

Park districts receiving first OSLAD grants from state in 4 years

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SPRINGFIELD – Residents of the northern part of Hoffman Estates, a Cook County suburb northwest of Chicago, were thrilled when they heard a local park would be renovated.

It had been 20 years since a playground, a few sports fields and a small parking lot were added to the acres surrounding South Ridge Park.

Meanwhile, parks in other areas of Hoffman Estates — a village separated by highways into three distinct geographical sections — had already seen new construction and updated amenities.

“So when we announced that we won \$400,000 on social media, the reaction from the public was overwhelming,” said Katie Burgess, spokeswoman for the Hoffman Estates Park District.

That money came from an Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development grant Illinois’ Department of Natural Resources distributes, under the governor’s orders, to park districts.

In early February, Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced the 87 recipients of nearly \$30 million in grants, mostly distributed in chunks of \$400,000.

It was the first time OSLAD grants had been awarded since January 2015, when former Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat, announced \$26 million in disbursements at the end of his term.

Then incoming Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner suspended those grants, and did not distribute any more during his 4-year term.

For Hoffman Estates' South Ridge Park, this year's money will go toward adding a slew of new amenities, including a splash pad for children, a "ninja warrior" course for fitness training and an open air shelter to the mostly plain grassy area that borders the park's pond.

But Hoffman Estates was only one of the more than 40 Illinois park districts that visited the capitol Tuesday with similar stories.

Known commonly as "park district day," representatives from Illinois park districts attend the Springfield event annually to talk with lawmakers, showcase their renovations and bring awareness to the two main grants that help fund their park improvements.

Money for OSLAD, the larger of the two grant programs, comes from Illinois' Real Estate Transfer Tax revenues.

Since 1987, the program has given more than \$415 million to 1,765 local park projects, according to IDNR's website.

While local park districts are required to match the funds from OSLAD, they often do much more than that, investing around \$700,000 for every \$400,000 from OSLAD, according to the Illinois Association of Park Districts.

“Where else do you go to get a 175 percent return on investment,” said Greg Lewis, executive director of the New Lenox Community Park District, in Will County about 40 miles south of Chicago.

Lewis’ group is using a \$400,000 OSLAD grant to help build various sports fields, trails and other amenities at the Leigh Creek South Park, which is currently home to just one park district building.

He called the grants a “win-win,” because park districts often cannot complete such projects without the state’s help.

“Sixty percent of our revenue comes from user fees, so sometimes we’re running like a business when we’re a not-for-profit,” Lewis said. “It’s not a choice.

“We can’t build without the grant money,” he added.

The other, much smaller grant program — a federal program that the Illinois Department of Natural Resources helps administer — is the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Only two state park districts, Glenview in northern Cook County and Forsyth near Decatur, received money from that grant on top of an OSLAD grant in 2019.

Glenview is using the LWCF money to add land to its 145 acres of conserved prairie grove, and the OSLAD money for amenities at the village’s Historic Wagner Farm, according to Michele Fiore, spokeswoman for the park district.

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