will matter for comparing across eligible project types in future cycles. In the inaugural cycle the application did not consistently prompt users to connect their work to the community impact Measure Q is intended to deliver, and some applicants reported activities or outputs in place of outcomes. Stronger prompting, with examples of appropriate metrics for different project types, would help applicants articulate impact they might otherwise leave implicit and give evaluators clearer material to assess.

R7. *Improve application prompts for success metrics with examples of measurable outcomes for different project types, so applicants report impact consistently and evaluators can compare across applications.*

4.3. Scoring and Evaluation

Theme: Calibration guidance

The supplemental calibration guidance improved scoring consistency but several rubric criteria proved difficult to apply evenly, particularly Vision Plan alignment. Because alignment was the highest-weighted criterion, small differences in evaluator interpretation moved scores significantly. The clearest tension arose with Parks, Recreation, Access and Equity projects: the theme is a Vision Plan priority, but a project addressing it alone, such as a standalone facility or access amenity, delivers a narrower benefit than one that also advances habitat, water, or wildfire objectives. This distinction was evident in deliberation, where parks-only Tier 2 projects drew notably more scrutiny from the COAB and Board than multi-benefit projects. More objective calibration guidance, tying full alignment points to measurable impact and placing conditions on full scoring for Parks projects such as requiring a multi-benefit nexus, would let evaluators score alignment more consistently and better reflect program intent..

R8. *Refine the calibration guidance with conditional alignment logic for Parks, Recreation, Access and Equity projects, so that full Vision Plan alignment points require a demonstrated multi-benefit nexus (such as pairing access with safety, environmental education, stewardship, or volunteerism programs) or address another Vision Plan theme such as habitat, water, or wildfire & forest health.*

Theme: Addressing score variance

Reviewer disagreement persisted across the scored pool and was flagged by applicants who were given the opportunity to review all scoring content. Some variance reflects legitimate differences in judgment, but wide differences in scores can also point to noise or to areas where the application structure and calibration guidance can be tuned to ensure objective criteria drive evaluation. A third reviewer and an explicit step to flag and reconcile widely divergent scores would further strengthen consistency where it most affects awards.

R9. *Add a third review score and a step to flag and reconcile applications whose scores diverge beyond a set threshold, to separate genuine differences in judgment from scoring noise.*

Theme: Shared language and frameworks around equity

Equity considerations appeared in several places across the rubric and Vision Plan, and evaluators noted that the program drew on more than one definition of a geographically disadvantaged community. Measure Q's authorizing code references

two separate data sources for identifying disadvantaged communities, which can return different results for the same location and create ambiguity for applicants and evaluators. Geography also fits some projects better than others. A restoration or access project in a disadvantaged tract has a clear place-based equity case, while an education program or a park serving a countywide population reaches disadvantaged residents in ways a location-based measure does not capture.

R10. *Provide a consolidated map viewer that combines the two code-referenced data sources into a single geographic determination, and pair it with a population-based measure so projects serving dispersed or countywide populations can demonstrate equity impact consistently.*

Theme: Competitive scoring for set-aside

The set-asides functioned differently across the two geographies. San Vicente Redwoods applications were not competitively scored, since the combined request was equal to the statutory minimum. In the Pajaro Valley, where demand exceeded the set-aside minimum, some projects applied under both the set-aside and the general Tier 2 pool to maximize competitive opportunity for funding. Both set-asides are best understood as guardrails that guarantee a minimum investment in priority geographies; applying set-aside designation during portfolio review, rather than at application, would ensure each project applies once and is evaluated independently, with the guardrail applied as a check on the resulting portfolio.

It is worth reinforcing to applicants, the COAB, and the Board that the Pajaro Valley set-aside is a floor, not a ceiling, intended to guarantee a minimum annual investment Pajaro Valley community. Because the current Vision Plan prioritizes South County investment, grant cycles under this Vision Plan should be expected to produce award funding that exceeds this set-aside amount.

R11. *Limit each project to a single application pool and apply set-aside designation during portfolio review, and clarify that statutory set-aside minimums are floors rather than ceilings on investment in those geographies.*

Theme: To publish or not to publish scores?

