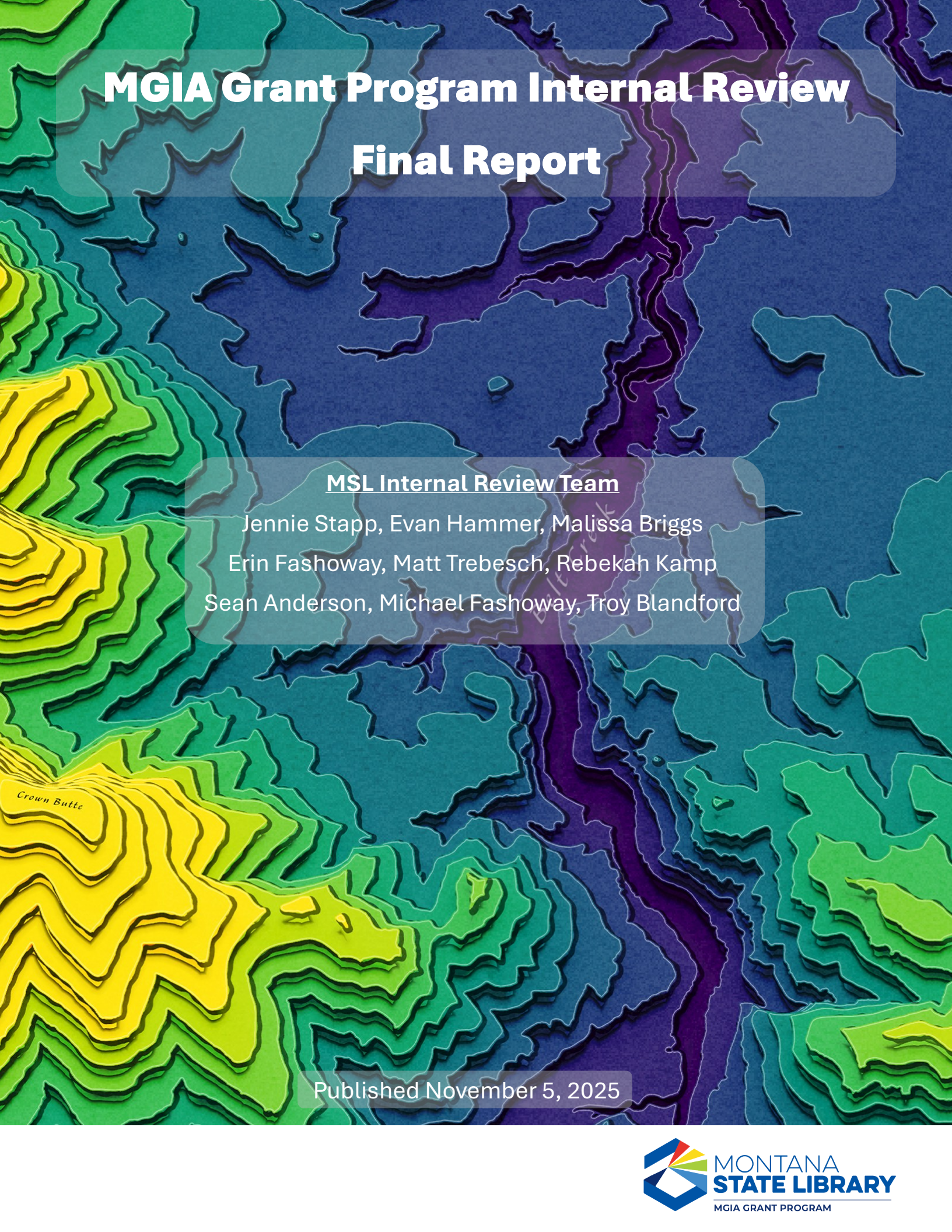




MGIA Grant Program Internal Review

Final Report

MSL Internal Review Team

Jennie Stapp, Evan Hammer, Malissa Briggs
Erin Fashoway, Matt Trebesch, Rebekah Kamp
Sean Anderson, Michael Fashoway, Troy Blandford

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Summary

The 2025 internal review of the Montana Geospatial Information Act (MGIA) Grant Program, conducted by Montana State Library (MSL) staff, provided a timely opportunity to thoughtfully study the program and refocus the program to prioritize efficiency, and to ensure long-term sustainability. It was also an opportunity to explore how best to implement the biennial grant cycle, established by Administrative Rule in 2024. By examining grant-making priorities, financial management, administrative practices, communication strategies, and grant management systems, the project team identified that aligning all efforts with the Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI) and Geospatial Information Plan is essential to maximize statewide benefit of the grant program and to ensure operational clarity. Central recommendations made by the project team to the Montana Geospatial Information Advisory Council (Council) include removing project tiers, implementing the biennial grant cycle established in Administrative Rule, standardizing project scopes, streamlining documentation, and refining training to focus on technical and project management skills.

Moving forward, if these recommendations are adopted by the Council, implementation will occur in phases: clarifying roles, updating processes and templates, building out training and evaluation tools, and making time for annual grant project reviews tied to MSDI priorities. Throughout this process, MSL staff and the grants working group of the MGIA Council will update stakeholders to ensure the program remains transparent and responsive to Montana's evolving geospatial needs.

Note that this report is intended to be a relatively brief overview of the internal review process and findings. More detailed reporting on report elements are attached as addenda to this report for reference.

Introduction

During the spring and summer of 2025, the MSL staff conducted a comprehensive internal review of the MGIA grant program. The study was initiated following financial shortfalls that forced MSL to cancel the FY2024 grant program extensions and FY2025/FY2026 grants. The study also took into account evolving stakeholder expectations. The absence of grant cycles in FY2025 & FY2026 provided a unique opportunity to assess and strengthen the program before grant awards are made for FY2027. The review was designed to advance the program's effectiveness and sustainability by focusing on five main areas of study.

The team concentrated on the following areas:

- Grant-making priorities: Evaluating and refining how grant priorities are set to ensure alignment with statutory mandates and the statewide Geospatial Information Plan.
- Financial stability: Assessing and improving fiscal planning, revenue projections, and overall sustainability to protect and strengthen the program's future.
- Administrative efficiency: Streamlining processes, updating documentation, and reducing burden for both staff and grantees by reviewing workflows, management tools, and reporting cycles.
- Stakeholder communication and outreach: Enhancing communication strategies to keep both internal and external stakeholders informed and engaged, while implementing best practices for training and outreach.

- Grant management practices: Reviewing and optimizing the systems, tools, and procedures for grant administration, including consideration of digital solutions and standardization of tasks.

Guided by these areas of study, the project team - including GIS, grants administration, data coordination, and finance staff - collaborated closely to identify current program inefficiencies, gather stakeholder feedback, and produce actionable recommendations. The findings from this review will inform ongoing implementation through FY2027, positioning the MGIA grant program to deliver greater value to Montana's geospatial community and meet its legislative commitments.

Process to Identify Grant Priorities

The MGIA grant program's success begins with alignment on Montana's statewide Geospatial Information Plan. With that in mind, team members revisited the Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI) to identify ongoing needs and gaps. In particular, the team sought to understand how well the grant program advanced the goals of the plan and to identify persistent challenges in the grant program, and the underlying causes of these challenges such as the lack of local GIS support for grantees to complete project requirements, limited tribal engagement with the grant program, or the absence of matching funds to support grant projects.

Despite the challenges identified, it is clear that the grant program is largely successful at achieving its intent to collaborate with grantees in "collecting, developing, maintaining, and disseminating geographic information systems, geospatial information, and geospatial technologies." (MCA 90-1-412). 69% of granted funds were directed toward tier 1 priorities – priorities which have the greatest impact on the MSDI. Additionally, grantees reported a high degree of appreciation and support from MSL staff, as well as practical improvements in workflow as a result of their projects, the creation of new GIS programs, and positive impacts on local industry and public services. Grantee feedback is discussed in detail later in this report.

A key focus was placed on standardizing project proposals to ensure that funded projects are aligned with MSDI priorities and reduce opportunities for confusion. Staff evaluated historic grant awards and grant success by type of project and found that the more standardized and prescribed the project, the more successful it was. Tier 2 projects tended to be more complex or locally nuanced projects, and were found to be more time and resource intensive for both MSL staff and grantees themselves (See Attachment 3: MGIA Grant Priorities Report). Grants rarely failed outright, but many were extended for multiple years or required significant investment of staff time to make the project successful.

