

MEMO

To: MT Geospatial Information Advisory Council

From: Sean Anderson

Subject: MGIA Grants Internal Review - Update

Date: May 9, 2025

In November 2024, MSL staff began an Internal Review project to improve and streamline the MGIA grant program. The council received an update at the January 2025 meeting, and this memo is intended to give insight into the process and current state of the review.

The review is moving ahead as planned. Areas of focus are described in the attached Project Outline – this is a high-level document that describes the general purpose of the review, and is being used by the review team as a guiding document.

Since the last update to this Council, all of the sub-committees have been meeting regularly to define measures of success, and identifying the specific problems and bottlenecks that need to be resolved. These are particular to each topic, but a number of common themes have emerged, including:

- A 2-year grant cycle that matches the legislative biennium is logical and solves for a number of logistical, financial, and staff resource issues.
- Establish boundaries between grant administration and project management responsibilities – reduces confusion, and improves efficiency.
- The need to simplify and document administrative procedures – consistency will serve MSL staff, and transparency will serve grantees and stakeholders.
- More consistent communication with grantees and stakeholders – helps maintain relationships, provides opportunities for accountability and feedback.
- Leveraging institutional partners to support grantees, especially in the areas of project management and grant management.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but is indicative of the kinds of solutions that have stood out as a result of this internal review. We regret not being able to offer grants in FY2026, but this



has provided us with a much-needed opportunity to think critically about ways to improve the grant program.

As of today, the teams are in the process of defining initial recommendations for each area of focus, and will be working on finalizing and implementing recommended changes over the summer. The ideal is that we end this review with a grant program that is easy for grantees to participate in, that is manageable for available MSL staff, that is financially sustainable, and that is fulfilling the goals and addressing the needs of the MSDI. Practically speaking, this means that by the end of Q1 of FY2026, we will have an MGIA Grant program with improved documentation, updated communication plans, and updated grant timelines ready to launch for the FY2027 grant cycle.

Montana Geographic Information Act (MGIA) Grants Review Project

This project aims to streamline and improve the MGIA grant process. Without a grant program for FY2026, this is an ideal time to conduct process improvement.

Because of the recent financial shortfalls affecting this program, this project focuses on grant-making priorities and essential financial aspects first, followed by grant timing, feedback collection and analysis, grant management tools, and finally outreach and communication strategies.

The following outline presents high-level tasks in order of priority:

Determining Grant Priorities

1. Review Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI) for needs/gaps
 - a. Sub-task: Explore ways to standardize projects
 - b. Staff: Erin, Jennie
- Note: Investigate reasons for gaps (e.g., lack of local GIS support, tribal relations, lack of matching funds)
2. Create/Update procedure for aligning Geospatial Information Plan priorities with grant priorities
 - a. Sub-task: Define MGIAC's role
- Note: Consider strategic opportunities and holistic approach to grant priorities

Budget/Finance

1. Determine 'typical' grant cycle budget
 - a. Staff: Malissa, Erin
2. Determine reserve amount to be maintained
 - a. Staff: Malissa, Erin
- Note: Start with 80% of 'typical' grant budget; retain 5% of annual revenue
3. Project MGIA revenue
 - a. Staff: Ashley (tentative)

Grantee Feedback

1. Compile existing grantee feedback
 - a. Sub-task: Connect feedback to project type and grant priority
 - b. Staff: Matt (tentative)
- Note: Analyze what works and what doesn't, identify staff-intensive projects, and consistencies in success/failure
2. Collect internal feedback on projects
 - a. Staff: Matt, Michael, Erin, Troy
3. Review past training evaluations
 - a. Staff: Rebekah

- Note: Assess if more training led to better grant management
- 4. Establish standard practice to solicit feedback from grantees
 - a. Staff: Sean, Erin
- 5. Analyze data and identify commonalities
 - a. Staff: Rebekah, Erin

Grant Timing

1. Consider local budgeting timelines
 - a. Sub-task: Identify other practical/fiscal considerations
 - b. Staff: Erin, Malissa
- Note: Counties typically begin budget work in January, finalize in June/July
2. Determine ideal grant cycle duration (one year vs. two years)
 - a. Staff: Erin, Malissa
- Note: Consider legislative, fiscal, and logistical dependencies and priorities

Outreach & Communication

1. Determine when training/outreach should begin
 - a. Staff: Sean, Erin
 - b. Note: Typically starts 4-6 months before grant cycle begins
2. Define training content
 - a. Staff: Sean, Erin, Matt, Michael, Troy
- Note: Current experience suggests extensive training may not be effective