Publishing scores and evaluator comments was a deliberate transparency choice that applicants and Board members appreciated, but that also drew scrutiny of small point differences. Among interviewed peer grant programs, most scoring deliberation happens at the advisory committee level, so the governing body engages mainly with a

staff recommendation rather than raw scores. Measure Q's process is more public at both the COAB and Board stages, an unprecedented transparency strength, but featuring scores prominently may weight discussion toward individual project merits rather than program priorities across the portfolio. It can also invite direct advocacy or project-by-project arbitration, which advantages organizations with the capacity and connections to mobilize it and may introduce non-transparent sources of influence beyond the published criteria and process. All scoring content is public information subject to the Public Records Act, so the question is not whether it is available on request but how prominently it features. Presenting results in qualitative terms, such as high, medium, and low priority tiers, and leading with the staff recommendation and its reasoning, would keep attention on how decisions were reached and help focus deliberation on program goals over individual projects.

R12. *Revisit how and when scores feature in the decision process, weighing full numeric publication against foregrounding the staff recommendation and qualitative results, while keeping scores available as public records.*

4.4. Award Decision Process

Theme: Building trust in the process

A perceived gap between the published scoring process and the final awards was among the more common decision-process themes in the survey responses provided by applicants, though the perception diverged sharply among funded vs. non-funded applicants. This tension is also a function of scarcity: the inaugural cycle was heavily oversubscribed, with a demand ratio of 3.3 to 1. Within that context, respondents did point to specific expectations that were not clear in advance, including how portfolio-level factors and the Board's adjustments would shape final award amounts. Many respondents also extended notable good faith to the process, recognizing the inaugural cycle as a first effort and anticipating that it would be refined in the years ahead.

Respondents and staff both pointed toward setting expectations up front, using the Guidelines as the appropriate place to define, in advance, how factors beyond score inform the final portfolio what the Board's role is in the award decision. That role centers on approving the Grant Guidelines and the process by which staff to produce a funding recommendation; then, at award stage, confirming the established process was followed, rather than adjusting individual award amounts or recipients.

R13. Document the full award decision process in the guidelines, including how portfolio-level factors shape final awards.

Theme: Geographic equity and distribution of projects

The geographic concentration of Tier 2 awards in the Pajaro Valley was a recurring theme through the decision process. The concentration was largely structural, present in the applicant pool before scoring, reinforced by the statutory set-aside, and shaped by the Vision Plan equity language and scoring rubric, all of which attracted strong projects from south county to apply in the first place and mapped favorably onto scoring criteria. The COAB supported a process-based recommendation based entirely on scores, which concentrated Tier 2 awards in the Pajaro Valley. The Board departed from the COAB recommendation, landing closer to a scenario previously developed by staff that offered greater geographic balance, despite the Vision Plan explicitly stating that Measure Q grants should prioritize South County.

The theme reflects a genuine tension in current Vision Plan's focus on equity and directing investment toward historically underinvested communities in South County, and the need for visible countywide impact in the program's early years. Future iterations of the Vision Plan may direct investment toward other areas of the county or elevate different thematic priorities, responsive to community needs and input.

As investment accumulates across successive years of the grant and direct allocation programs, the County can also begin to evaluate geographic balance cumulatively rather than cycle by cycle, and the balance struck in any single year matters less. Where the program does want to shape distribution, the more transparent place to do so is in the Vision Plan, rubric, and Grant Guidelines that applicants review before they apply, rather than through adjustments at the final award stage. Setting geographic and thematic expectations up front lets applicants respond to them and keeps the award decision anchored to a published process.

R14. Provide public tools to track Measure Q investment across the direct allocation and grant programs by geography and Vision Plan theme, so future grant awards are contextualized within cumulative investment over time.

Theme: Award modifications and budget realignment

Staff developed initial funding recommendations that in some cases included reduced amounts, discussed with applicants ahead of the decision. Further reductions applied at final Board approval were not vetted with applicants and have complicated project

scopes set at full budget, eroding perceptions of fairness and trust in the process. Determining reductions in advance, with applicant input, and resolving late funding gaps through staff rather than at the dais would minimize negative impacts on project performance and keeps final awards anchored to process.

***R15.** 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.*

Theme: Scenarios and bringing a strong staff recommendation to the Board

Developing three funding scenarios required substantial staff effort, and the staff debrief noted the format was difficult for the COAB to act on and created decision anchor points that carried into the final Board decision. Presenting several scenarios rather than one recommendation asked the COAB and Board to construct a portfolio in a public setting rather than weigh a proposal, which extended deliberation and contributed to split motions at both stages. Both the debrief and the peer programs interviewed pointed toward a single, well-supported staff recommendation, with the scoring and portfolio rationale documented behind it, giving the COAB and Board a clear proposal to accept, refine, or return to staff.