The result is a recommendation that the Geospatial Information Plan explicitly identify gaps and needs in the MSDI, and that grants be prioritized by their ability to address those needs and gaps. The current (as of Oct. 1, 2025) draft of the plan lists a priority need for data enhancement, administrative boundaries and geo-enabled elections, and significant gaps in data from tribal areas. These needs are best addressed through funded projects that utilize our more standardized, template-based NG9-1-1 and CadNSDI (CadNSDI represents the cadastral components of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS)) project scopes.

This result deviates from the status quo because it requires that the MSDI be the sole measure to prioritize projects for funding under this program. We acknowledge that some grantees have specific geospatial needs outside the MSDI, and MGIA grants have been used to fund those needs in the past. Moving forward, the MSDI and grants need to work holistically - Grant-funded projects must address a documented need to be considered (See Recommendation 4). This approach will help us maintain efficiency by eliminating “scope creep” and allow MSL to offer more prescriptive, templated projects to potential grantees, increasing their likelihood success.

Note: A comprehensive report on grant prioritization can be found in Attachment 3: MGIA Grant Priorities Report.

Budget & Finance

The financial stability of the MGIA grant program was an essential pillar of the review – especially following recent shortfalls and budget uncertainties. Staff analyzed past grant cycles to identify a ‘typical’ program budget, and (if possible) establish targets for financial reserves that might reduce the impact of revenue volatility that caused grants to be canceled for a couple of years. The review also considered that the 2025 legislature increased the proportion of recording fees that are allocated to the MGIA. MSL will monitor revenues to determine what a ‘new normal’ looks like in the future following the increase.

The review underscored that reliable forecasting of MGIA revenue remains a persistent challenge. Historical approaches - particularly the practice of allocating a consistent annual grant amount – are no longer sustainable. Because the source of the revenue is recording fees, it is naturally variable and can result in unpredictable revenue collections. As a result, the team concluded that future grant budgets must remain flexible and responsive to actual revenue trends.

To address this, the revised approach calls for MSL and the MGIA Council to consider and approve the grant budget biennially, allowing for more accurate alignment with current fiscal realities. The two-year grant cycle (discussed later in this report) will simplify planning and administration by harmonizing award timing with the biennial state budgeting process.

Staff did consider an alternative approach to maintain a reserve account, funded by MGIA revenue, that would be drawn from in the event of revenue fluctuations – the idea being that we could continue to offer a consistent grant amount year over year. However, this approach is inconsistent with how other agency budgets are created and maintained, and introduces unnecessary complexity and compliance issues.

No grant funding was allocated for either FY2025 or FY2026, but applications for FY2027 grants can be released in winter 2025, based on informed estimates of budget priorities and anticipated revenues. Determining a recommended budget for grants will require action by the MGIA Council at their November meeting. This biennial process will be continued in subsequent cycles, with the clear understanding that both revenue collections and grant amounts will vary over time. We do not anticipate a reduction in total support offered to grantees.

It should also be mentioned that the cost of administering and maintaining this grant program are significant, considering the staff time that is invested in administration, oversight and project management, IT maintenance, grantee outreach, financial management, etc. The shift to a two-

year grant cycle is expected to improve both financial stability and operational efficiency, as the program can avoid the need for grant extensions, thereby reducing the number of active grants requiring management at any given time. Maintaining a manageable portfolio of grants will remain a guiding principle for this and future iterations of the program, ensuring resources can be effectively allocated and oversight maintained.

Grantee Feedback

The review confirmed that outreach and communication with grantees have long been strengths of the MGIA grant program. Through intentional relationship-building and consistent interactions, staff have established positive partnerships across Montana's GIS and planning communities. However, analysis revealed that existing outreach efforts are often misaligned with grantees' most pressing needs. Much of staff time is spent on coaching applicants through the grant application process, while feedback indicates that grantees (particularly those in small communities) would benefit more from training and guidance focused on project management and technical geospatial guidance. Nearly all grantees would benefit from a simplified application and reporting process.

The review also found that general understanding of the MSDI - particularly how its goals, needs, and priorities are achieved by the grant program - is lower among grantees than anticipated. This concern highlights a clear need for education and targeted communication about the MSDI. One of the most actionable recommendations was to make better use of partner organizations such as Montana Association of Geographic Information Professionals (MAGIP), National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC), Montana Association of Planners (MAP), Montana Association of Registered Land Surveyors (MARLS), the Montana League of Cities & Towns (MLCT) and the Montana Association of Counties (MACo). Leveraging these partners for communication and ongoing training support will better communicate the value of MGIA and the function of the MSDI, clarifying what the program offers and how local communities benefit from participation.

A two-year grant cycle also opens up opportunities for grantees to participate meaningfully in conferences. We typically see a high level of participation in the current grant program, but this longer time frame allows for grantees to share tangible *results* at conferences, in a way that they typically may not. Often, projects are only partially completed by the time a conference is attended, so impacts can only be presumed. With a two-year cycle, we expect to see more results-oriented presentations by grantees.

A series of in-person interviews with past grantees was conducted, capturing valuable feedback that both validated internal conclusions and revealed new insights. Simplified application and reporting procedures were the primary suggestions made by interviewees. Past grantees also expressed support for the move to a two-year grant cycle, particularly for organizations with limited or no dedicated GIS staff, as this provides the lead time and flexibility needed for successful project completion.

Grantees whose projects included standardized scopes of work - such as PLSS and NG911 grants - naturally had clearer expectations and outcomes, and typically had better experiences. Grantees with little executive support, or small budgets could similarly benefit from more standardized, streamlined procedures.

Overall, these findings indicate that grantee success would be improved most through simplified application and reporting processes as well as standardized, templated scopes of work. Some improvement could also be made by reorienting training and outreach toward project management and ongoing support, and improving external communications about the broader impact of MSDI and the MGIA program. This feedback will inform a set of targeted improvements to both grant administration and communication best-practices, ensuring that grantees' needs are addressed.

Note: A comprehensive report on these interviews can be found in Attachment 4: Grantee Feedback Report.

Grant Management

To effectively administer and to provide project management, this grant program represents a significant commitment for a small staff team, consisting of MSL's GIS Coordinator, Grants Coordinator, and 3-5 GIS Project Managers (PMs), all of whom have other ongoing responsibilities within the agency. The review process repeatedly underscored the central importance of efficiency, not only as a path to sustainability but as a means of achieving consistent, high-quality outcomes across all grant cycles.

Discussions focused on several priority areas, each with clear measures of success. Team members evaluated grantee accountability, project management deficits, agency PM expectations, workflow issues, evaluation processes, and training needs. The following recommendations are advanced and underpinned by these principles:

Staff recommend awarding projects on a two-year, biennial cycle in accordance with Administrative Rule ([ARM 10.102.9105](#)), which dictates that grants are awarded on even-numbered years to minimize disruption from legislative session. This timeline was informed by historical data showing that 27 of 53 grants (51%) during 2020-2024 required extensions, indicating that single-year timelines are often insufficient. The two-year cycle provides grantees ample time for planning and implementation, distributes the administrative workload more effectively, and aims to minimize or eliminate the significant burden of processing extensions (which, while approved 89% of the time, create unnecessary administrative work for MSL).

Beyond reducing extensions, the two-year cycle creates valuable opportunities including MSL site visits throughout the project and the ability for grantees to present at conferences in consecutive years, giving attendees a more comprehensive view of project results. This longer timeline benefits both grantees and MSL by providing additional capacity for outreach and more consistent evaluation and support.

Administrative materials, including templates, scopes of work, agreements, and program definitions will be routinely updated, tracked, and aligned with annual reviews of MSDI priorities and data needs. A transparent exception process will be established for rare, non-MSDI projects (or off-cycle grants in alignment with [ARM 10.102.9107](#)), with clear documentation to ensure accountability. The topic of grant-management software has been a common topic of discussion for years, and while these tools have some benefit, their cost makes them untenable. MGIA grant-making should be kept simple – and making use of existing collaborative tools is the priority.