Grant Management

1. Create a Program that is manageable for limited MSL staff
 - a. MSL PMs review past grants
 - b. Standardize document templates
 - c. Standardize grant timelines, deadlines
- Note: Lean on Administrative Rules - doesn't appear to be a LOT of restriction or limitation on how the program is administered
2. Review and update grant management cycle and tasks
 - a. Staff: Sean, Erin, Matt, Michael
3. Decide on need for software solution
 - b. Staff: Sean, Erin
- Note: Current preference is for analog solution
4. Budget for grant management software
 - c. Staff: Malissa, Erin
- Note: Consider retaining percentage from MGIA revenue

Project Brief: MGIA Grant Program Internal Review

1. Project Overview

Project Name: MGIA Grant Program Internal Review

Summary: This project aims to streamline and improve the MGIA Grant Program by addressing inefficiencies in administration, challenges in tracking progress, and difficulties faced by grantees in achieving results. The initiative focuses on creating a sustainable funding model, enhancing administrative efficiency, simplifying the grant application and management process, and better integrating the program with the Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI).

Problem Statement: The current MGIA Grant Program is inefficient to administer, lacks effective tracking mechanisms, presents challenges for grantees in achieving successful outcomes, and may or may not contribute to the success of the Geospatial Information Plan and legislative mandate.

2. Objectives and Goals

Priority Objectives (in order):

1. Identify and/or improve the process for determining grant priorities to ensure alignment with the program's [legislative mandate](#).
 1. Evaluating overall program effectiveness
 2. Ensure successful grant reporting improves continuous evaluation and improve of grant priorities and alignment with the Geospatial Information Plan.
2. Ensure the financial stability of the grant program.
3. Improve administrative efficiency to streamline operations.
4. Create a program that is both accessible and achievable for grantees.
 1. Evaluating effectiveness of grants year-to-year
5. Enhance internal and external communication about the program.
6. Improve grant management processes, whether through automation or additional training for program staff.

3. Scope and Deliverables

Scope:

The project will include the following activities:

- Reviewing and refining the process for identifying grant priorities to align with legislative mandates.
- Conducting a financial analysis to ensure the program's sustainability.
- Streamlining administrative workflows for efficiency.
- Designing a simplified grant application and management system.
- Developing strategies to improve communication with stakeholders, both internal and external.
- Evaluating current grant management practices and implementing improvements through automation or staff training.

Deliverables:

1. A documented framework for identifying grant priorities and measures of success of grant award cycles and overall grant program.
2. A financial sustainability plan for the grant program.
3. A revised administrative process map or workflow guide.
4. A prototype or finalized design for the simplified grant application and management system.
5. A communication strategy and supporting materials for internal and external stakeholders.
6. Recommendations or tools for improved grant management (e.g., automated systems or training modules).

4. Stakeholders and Team

Key Stakeholders:

1. **Primary Stakeholders:** Grantees (local and county GIS departments, planning departments, etc.).
2. **MGIA Council:** Advisory board guiding MSL GIS initiatives.
3. **MSL Leadership and Central Services:** Responsible for oversight, accountability, and financial management of the program.

Project Team and Roles:

- **Erin Fashoway:** GIS Coordinator and staff to the MGIA Council
- **Sean Anderson:** Grant Administration
- **Jennie Stapp:** State Librarian and MGIA Councilmember
- **Michael Fashoway:** Land Projects Manager
- **Troy Blandford:** Water Projects Manager
- **Evan Hammer:** Digital Library Administrator
- **Malissa Briggs:** Central Services, Finance
- **Rebekah Kamp:** Data Coordinator

5. Timeline and Milestones

Overall Timeline: The project is scheduled for completion by **September 2025**.

Approach to Milestones:

The team will meet monthly to review progress and adjust plans as needed, with quarterly milestones to be developed as the project progresses.

6. Constraints and Dependencies

Constraints:

1. **Funding Stability:** Ensuring consistent funding availability is critical; contingency plans are needed to address potential reductions in funding (e.g., FY24-25).
2. **Team Capacity:** The small project team has multiple other responsibilities, making efficiency improvements essential.
3. **Regulatory Requirements:** Minimal regulatory constraints exist under Montana Administrative Rule 10.102.9105, offering flexibility in implementation.

Dependencies:

- Securing sustainable funding sources.
- Collaboration with internal teams (e.g., Central Services, GIS staff) to balance workload effectively.
- Integration with Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI) initiatives.

7. Communication Plan

Goals:

- Ensure consistent communication with stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle.
- Keep stakeholders informed of progress, challenges, and outcomes.
- Promote engagement among all parties involved.

Key Audiences:

1. Grantees (local/county GIS departments, planning departments).
2. MGIA Council (advisory board).
3. MSL Leadership/Central Services (oversight teams).
4. Internal Project Team Members.

Communication Tools/Strategies:

- Monthly team meetings to review progress.
- Quarterly stakeholder updates via email newsletters or virtual meetings.
- Multi-channel outreach using email, memos, and presentations.

- Feedback mechanisms such as surveys or feedback sessions during key phases.