***R16.** 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.*

5. Prioritization of Recommendations for FY2026–27 Grant Cycle

This section consolidates the recommendations from Section 4 for review by the COAB and the Board of Supervisors and for incorporation into the FY 2026–27 grant cycle. Recommendations are grouped by program area and carry a suggested priority for the coming cycle and a brief implementation note. Priority reflects staff’s assessment of urgency and impact for the next cycle, responsive to input by the COAB.

Table 3. Prioritized Recommendations for FY2026–27 Grant Cycle

#	Program Area	Recommendation	Priority	Implementation Note
R1	Guidelines & Pre-Application	Host a pre-application webinar and publish the Grant Guidelines, application questions, and scoring	High	Low lift; staff-controlled

#	Program Area	Recommendation	Priority	Implementation Note
		rubric in advance of the application window, so applicants can scope projects against evaluation criteria.		
R2	Guidelines & Pre-Application	Consider an optional pre-application or early scoping consultation to support earlier-stage projects and applicants with less capacity.	Low	Added staff capacity required
R3	Guidelines & Pre-Application	Establish an annual Board and COAB review of the Vision Plan and Grant Guidelines before each cycle opens, to confirm priorities and address program-design questions.	High	In process.
R4	Application Period	Open the application window earlier and extend its length, and enable completeness review and evaluation on an ongoing basis during the application period.	Very High	In process.
R5	Application Period	Work with the software contractor to improve user experience and resolve outstanding technical issues, and provide a downloadable version of the application.	High	In process.
R6	Application Period	Review the application questions in each tier to remove narrative that adds length without evaluation value and realign each question to a scoring criterion.	Medium	Low lift; staff-controlled
R7	Application Period	Improve application prompts for success metrics with examples of measurable outcomes for different project types.	High	Low lift; will be incorporated into FY2026-27 application questions
R8	Scoring & Evaluation	Refine the calibration guidance with conditional alignment logic for Parks, Recreation, Access and Equity projects, so that full Vision Plan alignment points require a demonstrated multi-benefit nexus (such as pairing access with safety, environmental education, stewardship, or volunteerism programs) or address another Vision Plan theme such as habitat, water, or wildfire / forest health.	Medium	Process change; subject to future approval by COAB / Board of revised guidelines and scoring rubric
R9	Scoring & Evaluation	Add a third reviewer and a step to flag and reconcile applications whose	Very High	Added reviewer cost and time; minor budget increase for

#	Program Area	Recommendation	Priority	Implementation Note
		scores diverge beyond a set threshold.		external reviewers was approved by Board for FY2026–27 admin budget.
R10	Scoring & Evaluation	Provide a consolidated map viewer that combines the two code-referenced data sources into a single geographic determination, paired with a population-based equity measure.	Medium	Medium lift; staff-controlled, working with County GIS staff
R11	Scoring & Evaluation	Limit each project to a single application and apply set-aside designation during portfolio review, and clarify that set-aside minimums are floors, not ceilings.	High	Process change; subject to future approval by COAB / Board of revised guidelines and scoring rubric
R12	Scoring & Evaluation	Revisit how and when scores feature in the decision process, foregrounding the staff recommendation and qualitative results while keeping scores available as public records.	Low	Process change; subject to future approval by COAB / Board of revised guidelines and scoring rubric
R13	Award Decision	Document the full award decision process in the guidelines, including how portfolio-level factors shape final awards.	High	Minor edit to Grant Guidelines
R14	Award Decision	Provide public tools to track Measure Q investment across the direct allocation and grant programs by geography and Vision Plan theme.	Medium	Medium lift; staff-controlled, working with County GIS staff
R15	Award Decision	Determine award reductions in advance with applicant input, and resolve late funding gaps through staff rather than at final Board approval.	High	Minor edit to Grant Guidelines and socialization with Board of Supervisors
R16	Award Decision	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	Very High	Process change; subject to future approval by COAB / Board of revised guidelines and scoring rubric

Attachment A. Applicant Survey Results

MEASURE Q FY2025–26 GRANT PROGRAM POST-APPLICATION SURVEY AUGUST 2026

This attachment summarizes findings from a post-cycle survey of organizations that engaged with the FY 2025–26 Measure Q grant cycle. Twenty-four responses were received, split evenly between funded and not-funded applicants. Responses are reviewed in aggregate. Findings inform the after-action review presented to the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board and Board of Supervisors in August 2026. Sample size is small; findings reflect respondent experience and should be interpreted accordingly.