Pre-application training will focus on MSDI standards and foundational project management skills, delivered through scalable recorded sessions and supplemented by partner workshops. Post-award outreach will be enhanced through purposeful and sustained contact with grantees, including site visits, scheduled check-ins, and open feedback channels. These improvements support grantees throughout their project's lifecycle and help us to tell stories and share the impact of this work.

Roles within the program team have been clearly defined to leverage individual expertise and support a culture of accountability and cooperation. Measures of success include higher rates of on-time quarterly reporting, timely project completion, transparent invoicing and application processes, effective use of contract management and dashboard tools, and an updated evaluation procedure.

Collectively, these recommendations address issues of process efficiency, grantee capacity, accountability, and program sustainability. As updates to documentation, application materials, and training modules are rolled out, ongoing input and feedback will be welcomed to guide effective implementation and continuous improvement of the program.

Note: A more comprehensive review of grant program administration can be found in Attachment 5: Grant Administration Improvement Memo

Recommendations

The MGIA grant program review led to a more refined vision for program administration and management. These recommendations reflect broad strategic priorities, with specific implementation details and tasks to follow.

Central to this vision is the recognition that MSL, as a small, high-capacity agency, must intentionally focus its efforts, and fully leverage the MSDI and Geospatial Information Plan to guide all grant-making activities. The program should be designed around realistic goals for efficiency, sustainability, and impact for Montana's communities and agencies.

1. Simplify Program Focus

Eliminate project "tiers." Prioritize only projects that directly target MSDI priorities. These include data enhancement, boundaries, and tribal integration - issues identified in current and future MSDI and Geospatial Information Plans.

- Standardize and template project scopes, especially for recurring themes like MSDI Cadastral and Structures & Addresses, which have proven successful and more manageable from both a project delivery and administrative perspective.
- Evaluate and adjust priorities on an ongoing basis, allowing grant-making activities to remain closely attuned to current statewide needs.

2. Adopt a Realistic and Selective Approach to Grant Application Approval

In order to sustain the grant program, the Council should be disciplined about saying "no" to proposals that do not directly advance goals of the MGIA and its Geospatial Information Plan, and actively resist scope creep:

- Embrace being selective: Invest scarce staff time and grant funds in projects with clear, high statewide impact, rather than attempting to accommodate all requests.
- Create & utilize a documented, transparent exception process for non-standard proposals, maintaining accountability and reinforcing the broader strategic direction.

3. Streamline Program Process and Administration

Efficiency is key to program sustainability given the size of the MSL team. Administrative practices should be continually refined to minimize friction for both staff and grantees.

- Set accurate, biennial grant budgets linked to revenue projections.
- Establish, document, and automate grantee communication best-practices.
- Standardize templates, agreements, and workflows, with annual updates in alignment with MSDI priorities and process improvements identified in grantee and staff feedback.
- Focus on metrics that matter: Timely grantee reporting, project completion rates, transparent application and tracking processes, and easy oversight and status monitoring.
- Simplify application and grantee reporting processes
- Grant management software is not recommended at this time, but may be considered if scale or complexity of grant program increases significantly.

4. Support Capacity Building by Focusing on Standard Projects

Dedicated “capacity-building” was removed from the Geographic Information Plan in 2024. Still, this review revealed that even standardized projects - those aligned with MSDI advancement - are critical to building local expertise and operational strength.

Relationships with grantees matter. Familiarity with and contribution to the MSDI, as well as constructive relationships with MSL staff inherently builds capacity.

- Continue providing training, tools, and ongoing support to grantees, always reiterating that “standard” data improvement activities are a high-value vehicle for meaningful skill-building across Montana’s communities.

5. Enhance Contributions to Statewide Services and Partnerships

The MSDI is a statewide resource, is federated to national spatial data infrastructure, and MGIA grant-funded improvements benefit all of Montanans and the nation. Many of these recommendations overlap with our strategic goals for Montana GIS Services and are particularly actionable in this case.

- Strengthen and formalize strategic partnerships (with NSGIC, MARLS, etc.) to enhance communication, training, and project support.
- Increase visibility of program through grantee conference participation.
- Use partner engagement to extend the reach of the program, improving understanding of MSDI among local communities and increasing buy-in for the statewide approach.

6. Refine Training, Evaluation, and Accountability Structures

Deliver scaled, modular training focused on MSDI standards and ongoing project management, utilizing recorded sessions and partner workshops.

- Regularly update evaluation criteria and processes, working with the MGIA Council to ensure transparency and continuous improvement.
- Maintain clear expectations for MSL PMs and grantees, embedding good communication and accountability practices into everyday administration.

7. Review and Evaluate Grantee Feedback

The grant program should be approached with an attitude of continual improvement, and processes should be evaluated critically and routinely.

- Develop surveys for grantees and internal stakeholders and administer them at the completion of each project on a biennial cycle.
- Findings from prior surveys should inform updates to procedures during the biennial grant planning phase.
- Survey results should also be archived and analyzed to track long-term trends.

8. Assess Impact Data

Collecting and regularly reviewing grant impact data is vital for understanding program effectiveness. Ongoing analysis of this information helps determine how well grant activities advance the goals of the Geospatial Information Plan and reveals where adjustments or improvements are needed.

- Use a standardized evaluation rubric linking grant deliverables to GIP goals.
- Review closed grant files at the end of each biennial cycle by applying the rubric.
- Conduct impact evaluation interviews with grantees 2 years following project completion.
- Integrate evaluation results into future grant planning, strengthening program strategies and criteria to better serve the goals of the Geospatial Information Plan.

Next Steps

Implementing these recommendations will make the program more reliable, transparent, and straightforward for all future grantees. It should be easy to find answers about the grant program, and as such, the priority will be to clarify roles, expectations, and core program purpose - communicating the “MSDI-first” focus and the value of standardized project scopes to staff, grantees, and stakeholders. Establishing this strong foundation will help ensure all program documentation, training, and communications are consistent and aligned with these guiding principles.

Following this step, the team will standardize workflows and develop consistent templates for applications, agreements, grant reporting, invoicing, project tracking, and project close out. These resources will be made easily accessible through a shared online portal/website. This will support both current grantees, future grantees, Council, and staff by streamlining the process from

application through closeout, reinforcing a single, clear way of working and greatly reducing confusion or duplication of effort.

Project Management resources and communication practices will also be overhauled, shifting to concise, modular materials focused on technical standards and practical project management skills. Regular check-ins, kick-off meetings, and feedback channels will be established for grantees and MSL PMs to foster relationships and maintain accountability. More technical training on MSDI standards is coordinated by MSDI Theme Leads. Fully incorporating this training into the grant program will take some time. The more immediate focus is on grant-specific skills and best-practices.

Finally, evaluation criteria, project scoring, and standard operating procedures will be updated and reviewed annually by the grant evaluation sub-committee, which includes members of the MGIA Council, and is supported by MSL Staff. This institutionalized cadence of review, documentation, and improvement will let the MGIA program remain transparent, objective, and adaptable, ensuring that each cycle builds on past experience and continues to meet Montana's statewide geospatial needs in a sustainable way.

Attachments

1. Internal Review Project Brief
2. Internal Review Work Plan
3. MGIA Grant Priorities Report
4. Grantee Feedback Report
5. Grant Administration Improvement Memo

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 improvement 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. Evaluate grantee success 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, including 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.

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

MGIA Grant Priorities

Completed May 14, 2025

Statutory Alignment

Montana’s geospatial grant program is guided by statutory requirements that emphasize the consistent collection, accurate maintenance, and common availability of standardized geospatial information in digital formats (MCA 90-1-402). Statute further specifies that grant funds must primarily support the collection, development, maintenance, and dissemination of geographic information systems, geospatial information, and related technologies (MCA 90-1-412).

In alignment with these statutory directives, grant priorities published over the past five years have consistently focused on the development of “needed, standardized, and uniform geospatial information in digital formats” across six primary areas. Since 2021, these priorities have been ranked using a tiered system to guide investment and project selection. While the 2020 plan included similar categories, they were not ranked. Over this period, the core priorities have remained unchanged, reflecting a sustained commitment to the foundational elements of Montana’s Spatial Data Infrastructure and the ongoing needs identified in statute and planning documents.

