

Marshall's HELP grant sites aim to increase habitat, awareness



Marshall city staff anticipate the habitat enhancements planned for two sites totaling 19 acres will save time and money on maintenance, attract pollinators, serve as an educational resource and — in a few years when the wildflowers and grasses are well-established — beautify the landscape.

The project is supported by a \$28,725 [Habitat Enhancement Landscape Pilot \(HELP\)](#) grant the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) awarded to the Lyon Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) in 2023. A city crew completed initial site preparation as part of the city's in-kind match. Prescribed burns and dormant seedings are planned on both sites. One encompasses 15 acres; the second is 4 acres.

“ It really in the long run will save us money. It also helps the environment. ”
— James Lozinski,
Marshall city councilmember

Funded by an Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) allocation, HELP aims to restore and enhance diverse native habitat across Minnesota. Its objective is to benefit pollinators and increase plant and animal diversity. To date, BWSR has awarded 17 pilot grants totaling \$643,500 and affecting 1,000 acres.

The Minnesota Legislature in 2023 allocated \$4 million to BWSR for the [Habitat Enhancement Landscape Program](#). Also known as HELP, it will move



This 15-acre site tucked into a bend of the Redwood River at Marshall's Victory Park will undergo a prescribed burn before it's seeded with a diverse array of native species. The work is made possible by a Habitat Enhancement Landscape Pilot grant BWSR awarded to the Lyon SWCD. The pilot will transition to a program — also known as HELP (Habitat Enhancement Landscape Program) — once BWSR issues a request for proposals later this month. Photo Courtesy City of Marshall



Hanson



Lozinski



Stensrud



Giles

past the pilot stage once BWSR issues a request for proposals (RFP). The RFP is expected to be released this month. The pilot required a 25% match; the program will require a 10% match.

Local government units eligible to apply for the RFP will include tribal governments, conservation districts, watershed districts, watershed management organizations, local government joint powers boards, counties, municipalities, non-government organizations, park districts and contractors.

Marshall City Administrator Sharon Hanson encouraged staff to support the pilot grant application. The SWCD serves as the fiscal agent and grant manager. The city contracted with Stantec to establish the plantings and maintain the sites for three years.

“We are seeing different environmental impacts, not only in the city, but across the state, and we’re assessing how we can best adjust our practices,” Hanson said. “We’ve got to change the way we do things.”

The city has addressed stormwater treatment. It has cut back on road salt to curb chloride pollution. On city-owned land, staff is considering which grass and tree species are best-suited to the climate. The HELP grant allows city council and staff members to expand efforts

to enhance city park and recreational areas.

“To give a little extra added dimension to our green spaces, encouraging natural areas that can survive the environmental challenges, (the grant-funded enhancements) can provide habitat for native species, and (for pollinators),” Hanson said.

Both sites are off Minnesota Highway 23, and the Camden Regional Bike Trail runs through both.

The 15-acre enhancement site is tucked into a bend of the Redwood River at Victory Park in the southwest part of town. There, an enhanced seed mix will augment the existing vegetation. In addition to the undesirable brome grass, the site currently supports native species such as clover, side-oats grama, green ash, milkweed, black-eyed Susan, riverbank grape and golden Alexanders.

The 4-acre native planting establishment site lies on the north side of town, north of Southwest Minnesota State University. It currently consists of brome grass-covered spoils excavated from the adjacent retention pond, which flows to a ditch bound for the Redwood River.

City Parks and Recreation Superintendent Preston Stensrud said replacing mowed grass with native grasses and plants will

likely reduce drifting across Highway 23 near the 4-acre site. Both locations are easily accessible and highly visible.

“Having trails in proximity to the sites makes it really ideal, because it can be a teaching and learning tool,” Hanson said.

Residents considering native plantings in their own yards could get inspiration and a close-up look at different species planted at the HELP sites. The city of Marshall in 2023 amended its landscaping ordinance to allow pollinator gardens of any size in front yards, with 10-foot setbacks from property lines and buildings.

“I think part of the value of the whole project is public awareness, and, as we want to expand wildflowers, for the city to take the first step,” said City Councilmember James Lozinski. “I think the biggest benefit is going to be education.”

Lozinski and his wife are establishing native grasses along their riverfront property in northern Wisconsin. Hanson has established a pollinator planting in her yard. And Stensrud has worked with native plants in a city park rain garden.

“I think it helps to not only talk about the benefits, but to show that we’re actually participating,” Stensrud said. “And that gives us experience, too.”

The three-year contract with Stantec will allow city

and SWCD staff to learn from experts and then apply those techniques when they maintain the HELP sites and future plantings.

Hanson said the city’s good working relationship with the Lyon SWCD was instrumental in securing and implementing the HELP-funded project. Lyon SWCD conservation technician Blake Giles is working with the city on the project.

Giles’ advice to those who might consider pursuing a HELP grant: “If they’ve got a good area (where) they want to establish native grasses, go for it,” he said. “You can try something that you may not have tried before and have that funding to do that so you can learn what works and what doesn’t work.”

Lozinski said one challenge is the perception that the project wastes taxpayers’ money.

His response: Mowing the 19 acres slated for restoration and enhancement typically took two city workers about six hours. Eliminating mowing will save not only paid staff time but also fuel and equipment maintenance costs. Eliminating mowing at the 4-acre site will keep grass clippings out of the adjacent stormwater retention pond, which, in turn, will reduce dredging costs.

“It really in the long run will save us money. It also helps the environment,” Lozinski said.