DATA AND METHODS

Data source. Survey distributed via Microsoft Forms to organizations that engaged with the FY 2025–26 Measure Q grant cycle. Twenty-four responses received. Response data exported for analysis.

AI assistance. Charts were generated programmatically from response counts using Python/matplotlib. Open-text responses were thematically coded and quotes selected using Claude (Anthropic). All outputs were reviewed by program staff.

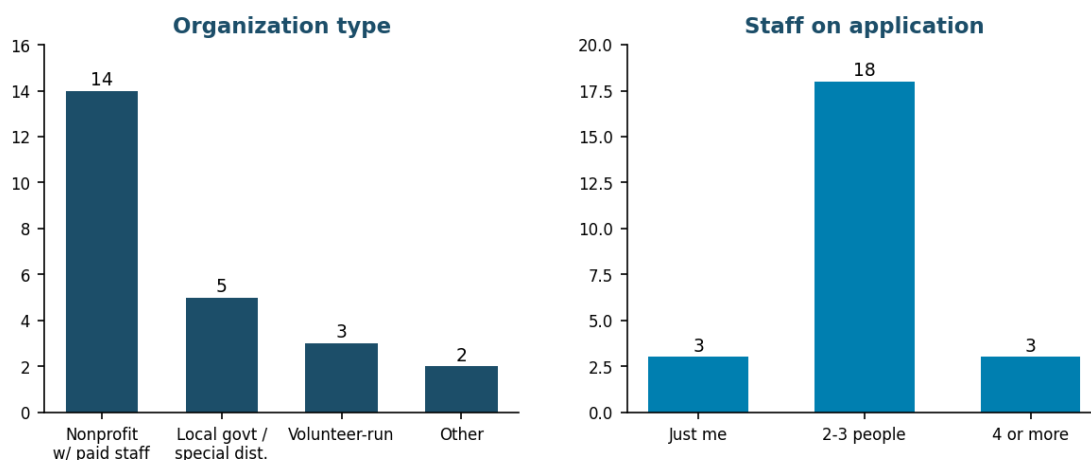
Quotes. Quotes are reproduced from respondent submissions and lightly trimmed for length only. Minor spelling corrections applied. Quotes were selected to represent the range of perspectives across funded and not-funded respondents.

Question citations. The exact survey question is cited below each chart or section heading throughout this report.

1. Respondent Summary

24 TOTAL RESPONSES	12 / 12 FUNDED / NOT FUNDED	13 / 11 TIER 1 / TIER 2
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Survey question: “Which best describes your organization? | Roughly how many staff (paid or volunteer) worked on your application?”

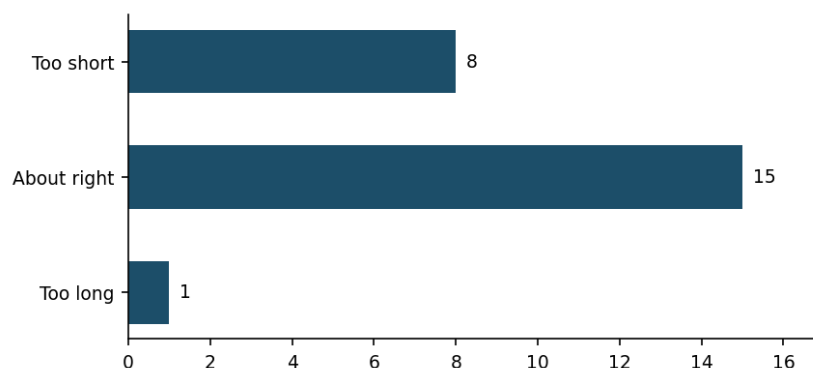


2. Application Period

The application window ran January 23 to March 13, 2026 — seven weeks. Most respondents found the length adequate, and eight said it was too short. Platform reliability was the most consistent complaint across the survey, raised by 15 of 24 respondents regardless of award outcome.

