

ITEM #:	15
DATE:	07-14-26
DEPT:	CMO

COUNCIL ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: EXPANDING THE NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT GRANT'S SCOPE TO ENCOURAGE MORE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

BACKGROUND:

On February 24, 2026, City staff presented a staff report to Council on 2026 Neighborhood Connections Initiatives, which included four specific strategies to implement this calendar year to strengthen community outreach and engagement. They included:

1. Connecting with and Strengthening existing Neighborhood Associations - *The Engagement Coordinator has been in contact with existing neighborhood associations, asking for feedback on how the City can support their efforts and sharing City resources.*
2. Refreshing the Neighborhood Improvement Grant - *This item is before you now, where an additional component is being proposed. More below.*
3. Road Trip through Ames: Stops to Build Connections - *Two of the four road trip stops (block party events have been conducted in May and June at Moore Memorial Park and Kate Mitchell Elementary, and two more are planned for the remainder of the year in August and September at Tahira and Labh Park, and Roosevelt Park).*
4. Connect with Existing Groups and Events - *Staff have been deliberate about asking to be invited into spaces where people are already congregating to share information about City resources, e.g., Sixty Forward Center, Juneteenth, Farmer's Market, Hy-Vee grocery stores, etc.*

The item before Council today came about through implementing strategies one and two listed above.

REFRESH THE NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Since the conception of the Neighborhood Improvement Grant in 2004, its purpose has been to:

- Promote a greater sense of community through resident participation in a neighborhood project and
- Strengthen a neighborhood's appearance with the addition of permanent physical improvements

Currently, applicants must choose to work on a permanent physical improvement to public or

private property that positively affects a significant number of residents. A maximum of \$5,000 can be awarded per year per application, and the project should reflect a direct contribution of \$1.00 in cash or in-kind labor valued at \$1.00 for every \$1.00 of City funds received.

Grant participation has declined significantly over the past six years, with no applications submitted since 2022. Given the inactivity, staff has been working to revive this grant and expand marketing the opportunity. As such, in the past few months, staff has reached out to past grant participants for feedback on the process and connected with neighborhood associations to gather input on how to improve the grant. Additionally, staff has researched other cities with similar programs.

CITIES WITH SIMILAR GRANTS:

- [North Liberty, IA](#), assists residents with funding to bring their neighbors together and enhance the quality of life in North Liberty.
 - \$400 is available per neighborhood for costs like food, non-alcoholic beverages, entertainment, facility and equipment rentals, prizes, materials, and others.
- [Iowa City, IA](#), supports efforts that enhance quality of life, encourage civic engagement, and bring people together. Their Program for Improving Neighborhoods (PIN) Grant funds a wide range of events, programs, and initiatives like public safety trainings, healthy cooking demonstrations, STEM activities, holiday celebrations, outdoor movie night, block party, and many others.
 - Each neighborhood association may receive a maximum amount of \$3,000.
- [Brooklyn Park, MN](#), offers funds to support and encourage their community members to get to know their neighbors, build relationships, and work together to make their neighborhood united, healthy, and thriving.
 - \$250 is available per application for projects like: neighborhood picnic in the park, cultural exchange potluck, litter pick up, kid or pet parade, ice cream social, neighborhood talent show, and others.
- [Mankato, MN](#), offers funds to cover the costs of public community-building events like block parties, movie nights, and social gatherings.
 - Grant recipients may receive up to \$500 per event; no more than one grant will be awarded per event.

NEW COMPONENT PROPOSAL:

With the feedback received and the research staff has conducted, **staff is recommending that a new component be added to the Neighborhood Improvement Grant program, allowing residents to apply for up to \$500 to support community connections.**

A 1-for-1 in-kind match still would be required. This new element would financially support events or activities aimed at strengthening social connections.

Examples of activities that could be supported included:

- Programs that provide hands-on learning, training, and education that support the community like CPR training, Mental Health First Aid training, healthy cooking

demonstrations, STEM Activities, etc.

- Unique projects that engage and bring neighbors together and make them better connected, but do not require a physical improvement, like hosting an outdoor movie night, a block party, an around-the-world festival, or outdoor games, etc.
- Multimedia, art, and design activities such as enhancing assets that are sources of neighborhood pride. This could be painting a mural or having an event to showcase art, hosting a chalk art event or doing a public art installation.

The \$500 maximum grant award could cover expenses such as:

- Food and non-alcoholic beverages
- Entertainment
- Facility and equipment rentals
- Insurance fees
- Materials (paint, plants, etc.)
- Marketing, promotion, and other advertising fees
- Specialized labor (arborist, training facilitator, etc.)

MARKETING:

City staff has already begun re-focusing on promoting the existing neighborhood grant program. Not only has communication gone out to the existing list of neighborhood associations and is available on the website, but it has been promoted at the neighborhood road trip stops.

If Council is supportive of adding this additional component, staff will revise the program and re-promote the opportunity using multiple communication tools, including social media. Staff also anticipates that making this funding available could inspire some residents to use the block party trailer, equipping residents with more resources to build social connections.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. Approve the proposed expansion of the Neighborhood Improvement Grant to include the opportunity to receive up to \$500 for supporting social connections.
2. Do not approve the proposed expansion of the Neighborhood Improvement Grant and provide further direction to staff.

CITY MANAGER'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

The **City Council Goals** include valuing communication and engagement with the public and express a desire to keep Ames as a fun, vibrant, and healthy community that attracts and retains people. The addition of expanding the Neighborhood Improvement Grant to include up to \$500 for supporting social connections amongst neighbors can financially support Ames residents with resources to grow their connections and create community. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council approve Alternative #1 as listed above.