Grant priorities as ranked each plan year

Plan	Support NG 9-1-1	Improve Land Records	Geo- Enabled Elections	Hydrography*	Build GIS Capacity	RTN Network Buildout
2025**	Tier 1A	Tier 1B	Tier 1C	Tier 1D	Tier 2a-c	Tier 2d
2024	Tier 1A	Tier 1B	Tier 1C	-	Tier 2a-c	Tier 2d
2023	Tier 1A	Tier 1B	Tier 1C	-	Tier 2a-c	-
2022	Tier 1A	Tier 1B	Tier 1C	-	Tier 2a-c	-
2021	Tier 1A	Tier 1B	Tier 1C	-	Tier 2a-c	-
2020	Present	Present	-	Present	Present	-

* The 2020 plan included an MSDI Hydrography priority, which did not result in any grant awards. Hydrography reemerged as a ranked priority (Tier 1D) in 2025, calling for a pilot project to support the next generation of the National Hydrography Dataset. As no awards were issued in this area, it is excluded from subsequent charts.

**2025 priorities were published, but grants were not awarded.

This continuity in priorities demonstrates a clear alignment with statutory expectations and the strategic goals of the Montana Geospatial Information Act. The tiered system provides a framework for evaluating proposals and allocating resources, ensuring that funded projects address foundational geospatial needs of the state. Maintaining consistent priorities over multiple years has

provided stability and focus for applicants and administrators. At the same time, this approach highlights the importance of regularly reviewing priorities to ensure that the grant program remains responsive to emerging technologies and evolving stakeholder needs.

Priority Alignment

At the time of application, grantees aligned their projects with a plan priority.

Count of grants awarded by plan priority

Grant Year	Support NG 9-1-1	Improve Land Records	Geo-Enabled Elections	Build GIS Capacity	RTN Network Buildout	Total
2024	2	3	0	1	1	7
2023	4	2	1	1	0	8
2022	1	5	1	5	0	12
2021	6	0	2	3	0	11
2020	6	3	0	6	0	15
Total	19	13	4	16	1	53

While each application listed only one primary priority alignment, some grants addressed multiple priorities. For example, Next Generation 9-1-1 projects often resulted in data that was also valuable for Geo-Enabled Elections.

Total award amounts by plan priority

Grant Year	Support NG 9-1-1	Improve Land Records	Geo-Enabled Elections	Build GIS Capacity	RTN Network Buildout	Total
2024	\$36,969	\$130,204	\$0	\$45,527	\$37,300	\$250,000
2023	\$116,717	\$66,000	\$16,000	\$43,703	\$0	\$242,420
2022	\$17,769	\$122,359	\$11,400	\$98,472	\$0	\$250,000
2021	\$79,928	\$0	\$36,665	\$45,605	\$0	\$162,198
2020	\$93,184	\$64,605	\$0	\$87,001	\$0	\$244,790
Total	\$344,567	\$383,168	\$64,065	\$320,308	\$37,300	\$1,149,408

Comparison to priority ranking

Evaluating grant program success involves assessing how well the funded projects align with the priorities established in the plan, both in terms of project count and total funding.

Investment per priority tier, 2020-2024



Tier 1A, Support NG 9-1-1, was consistently the top priority in the Montana Land Information Plan each year and had the highest number of projects across the five-year period (19). However, this priority did not receive the most grant funding. Instead, Tier 1B, Improve Land Records, accounted for the largest share of funding, influenced in part by four off-cycle awards made in 2022 totaling \$79,859.

Few applicants sought funds for projects focused on Tier 1C, Geo-Enabled Elections. Nevertheless, data produced for Next Generation 9-1-1 also supports geo-enabled elections, indicating some overlap in outcomes even when direct applications are limited.

The RTN Network Buildout was first introduced as a priority in 2024, accounting for 15% of awarded funds that year. While listed as the lowest priority (Tier 2d), this category aligns with state objectives to expand and create a sustainable state reference network.

Despite being a Tier 2 priority, building local GIS capacity received a substantial 28% of the total funds awarded over the past five grant cycles. This investment supported 16 projects addressing a range of local needs, including hazard mapping, replacement of data collection equipment, and development of base geographic layers. Some of these efforts were part of multi-year projects, with one grant recipient in this category receiving funding in four out of five years. These figures reflect a significant commitment to capacity building but also highlight that not all projects may result in the type of capacity necessary to advance key statewide initiatives.

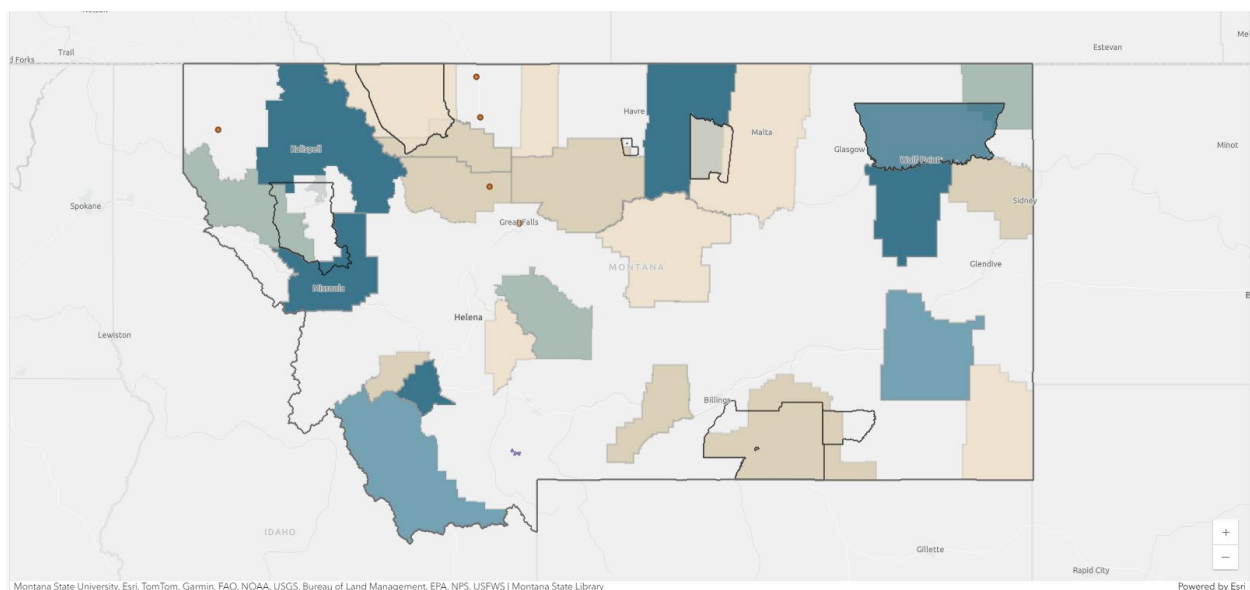
Across the Montana Geospatial Information Plans (2020–2024), “build GIS capacity” is consistently identified as a grant priority. This concept is broadly defined as supporting the ability of state, local, and tribal governments to plan for, implement, maintain, and expand their use of GIS for land information management, decision-making, and public service delivery. The plans emphasize that GIS capacity is not just about technology, but also about people, partnerships, data standards, and workflows that enable effective use of GIS in government operations and statewide initiatives. While this broad approach can help new grant recipients get started and apply for funding, it does not always ensure that projects will result in the specific capacity needed to advance key state priorities, such as geo-enabled elections or improved land records. A more focused definition of capacity building could help clarify what resources and skills are truly needed to prepare participants for these next steps.

It is also important to recognize that building GIS capacity can have significant local benefits, such as improving emergency response, supporting local planning efforts, or enhancing public access to information. However, some of these local impacts may extend beyond the primary scope of the grant program, which is designed to advance statewide geospatial objectives toward the “common availability of geospatial information to provide needed, standardized, and uniform geospatial information.”

Success can be achieved when recipients develop the specific competencies and infrastructure needed to advance Montana’s Tier 1 geospatial objectives. Effective capacity building, reflected in well-scoped proposals, skilled personnel, and appropriate equipment, has the potential to increase the success of future projects. Over time, this could lead to a more balanced distribution of projects statewide and support the development of comprehensive, high-quality datasets that benefit all Montanans.