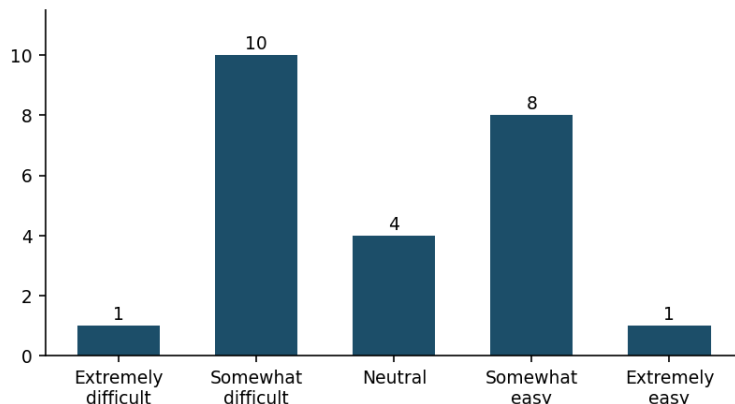
Window Length

Survey question: “The application period ran from January 23 to March 13, 2026 (7 weeks). How did the length feel?”



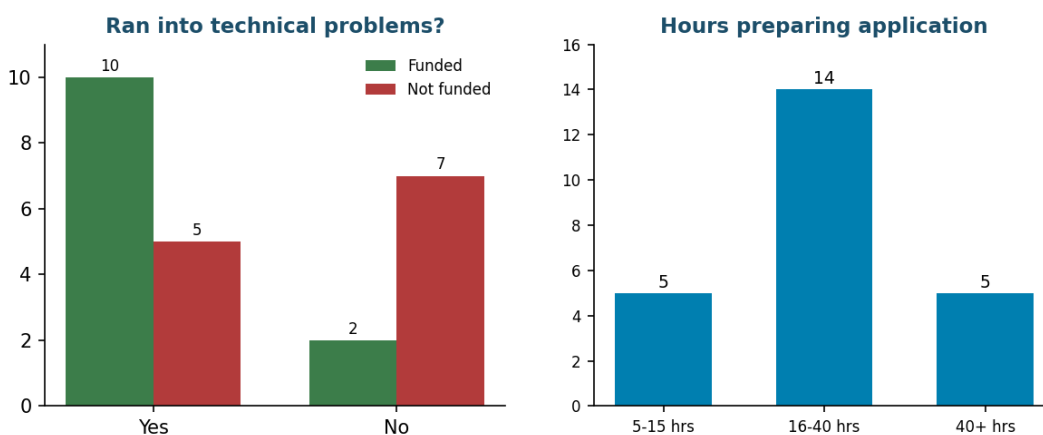
Online Platform

Survey question: “How easy was it to use the online application platform (Open Gov)?”



Technical Problems and Time Burden

Survey question: “Did you run into any technical problems (uploads, saving progress, formatting)? | Roughly how many hours did your organization spend preparing the application?”



The most consistently reported technical issues were:

- Progress not saved between sessions, requiring re-entry of completed fields
- Formatting (spacing, line breaks) changed on submission
- Attachments disappearing after saving
- Character limits that truncated visible text but accepted the full entry
- Collaborative editing and sharing features that did not function
- Inability to preview the full application before beginning, causing missed requirements

“Progress was not always saved, and formatting was not preserved (spacing/line breaks).”

— Tier 1 / Not funded

“I had some attachments disappear after saving. I had to input all the referenced plans multiple times.”

— Tier 2 / Funded

"Not being able to see all of the application until one page was finished caused us to miss the deadline."

— Not funded (incomplete submission)

"Can you provide a Word version of the application questions to help draft responses before entering them? An autosave feature could be immensely helpful."

— Tier 2 / Funded

Repetitive and Overlapping Questions

Survey question: *"Were there any questions or areas of the application that felt repetitive, unclear, or difficult for your organization to answer?"*

Roughly half of respondents identified pairs or clusters of questions that asked for similar information in different ways. Most-cited overlaps: project readiness addressed in multiple sections; community served and community benefits narratives; partnership and collaboration summaries; and the timeline question versus the required timeline attachment. Several respondents noted that permitting-related questions felt irrelevant to non-capital projects.

"Several sections are repetitive: Project Readiness is addressed multiple times. Community Benefits and Community Served overlap. Strategic Alignment overlaps with Readiness and Public Benefits. Environmental Benefits and Measure Q Priorities are somewhat duplicative."

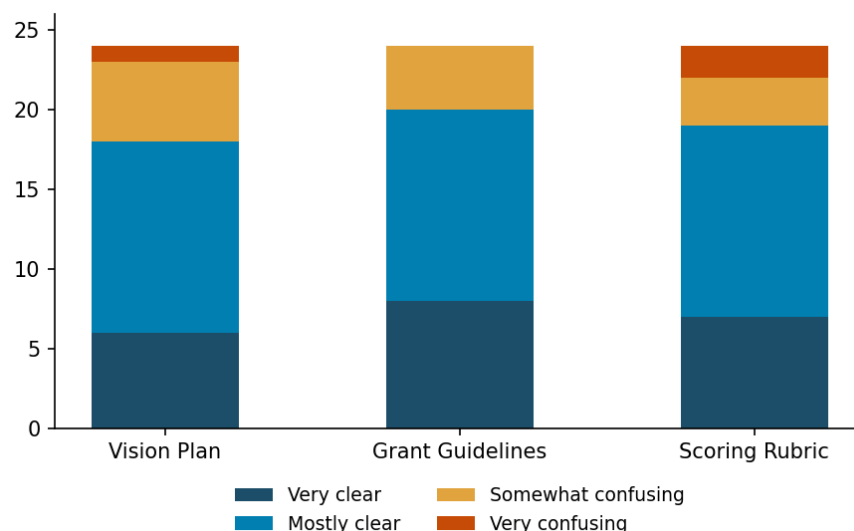
— Tier 2 / Funded

3. Grant Guidelines and Scoring

Materials provided to applicants in advance (Vision Plan, Grant Guidelines, and scoring rubric) were rated as clear by a majority of respondents. Evaluator variance and interpretation of the scoring rubric raised the most substantive concerns.

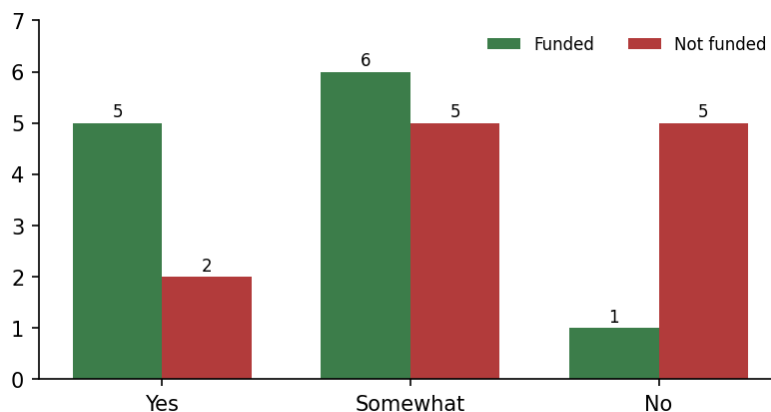
Clarity Ratings

Survey question: *"How clear was the Vision Plan / Grant Guidelines / scoring rubric?"*



Did the Evaluation Process Feel Fair?

Survey question: “After reviewing your scoring results and evaluator comments, did the evaluation process feel fair?”



Thematic Classification and Point Caps

Survey question: “Any other feedback on the guidelines or scoring process? | Were there any questions or areas of the application that felt repetitive, unclear, or difficult for your organization to answer?”

At least two respondents did not know that evaluators would assign a single thematic category to their application, or that this assignment would set the maximum possible score for the Vision Plan alignment criterion.

“It was determined that Agricultural and Working Lands Protection was the thematic area we would be scored on, and our score for the thematic areas narrative was capped at 9 points. We did not know ahead of time that reviewers would decide which thematic area a proposal fit into, and that possible points would be capped if the project was outside the top three priority areas.”

— Tier 2 / Not funded

“From the RFP and rubric, it seemed like we were supposed to pick a primary Measure Q theme and build our application around that. However, both evaluators docked significant points because we failed to address the other three priority areas.”

— Tier 1 / Funded

Evaluator Variance

Survey question: “Any other feedback on the guidelines or scoring process?”

High variance between the two evaluators assigned to each application was raised independently by at least six respondents. Issues included no visible reconciliation step when scores diverged substantially; one reviewer leaving no written reasoning for deducted points; and at least one case where bundled letters of support were counted as a single letter. Multiple

respondents suggested adding a third reviewer, a divergence-flagging step, or score normalization.

“One suggestion is to add a judge-score normalization procedure and a flagging step for highly divergent reviews. That variation can affect outcomes if scores are averaged without calibration.”