Grant Recipients

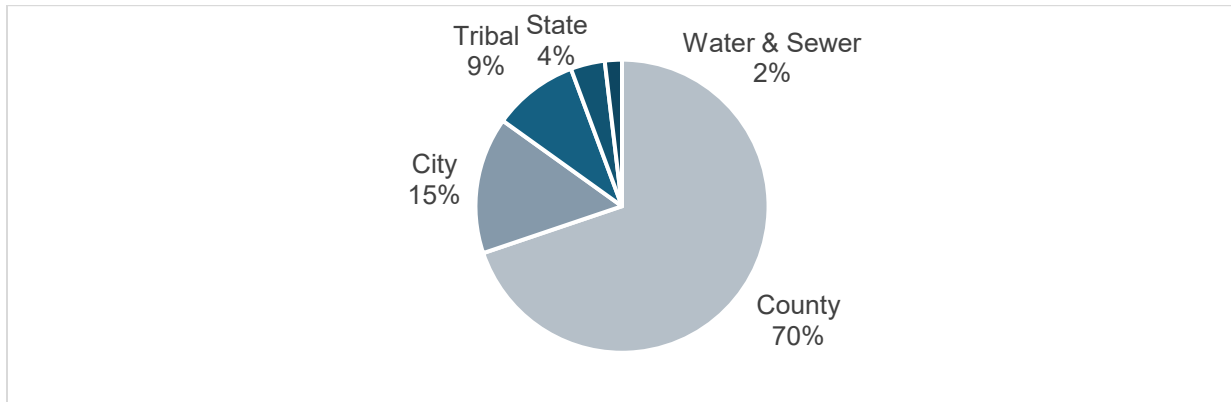
MGIA grant award locations, 2020-2024



Map available online through the [MGIA Grant Projects History Dashboard](#).

Grants were distributed to recipients representing city, county, tribal, and state governments as well as water and sewer districts, as shown in the pie chart below. The map above illustrates the geographic distribution of these awards.

Grant awards by sector, 2020-2024



Although grant recipients represent various sectors of government, analyzing awards by county helps illustrate the geographic distribution of projects across Montana. Because grants may be awarded to city, tribal, or special district governments located within or overlapping county boundaries, a county's presence in the data indicates that a project occurred within its area, regardless of whether the recipient was the county government or another eligible entity.

It is also important to recognize that grants are awarded through an application-driven process. This approach can introduce bias, as it may not accurately reflect the areas of greatest need across the state. Regions facing the most significant challenges are sometimes those with the least capacity or resources to apply for and manage grant-funded projects, leading to their underrepresentation among recipients, even though they might benefit the most from support. This can leave portions of the state without high-quality or up-to-date data, making it difficult to achieve comprehensive statewide initiatives such as geo-enabled elections. As mentioned in the Priority Alignment section, capacity-building grants have the potential to address these gaps.

Over the past five grant cycles, 28 of Montana's 56 counties (50%) received at least one project grant, and 15 of those counties had two or more projects supported by the grant program.

The following 28 counties did not receive any grants during this period: Carbon, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, Golden Valley, Granite, Hill, Jefferson, Judith Basin, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Madison, Mineral, Musselshell, Park, Petroleum, Powder River, Powell, Prairie, Ravalli, Rosebud, Sweet Grass, Treasure, Valley, Wheatland, Wibaux, and Yellowstone.

Measures of Success

The evaluation examined grant financial data including the amount awarded, invoiced, and underspent. The statement of work and contract amendments were also reviewed to determine local match including in-kind and whether a grant was extended.

Beyond finances, a simple matrix was used to evaluate whether grant projects achieved key objectives such as creating data, delivering the data, meeting data standards, and submitting a final report. In some cases, an item might be non-applicable. For example, grants for the sole purpose of collecting new survey control data did not require a final report.

Project Title	Priority Alignment	Data Created	Data Delivered	Met Standards	Final Report Submitted	Additional Notes
Name	Identified Priority	Yes-Partial-No-N/A	Yes-Partial-No-N/A	Yes-Partial-No-N/A	Yes-Partial-No-N/A	[Notes to provide context]

These same standards can roll up from the individual project to examine the overall 2020-2024 grant program.

A significant finding from this analysis is that more than half of all grant projects, 27 out of 53 (51%), requested an extension beyond the original one-year timeline. Except for three grants in FY 2024, all extension requests were approved, highlighting that a single-year grant period often does not meet the needs of many recipients. Several recurring challenges contributed to these extension requests:

- **Weather Delays:** Inclement weather was frequently cited as a barrier to project execution, particularly in Montana’s rural and remote areas. Weather-related delays often made it impossible to complete fieldwork or data collection within the original grant period, prompting requests for additional time.
- **Changes in Tools and Staffing:** Mid-grant transitions, such as adopting new tools or experiencing staff turnover, created additional hurdles. While updated tools sometimes improved project outcomes, the learning curve and workflow adjustments led to delays. Unexpected staff departures also slowed progress, as hiring and onboarding new personnel mid-project required extra time for training and familiarization.
- **Local Capacity Limitations:** Many grantees, especially in rural counties, reported limited staff availability and insufficient equipment. Some lacked dedicated GIS personnel, with existing staff juggling multiple responsibilities such as snowplowing or park maintenance. Technical challenges, like unavailable or outdated equipment, further hampered progress. To address these issues, many projects relied on consultants for specialized expertise or to complete critical tasks.

These recurring barriers suggest that a one-year grant cycle may not provide sufficient flexibility for recipients to overcome local capacity constraints and unforeseen challenges. Extending project

timelines or offering multi-year grant options could improve project completion rates and outcomes, particularly for communities with limited resources.

In addition to highlighting the need for greater flexibility, the frequency of extension requests and the nature of reported challenges also point to potential issues with initial project scoping. The high number of extension requests, along with the challenges detailed in final reports, suggests that some projects may have encountered difficulties in fully anticipating the time, resources, or conditions required to achieve their original objectives as outlined in the Statement of Work. This observation raises the possibility that certain projects were not optimally scoped at the outset. Further analysis—such as comparing the data delivered to the deliverables proposed—could provide additional insight into the alignment between project planning and outcomes. This type of evaluation would benefit from the expertise of a GIS technician to accurately assess project completion and data quality.

Final Reports

This study included a review of final reports. While some reports highlighted the challenges described above and offered valuable insight into how the grant program fosters relationship-building and promotes collaboration, others were more concise in their responses. Future analyses may benefit from a standardized reporting format to support comprehensive evaluation. Even with these variations, clear patterns emerged regarding the importance of partnerships and the critical support provided by the Montana State Library.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a stated priority in the MGIA grant program. The 2024 plan “gives preference to interagency or intergovernmental grant requests,” reflecting the belief that “collaboration and partnerships across all levels of government, nonprofit and private sectors is fundamental in building and maintaining this information.” This focus is reflected in the grant scoring criteria, with 15% of the total score assigned to “Public Benefit,” including service to multiple agencies or jurisdictions. While certain project types, such as survey control collection, MTSRN Buildout, or GIS planning grants, automatically received full points for this criterion, most applicants were evaluated on their ability to demonstrate collaborative impact.

This emphasis on collaboration is reflected in several recent final reports. The Map Missoula Year 3 (2023) report highlights interdepartmental efforts between Missoula County’s GIS Division and the Office of the Clerk & Recorder to digitize tracts of record and link historical deed records to the parcel fabric. Similarly, the Butte-Silver Bow Road Attribution Project (2023) details a partnership between the Planning Department and the Archives, where staff collaborated to scan, transcribe, and map historical records, enhancing the street centerline geodatabase for integration into the MSDI transportation theme and supporting Next Generation 9-1-1 best practices. In 2022, Anaconda-Deer Lodge County reported improved coordination and communication through collaboration among several departments, including Road, Sewer, Water, and Planning, which led to a shared map and more sustainable, efficient GIS workflows for the county.