— Tier 1 / Not funded

“Another reviewer left no reasoning as to why points were not given across various categories. Their only comments were positive, leaving the reader confused.”

— Tier 1 / Funded

“Scorers missed several aspects in our proposal. Bundled letters of support (7 in total) were judged as a single letter and thus scored low.”

— Tier 2 / Funded

“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.”

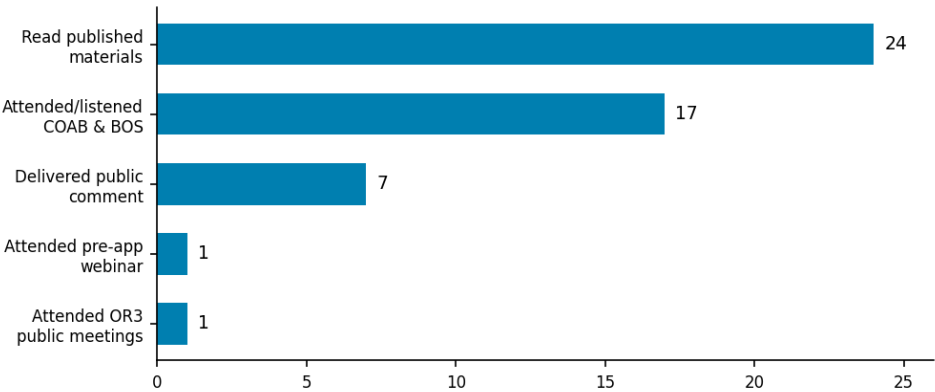
— Tier 2 / Funded

4. Funding Decision Process

Respondents were highly engaged with the decision-making process. All read published materials, and most attended or listened to COAB and Board of Supervisors meetings. Overall transparency ratings were positive, although respondents raised concerns about award reductions and divergence between COAB recommendations and the final Board of Supervisors decision.

Engagement with the Decision-Making Process

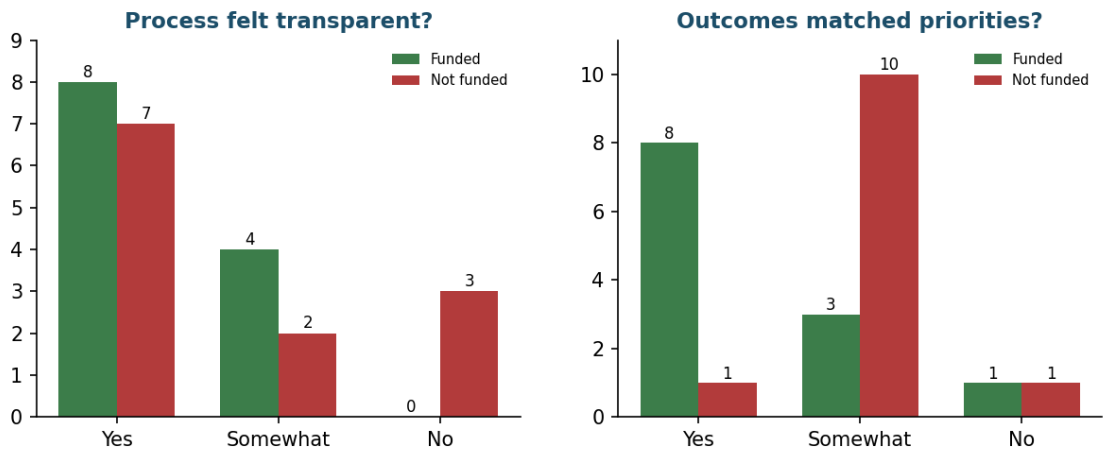
Survey question: “In what ways did you engage with the decision-making process? (select all that apply)”



Transparency and Alignment with Vision Plan Priorities

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?"

The funded and not-funded split on perceived Vision Plan consistency was the most pronounced divergence in the survey.



June 9, 2026 Board of Supervisors Meeting

Theme from open-text responses.

Survey question: "Is there support you wish had been available but wasn't? | Any other feedback on the guidelines or scoring process? | Any other comments?"

Multiple respondents, including funded applicants, raised the June 9 Board of Supervisors meeting. Common themes: applicants were not informed in advance that portfolio-balancing scenarios (geography, equity, thematic distribution) would factor alongside scores; the Board's verbal emphasis on wildfire prevention was seen as inconsistent with Vision Plan language; and across-the-board award reductions were perceived as disconnected from individual application merit.