These examples from the final reports demonstrate that, where collaboration occurred, it often enabled more comprehensive data collection and produced results that benefitted multiple agencies and the public. While some project types, such as those focused on collecting new survey control data, are not required to specifically document “public benefit” or collaboration in the application, the experience of Flathead County in 2022 shows the added value partnerships can bring. Flathead County worked with the cities of Whitefish and Columbia Falls to collect PLSS survey control, resulting in 144 data points delivered to the Montana State Library. This partnership not only improved local data quality but also inspired the recipient to consider a similar project in partnership with other municipalities within the county. However, many other projects did not call upon interagency collaboration to carry out their work. Recipients in rural or smaller jurisdictions often completed projects independently due to limited staff or the localized nature of their needs. Even in these cases, the recipients often found success by turning to help from other sources such as a contractor or technical support from the Montana State Library.

Beyond resource constraints, several additional factors may contribute to applicants’ hesitancy to collaborate. Though not explicitly mentioned in final reports, these considerations remain relevant and could be further explored with grant recipient interviews. Concerns about data sharing, including legal risks and differences in data management practices, can complicate joint efforts, even as Montana moves toward shared data standards. Institutional and political dynamics, such as a desire to maintain local control or limited political support, may also discourage collaboration. Effective partnerships require project management skills and time commitments that often exceed the capacity of already overextended staff. The frequency of extension requests in final reports underscores how staffing limitations and competing priorities can restrict applicants’ ability to pursue collaborative projects, highlighting a practical barrier that persists even when the benefits of partnership are recognized.

Montana State Library Support

One key partner consistently mentioned throughout the final reports is the grant administrator, the Montana State Library. While final reports for all project types acknowledge this support, Next Generation 9-1-1 projects in particular highlight the value of assistance provided by the State Library. This is not surprising as the State Library has a statutory responsibility to support “public safety answering points on the ongoing assessment and improvement of next-generation 9-1-1 GIS data sets” (MCA 10-4-310). In a 2024 report from Sheridan County, both the project manager and GIS contractor specifically recognized the impact of technical support and instruction from MSL on the project’s success. When listing what went well during the project implementation, the report emphasizes, “support from the State Library.” It goes on to describe the effectiveness of work sessions and the knowledgeable assistance of State Library staff, especially in resolving issues with the data validation software. Meagher County’s 2023 report for another Next Generation 9-1-1 project similarly calls attention to the “invaluable” support of the Montana State Library in “guiding consultants through issues and errors that arose during the validation process.”

As acknowledged in many other final reports, when key local staff or contractors unexpectedly leave mid-project, Montana State Library helps reorient and support the new project managers. Pondera County’s project in 2022 saw the retirement of their Disaster and Emergency Services

(DES) Coordinator. The State Library helped “get the project back on track” and helped the county determine what needed to be done to amend the Statement of Work. Ultimately, county staff were “very thankful and excited about the future of mapping and data collection.” Fergus County had a similar experience in 2021 when an employee abruptly ended their employment with the county. The new project manager writes, “Thankfully, the Montana State Library staff were great to work with and very helpful in getting me up to speed.” These experiences demonstrate how the State Library’s guidance helps projects recover from staffing changes, one of the key factors in grant extension requests.

Building capacity and a useful GIS infrastructure is not just about technology or data; it is fundamentally about investing in people and fostering strong partnerships. The relationships developed between local project teams and MSL staff have been instrumental in advancing geospatial initiatives statewide. However, as the demand for technical support and partnership grows, it is important to recognize the limits of MSL staff capacity. Future iterations of the grant program should continue to acknowledge the value of these relationships, while also considering the staffing resources required to maintain this high level of engagement and support across Montana.

Grantee Feedback Report

Completed September 19, 2025

To develop informed recommendations for the MGIA grant program, the Montana State Library combined a review of past grant reports with direct feedback from previous grant recipients. The intent of this method was to capture not only the documented outcomes of funded projects but also the practical experiences, challenges, and benefits as described by those who implemented them. By gathering both quantitative and qualitative insights, the library aimed to ensure that future program improvements are responsive to the needs of diverse recipients and reflective of the realities of grant implementation.

Methodology

Interviewees were selected to provide a sampling of grant recipients from different types and sizes, including city, county, and tribal governments. This selection process allowed the team to gather perspectives from a diverse cross section of participants who had engaged with the program in varying capacities.

Interviews were conducted in person by a three-member team from the Montana State Library consisting of the State GIS Coordinator, a GIS Analyst, and the Library Data Coordinator. Each interview followed a consistent set of questions designed to capture recipients' experiences with the grant program, the impact of funded projects, and opportunities for improvement.

During each interview, notes were taken independently by the interview team to ensure accuracy and capture observations from multiple perspectives. Afterward, responses were reviewed and summarized. This process enabled the team to identify common themes found across recipients, highlight unique perspectives reflecting individual experiences, and pinpoint opportunities for improvement in the grant program.

Interview Questions

1. Explain your annual budgeting process.
2. How does the grant challenge your budgeting process?
3. What could we do to improve or to fit in better with local government budgeting processes?
4. Are the grant award amounts manageable? Is it enough to meet your goals?
5. Is there anything else you would like us to be aware of?
6. How did you find out about the grant?
7. Did you receive the notification in ample time to prepare your application?
8. How could we do better in notification?
9. How would you rate the ease of applying for the grant?
10. Were the grant guidelines and requirements clear and easy to follow?
11. Did you attend or watch a recorded training, office hours, other type of event? Were they helpful?

12. Can you give examples of other grants you apply for that have an application process you would recommend? Why do you recommend that process?
13. How much time did you put into applying for the grant?
14. How much time did it take to develop the project scope?
15. Was the grant prioritization and scoring process clear to you?
16. Was grant award notification satisfactory?
17. Are there any ways we can improve the grant award process?
18. From your perspective, is there anything we can improve with the contract development process? (Timing, Communication, Meetings)
19. What challenges did you encounter that were directly related to project delays? (MSL, Contractor, Other external variables)
20. Is there anything MSL could have done to help with these challenges?
21. What advice would you give to a new grantee regarding how much time to allow on a weekly or monthly basis for grant administration?
22. What feedback do you have for MSL grant project managers to better support grantees?
23. Did you know where to find resources?
24. Was the grant reimbursement process clear and manageable? How could it be improved?
25. Was the reporting process clear and manageable? How could it be improved?
26. How did the grant award bring your community or organization success for future geospatial projects?
27. Did the grant award support existing government workflows?
28. What were the unforeseen benefits?
29. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know?

Analysis

Staff analyzed results from eight interviews conducted between June and August 2025. The following themes were identified.

Budget

Grant Timeline

City, county, and combined city/county recipients confirmed that their budgeting followed the state fiscal year (July to June), while tribal government budgets were based on the federal fiscal year (October to September). Regardless of fiscal schedules, participants indicated that grant cycles generally aligned with their budgeting processes. However, several recipients emphasized that additional time would be beneficial, especially for notification of grant awards so that contracts with surveyors can be coordinated effectively with the grant timeline. All interviewees agreed that a two-year grant period would provide more flexibility, particularly for projects involving seasonal data collection. Even grantees who had not requested extensions in the past noted that a two-year window would better suit most projects, even if they finished ahead of schedule. One interviewee noted that consistency and ample notice are more important than the specific length of the cycle, as this allows applicants to adequately prepare.

Perceptions of Funding Limits and Adequacy

A recurring theme among recipients concerned the perception of a cap on grant amounts that could be requested. One participant expressed hesitation to request a larger award, stating they did not want to “hog it all,” which resulted in their project being spread over several years through multiple smaller grants. Others echoed similar sentiments about not wanting to seem greedy or believing that only modest requests would be accepted. A participant stated, “if you ask for more, your chances go down.” Despite this impression, most recipients felt the amounts awarded were sufficient for their project needs. Nevertheless, given the ongoing nature of the work, one interviewee shared that the available funding is “never enough,” noting that additional resources would enable further project development and support for future initiatives.