"Wish we had been made aware that scenarios for funding based upon geography or community impact would be used in addition to scores. This would have allowed us to write to those possibilities and stay competitive."

— Tier 2 / Not funded

"It felt unfair that one supervisor's opinion that everyone should take a cut resulted in significant reductions to funding awards regardless of ranking or alignment with core Measure Q priorities. It would be preferable for funding reductions to be referred back to staff."

— Tier 2 / 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

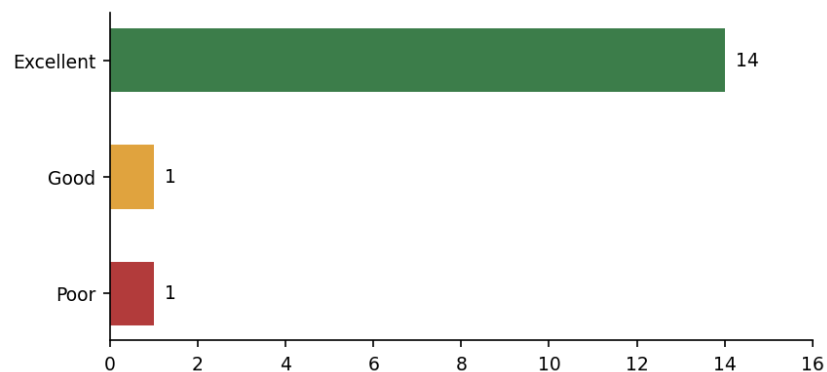
"What felt very unfair was the difference between how projects were evaluated initially and who ultimately got funded. There shouldn't be such a big variance between the recommendations for funding and those final decisions, if we're to have a transparent process that can be trusted."

— Tier 2 / Not funded

5. Staff Support

Survey question: *"Did you contact Measure Q staff for help? | How would you rate the support you received?"*

Staff support was rated positively across the board. Of 16 respondents who contacted staff during the application process, 14 rated support as Excellent and 1 as Good. Responsiveness was cited repeatedly by both funded and not-funded applicants.



"County staff was highly responsive as these things occurred, which was very helpful."

— Tier 2 / Funded

"Staff were incredibly available and supportive to answer technical questions."

— Tier 1 / Funded

6. Institutional Barriers

Survey question: *"What is the single biggest barrier your organization faced in applying for or competing for this funding?"*

Several structural barriers were raised by smaller and volunteer-run organizations. The fiscal sponsor requirement was among the most frequently cited, particularly for FireWise communities and neighborhood groups without an eligible fiscal agent. Time burden and limited staff capacity were also identified, with some respondents noting a competitive disadvantage relative to organizations with dedicated grant-writing staff.

"We had extreme difficulty finding a fiscal sponsor. Yet this money needs to go to small communities like ours to protect our homes and infrastructure."

— Tier 1 / Funded (volunteer-run)

"Finding a way for non-professional grant writers to compete fairly with professional grant writers. This is a huge barrier for small nonprofits or agencies without the same resources."

— Tier 1 / Not funded

"We only have one designated grant writer, and the length of this application stretched our capacity and required us to pull program staff for assistance."

— Tier 1 / Funded

"If we'd known further in advance when the application window was going to open, and had access to the question list in advance, we could have prepared better. With two applications going in and other priorities in our queue, it was a struggle to get everything ready on time."

— Tier 2 / Not funded

One respondent raised a concern not captured elsewhere: public posting of equity-focused applications may create risk for some organizations in the current federal environment. This may warrant separate consideration in guidelines discussions about what is published and how.

7. Positive Feedback

Survey question: "Any other comments?"

Many respondents specifically praised county staff, the transparency of published materials, and the overall quality of the inaugural cycle. These responses came from both funded and not-funded applicants.

"This was one of the most straightforward applications I've worked on, and I really appreciated the precise guidelines, vision plan, and scoring rubric."

— Tier 1 / Funded

"All in all, this was an excellent beginning. Congratulations to County Staff for some of the best public participation and transparency we've seen in government."

— Tier 1 / Funded (volunteer-run)

"THANK YOU. Really appreciate all the thought you put into this and the transparency and space for input throughout the whole process. Not an easy task."

— Tier 1 / Not funded

Survey instrument and raw data available from program staff upon request. Published scoring and evaluator comments: <https://santacruzcountyca.gov/MeasureQ.aspx>