Impact of Program Pauses on Budgeting

It is important to note that one participant expressed concern about the abrupt pause in grant funding caused by a decline in the program’s account balance. This disruption resulted in a loss of trust and frustration, particularly because the grant process had started and required significant effort before ultimately being cancelled. The participant remarked that it would have been preferable not to launch the grant cycle at all than to proceed with the application process only to have it terminated later. Applicants often dedicate substantial time and resources to completing their submissions, and this unexpected halt created budgeting challenges, especially for entities working to build partnerships between city and county governments. Two participants highlighted that such partnerships can be fragile, as staff and elected official turnover may require them to start over with collaboration and budgeting if resubmitting after a cancelled cycle.

Notification

Awareness and Outreach

Past grant recipients familiar with the MGIA grant program routinely check the Montana State Library website or mark application periods on their calendars each year. As one interviewee stated, “this is a priority so it’s always on our radar to apply” and in the words of another, “if it’s consistent, you come to expect it.” However, when reflecting on their first experience, most recipients noted that word of mouth was a primary source of information. Initial awareness often came through conversations with previous recipients, direct outreach from Montana State Library staff or MGIA Council members, and collaborative efforts such as Next Generation 9-1-1 outreach and established “working relationships” with those aware of the program. Additionally, professional conferences such as the Montana Association of Geographic Information Professionals (MAGIP) Big Sky GeoCon served as important venues for promoting the grant program and reaching new audiences. A few recipients indicated they conducted independent grant research to find funding but emphasized that this proactive approach required specialized staff and was not the norm for most local governments.

Application

Application Complexity

A consistent theme among interviewees was that the grant application process was overly complex, particularly for certain project types. Recipients described the application as a “big lift” and “too complicated for a simple project.” One participant said this was the “hardest grant I ever applied for.” Some noted that the level of detail required sometimes led them to “fill with fluff” or to “grit my teeth to keep going.” The outline, timeline, and scope of work sections were repeatedly identified as the most challenging aspects, especially for new applicants. In contrast, projects that involved fewer sections or followed established templates, such as survey control proposals, were generally easier to complete. Past grantees reported that access to earlier applications or templates simplified their work, providing a useful model to follow. Additionally, many recipients expressed appreciation for the support given by Montana State Library staff, who helped guide applicants through difficult portions of the application and made the process more manageable.

Application Tools

An additional challenge for applicants has been the multiple changes in grant application tools over the past decade. Interviewees expressed a range of opinions regarding Amplifund. Some found the tool difficult to navigate and not intuitive, while others appreciated its familiarity from use with other grant programs. Suggestions for alternative platforms included Submittable and even a simple Word document. Desired features mentioned were the ability to collaborate with staff and to easily copy and paste content from previous applications. Overall, recipients emphasized the need for consistency. One participant noted, “bouncing back and forth between systems is frustrating. Just choose a platform.” This sentiment reflects a recurring preference for a single, reliable tool that can be used from year to year, suggesting that consistency is more important than the specific software selected.

Grant Training

Most interviewees reported that grant training sessions were especially helpful for first-time applicants, giving them the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate the process. Returning applicants often described these trainings as less necessary and somewhat repetitive, though several expressed interest in recordings and reference materials to consult as needed. There was also positive feedback about general grant writing workshops, which were valued because the skills and insights gained could be applied to other grant opportunities as well. Participants agreed that clear guidelines and dedicated training resources are valuable for new applicants.

Award

Award Process Transparency

Most grant recipients understood the criteria for how points would be awarded, as this information was clearly listed in the application. However, the process for scoring applications, including how and when grants would be evaluated and when awards would be announced, was less transparent for some applicants. One recipient was unsure whether their attendance was required at the scoring meeting to answer potential questions. Another participant shared that they felt confused

about the timeline and suggested that a dashboard be created to track the status of applications and awards, which could be included in all communications.

Recognizing and Celebrating Awards

Interviewees suggested that providing public relations materials, such as press release templates and ready-made publicity resources, would make it easier to celebrate grant awards and share news with the wider community. Increasing visibility in this way adds to the program's transparency and helps stakeholders understand how MGIA funds are being used and what types of projects are supported. One participant specifically mentioned real estate agents as an example of a group that would benefit from knowing about funded projects. The excitement and significance of receiving an award was captured by a recipient who shared they "did a little dance" at the news, but others may not be familiar with the grant's origins or its impact. Additionally, participants noted that access to information about previously funded projects would help as proposals are developed, providing both inspiration and useful examples for future applications.

Contract Development

Deliverables

Some participants did not encounter any significant challenges with contract development, noting that the process worked smoothly for their projects. However, a few described specific difficulties, especially regarding the clarity of reporting requirements for survey corner deliverables. The language in certain contract sections was described as "poorly worded" and "could be interpreted in a number of ways," which created confusion about expectations. One participant suggested that holding a kickoff meeting before signing the contract would have been helpful for clarifying project requirements and processes.

Support in the Signature Process

Two participants reported delays during contract development related to obtaining signatures from county commissioners. These delays were often due to communication challenges, as commissioners and staff had varying levels of familiarity with the project requirements. At times, the involvement of multiple people, or as one participant said, "too many cooks in the kitchen," created confusion and bottlenecks. To improve clarity and streamline decision-making, recipients suggested using concise, bulleted lists of requirements that could be easily understood by everyone involved. Another participant noted that some commissioners were less comfortable with technology, which occasionally made electronic signatures through DocuSign more difficult.

Project Implementation

Project Delays

Interviews provided valuable insight into the causes of project delays. Participants described a combination of challenges such as personal circumstances, bad weather, communication breakdowns, and landowner issues. While many of these delays are outside the State Library's direct control, participants offered suggestions for support that could help mitigate some problems. For instance, landowners do not always understand why surveyors need access to their property. One participant suggested sharing a template for a pamphlet or postcard explaining the

project and its purpose to help build understanding and buy-in from landowners. Information to share with surveyors and contractors would also be helpful to explain procedures, such as when selecting alternate corners is permitted if collecting data at the originally planned location becomes impossible. Additionally, access to more equipment, potentially through grant funding, could help address shortages that arise when teams are unable to share resources during optimal working seasons. Concerning personal circumstances, one grantee acknowledged that in small project teams, when something happens to a key person, delays are often unavoidable. Despite these challenges, participants expressed optimism that the new two-year grant cycle offers greater flexibility and will help teams better navigate both expected and unexpected setbacks, ultimately leading to more resilient and successful projects.

Grant Reimbursement

Grantees take different approaches to invoicing, with some submitting invoices as contractor bills arrive and others waiting until the end of the program to submit one large invoice. Those who delay invoicing often deprioritize it and can carry expenses until a convenient time. Across interviews, multiple grantees suggested that a standardized invoice template or form would simplify the process. One participant noted that their fiscal department required significant time to establish a workable process between their office, finance, and MSL. They highlighted a communication gap that could be improved by providing a clear checklist of invoice requirements and a running log of previously processed expenses. Another participant mentioned that their checks often get misrouted because when it goes to the treasurer, it's not clear which department should receive it. Adding a note in the check memo line or sending an email with the check number once it's sent would resolve this issue.

Reports

Opinions about the reporting process varied. Some grantees described it as "super easy," noting that "every subsequent year seems easier and easier," while others encountered challenges that required support from MSL staff. Several participants felt that quarterly reporting was excessive, especially when there was little new information to share. One grantee admitted they "tried to make something sound good" but ultimately submitted filler content. Another participant expressed a preference for less frequent reporting but acknowledged the importance of keeping MSL informed about project progress. As a compromise, they suggested a simple, standardized form or periodic check-in calls. Others recommended shifting from quarterly to mid-point and final reports. One recipient also noted difficulties with the Survey 1-2-3 tool, explaining that infrequent use of their ESRI account meant having to track down login credentials. This concern highlighted a broader preference among participants for continuity and consistency in the tools used for reporting and the grant program overall, rather than having to adapt and remember login information to different systems.

State Library Support

Grant recipients expressed appreciation for MSL staff and their project managers. One participant remarked that their grant manager "was so accessible and never made me feel like I was a bother." Others shared that it was "nice working with MSL" and that they valued "knowing I can email one person." Several repeat suggestions centered on communication. Many participants noted that video calls or brief stand-up meetings would be beneficial, both for staying connected with their

grant manager and for hearing updates from peers working on similar projects. Microsoft Teams was highlighted specifically for its screen-sharing capability, which makes troubleshooting issues easier in real time. While participants appreciated having a dedicated point of contact, one grantee emphasized the importance of continuity, advising, “if you’re gone, make sure there is someone else trained with answers so they can help.” The GeoInfo help desk was suggested as a potential resource, but participants indicated they would benefit from additional demonstrations and reminders on how to effectively use the system.

Unanticipated Benefits

Integration with Government Workflows

Grant recipients often found that the impact of their projects extended beyond their initial expectations, reaching a wider array of users and departments than anticipated. For example, updated addressing in one county made a practical difference for law enforcement, who needed clarity about whether city police or the sheriff should respond to calls. Before participating in the program, one recipient had hesitated to offer maps given concerns about accuracy, explaining, “we didn’t have credibility. It was embarrassing for maps to be off.” Participation in the grant program changed this dynamic. The recipient observed that the grant “improved our credibility,” fostering requests for data from other agencies like the fire department. Others observed that grant-funded work reached across government workflows, “accuracy improvements are integrated into so many systems.”

Creation of New GIS Programs

Similarly, another participant described how the training received through the grant not only benefited their immediate project, but also sparked new GIS initiatives in small towns within the county. In another case, training and experience through the grant program enabled the recipient to provide support for GIS development in neighboring counties as well. In some cases, grant projects helped launch GIS programs in places where none previously existed. As one interviewee summarized, “the grant program promotes GIS through the state, and local counties can do it.”

Industry and Public Benefit

The impact also ripples beyond the recipients to impact industry and the broader public. For example, a recipient explained that farmers and ranchers benefit from the data, supporting critical task such as irrigation projects on the near horizon, “it was a win for something we already need to accomplish.” Another interviewee described how updates to PLSS data help ensure that citizens and business receive government information that matches on-the-ground reality. These enhancements encourage more widespread and confident use of datasets such as cadastral records. As one participant put it, the benefits are felt “all the way down to OnX where people expect the corner to be accurate to cross the creek to kill the deer.” Collectively, these examples demonstrate how the MGIA grant program creates value that reaches well beyond the immediate grant recipients, strengthening local economies, increasing stakeholder trust, and promoting collaboration across Montana.

Conclusion

Feedback from grant recipients has provided invaluable insights to guide future improvements to the MGIA grant program. Participants offered candid observations and practical recommendations that point to meaningful changes in processes, outreach, and support. Based on their input, five key areas for consideration include:

1. **Simplify reporting requirements** by reducing the number of required reports or offering a standardized form/check-in call to reduce filler content and make updates more meaningful.
2. **Standardize tools and processes** by adopting a consistent grant application and reporting platform (rather than switching between systems like Amplifund, Survey123, etc.) and providing reusable templates and a simplified application wherever possible.
3. **Improve communication and continuity** with more regular check-ins (via Teams or brief stand-up meetings) and by ensuring backup staff or the help desk can step in when a grant manager is unavailable.
4. **Clarify invoicing and reimbursement** with a template invoice and a checklist of required information, and address issues with reimbursement checks by adding clearer memos or notifications.
5. **Refine award and contract processes** by providing earlier and more consistent notifications, offering kickoff meetings for project clarification, and creating concise bulleted lists of requirements to ease communication with commissioners and fiscal staff.

Beyond these action items, participants described the transformative impact these grants have had on their local geospatial programs, emphasizing that the MGIA program is not only a funding source but also a catalyst for building successful GIS initiatives. As the grant administrator in Custer County Maureen Celander noted, “The MSL MGIA Grant Program has been a mainspring in the establishment of the GIS program here in Custer County, MT.” The team in Blaine County further remarked, “Blaine County’s GIS program wouldn’t be here without it. It’s been a tremendous success.”

These reflections underscore the value and significance of the MGIA grant program across Montana. Continued engagement with recipients and responsiveness to their feedback will ensure the program remains effective, impactful, and a driving force for GIS growth and innovation throughout the state.



MEMO

To: MGIA Stakeholders, Montana GIS Community, and Grantees
From: Sean Anderson, Montana State Library
Subject: Proposed Changes to MGIA Grant Management for FY27
Date: August 18, 2025

Background:

The Montana Geospatial Information Act (MGIA) grant program has historically supported a wide variety of geospatial projects. Our recent strategic review highlights a critical insight: while our primary funding focus will be on projects that directly contribute to the Montana Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI), we also recognize the importance of ensuring these projects offer meaningful value to the grantees delivering the work.

Acknowledging this dual consideration helps ensure that each investment strengthens Montana's shared geospatial data foundation and supports the capacity and long-term success of the organizations undertaking the work.

Proposed Changes:

MGIA grants will be awarded on a 2-year cycle, coinciding with the State's legislative biennium. This adjustment brings greater alignment with state priorities, provides grantees with a longer time frame for planning and execution, and simplifies program administration for consistent review and delivery.

MGIA grants will prioritize projects that result in the creation, improvement, or maintenance of MSDI data themes. In evaluating proposals, we will also consider how each project supports grantee organizations in building skills, capacity, and tools for ongoing success - even though this is not a formal eligibility requirement.

What's New?

- **Primary Focus:** Projects strengthen MSDI datasets and follow MSDI standards/workflows, resulting in more standardized scopes and less variation than past cycles. This deliberate shift acknowledges the need to make the program sustainable with current MSL staffing levels and enables more consistent, successful grantee outcomes.
- **Training:** Training is dramatically simplified and centered on MSDI technical standards and core project management skills. This means that training sessions can be recorded, enabling ongoing use and easy onboarding for grantees in future years. We'll collaborate with partners to provide supplemental project management workshops and support.
- **Outreach:** We are investing in more purposeful and consistent contact with grantees, including in-person site visits, regular check-ins, and accessible feedback channels. This

improves accountability and helps ensure projects are completed on time and shared publicly for statewide benefit.

- **Template and Process Maintenance:** All project templates, SOWs, agreements, and program definitions will be routinely updated by MSL GIS staff. Changes will be systematically tracked, communicated, and aligned with annual reviews of MSDI priorities and data needs.
- **Exception Process:** A transparent, case-by-case procedure will be used for reviewing rare non-MSDI projects, with clear documentation and decision logs.
- **Ongoing MSDI Communication:** Focusing on the MSDI gives us an ongoing, high-value opportunity to educate stakeholders and the public about what the MSDI is, why it matters, and how our work supports Montana's spatial data stewardship.

Collaborative Team Structure for Accountability and Cooperation:

Roles are intentionally defined so that each team member is assigned work suited to their expertise and strengths—creating a structure that ensures accountability, transparency, and effective cooperation.

- **Technical leadership and MSDI strategy:** Erin Fashoway (GIS Coordinator) is ultimately accountable and provides guidance to the GIS Technical Team (Michael Fashoway, Troy Blandford, Matt Trebesch, Evan Hammer), which collaborates to maintain MSDI priorities, set scopes, and review projects.
- **Administrative oversight & grant cycle management:** Led by Sean Anderson (Grants Coordinator), assisted by admin stakeholders (Malissa Briggs, Evan Hammer), who support contracts, compliance, and process integrity.
- **Grant management (post-award):** Assigned to the most suitable manager by project theme (Michael, Troy, Matt, or Erin).
- **Data coordination and evaluation:** Managed by Rebekah Kamp, who oversees documentation, surveys, and ongoing process improvements.
- **MGIA Council:** Consulted on MSDI priorities and program structure, providing high-level oversight and guidance.

Implementation Roadmap:

1. **Update Templates & Documentation:** Embed the MSDI priority and communicate grantee value consideration.
2. **Develop and Launch Training:** Modular program focused on MSDI alignment and project management, using recorded and partner-assisted sessions.

3. **Formalize Exception Procedure:** Establish clear review steps and logging for rare edge-case projects.
4. **Strengthen Outreach:** Integrate site visits, check-ins, and feedback loops into every grant cycle.
5. **Ongoing Updates:** Annual review of MSDI needs, priorities, and systematic revision of templates and documents by MSL GIS staff.

Next Steps:

Updated documentation, new application materials, and training schedules will be developed in the coming months, with the goal of having them completed before January 2026. The MGIA grant administration team welcomes input as we implement this new direction - designed to strengthen the MSDI and empower the communities whose work benefits all Montanans.