Process Improvement Report: 2025-26 Small Grants

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Executive summary

Introduction: Portland Children's Levy (PCL) staff lead a quality improvement process after each round of grantmaking. For its recent 2025-26 small grants funding process, PCL staff used the following methods to gather feedback: applicant survey, survey and individual interviews with PCL Community Council members, and individual interviews with PCL Allocation Committee members. Results per group follow the executive summary.

Background: Key features of PCL's 2025-26 small grants funding process included:

- PCL's Community Council: 13 community volunteers built on 2 years of advising staff on PCL's 2024-25 large grants process to provide additional advice on the small grants application and scoring criteria. They also served as reviewers by scoring the video portion of each application, alongside staff's review and scoring of the written portion of each application. Community Council used total scores on applications and other policy considerations to provide recommendations to the Allocation Committee on which small grant applications to fund.
- Community engagement: PCL partnered with Camille E Trummer and with PKS International to engage over 750 community members in 26 different

languages to identify priorities for services with children and families for both PCL's large grants in 2024-25 and its 2025-26 small grants. Applications had to address at least 1 funding priority in one of PCL's 6 program areas.

- Support for applicants: PCL staff held information sessions, made informational videos, and hosted a weekly email question/answer digest on PCL's website to assist applicants with preparing their application.
- Communication with applicants: PCL provided email updates to applicants throughout the funding process. Applicants received Community Council recommendations along with individualized review scores and Community Council voting results for their own application.
- Applicant testimony: Applicants had the option to submit written testimony to PCL's Allocation Committee in support of their application and prior to the Committee's decision-making.
- Decision-making: PCL Allocation Committee made funding decisions in April 2026, after reviewing the funding recommendations and applicant testimony. In May 2026, Portland City Council approved the Allocation Committee's grants.

Strengths of the PCL small grants funding process

Staff support and communication during the funding process

Applicants, Community Council members, and Allocation Committee members all indicated that staff support was helpful. Applicants reported that application materials, info sessions and the question/answer process helped them prepare their applications. They also expressed satisfaction with receiving funding recommendation materials prior to submitting testimony. Community Council members found the video reviewer training helpful and appreciated staff integrating their input throughout the process. Allocation Committee members valued staff's preparation of members, including answering their questions on the funding recommendations and rationale. They also recognized staff's support of applicants in the process.

Community voice

Community Council members, Allocation Committee members, and applicants expressed satisfaction with how the process reflected community voice. Community Council members felt they had a voice in making funding recommendations and that their voice and perspective were reflected in the

outcomes. Allocation Committee members shared that they valued Community Council's involvement, including their review/scoring of applicant videos and their role in making funding recommendations.

Commitment to equity
Applicants and Community Council members expressed high levels of satisfaction with the process's commitment to equity and increasing access and opportunities for families experiencing inequities.

Areas for improvement in the PCL small grants funding process

Video portion of the application and applicant/reviewer workload
Applicants expressed the most dissatisfaction with the video portion of the application, including its impact on workload. Some were dissatisfied that it revealed the identity of people involved with the application. Community Council members had mixed feelings about the video portion of the application. They appreciated viewing all videos to prepare for making funding recommendations, but some felt it was a high workload, and some expressed frustration with scoring when applicants didn't provide the information requested for the video part of the application.

Funding recommendations and decision-making
Some applicants also showed lower rates of satisfaction with whether Community Council voting on applications helped bring community voice into the process. Some showed lower rates of satisfaction with understanding the Allocation Committee's rationale for their decisions. Some also disagreed that the number of decision-making steps – Community Council, Allocation Committee, and City Council – in the small grants process felt appropriate for the small grants. In addition, a few Allocation Committee members mentioned clarifying roles between staff, Community Council, and Allocation Committee.

Balancing demand and available resources
A majority of Allocation Committee members mentioned wanting to have funded more small grants, however they recognized PCL resource constraints and honored the funding process that resulted in the 12 grants selected.

Implications: recommendations for future funding processes

The recommendations below reflect staff reflections on the strengths and areas for improvement discussed in this report. The feedback covered in this report suggests overall satisfaction with the small grants process. These recommendations focus on further improving the process for any potential future funding rounds.

Application design and applicant/reviewer workload

- Gather additional input and perspective from past applicants and/or potential applicants on what types of alternative application formats to offer, instead of videos or interviews, and options for reducing applicant workload. As part of additional feedback, ask past and/or potential applicants if they prefer only written formats.
- Consult/brainstorm with PCL Community Council on alternative application formats, other than videos and interviews, and options to reduce applicant workload.
- Consider offering applicants the choice to complete some application sections in writing or in an alternative format.
- Develop options for a phased application process that reduces workload for applicants and reviewers.

Role clarity and rationale in decision-making

- Build on the strength of community voice and ask the Community Council how they want to be involved in the funding process and facilitate a conversation with them to decide their involvement in future funding rounds. Staff will aim to communicate Community Council's role prior to releasing application materials.
- Continue to clarify the roles and decision-making authorities of staff, Community Council, and the Allocation Committee in funding processes. Ensure these are clear before publication of application materials. As part of that clarification, spotlight the unique ways that Community Council's role enhances community voice in advising PCL staff and the Allocation Committee.
- Continue supporting Allocation Committee members to share the rationale for their decision-making, including how they used Community Council's advice and/or recommendations as well as applicant testimony.

- Continue to assist applicants with understanding the decision-making process for PCL funding. Help applicants, especially those less familiar with PCL or City Council, understand their options for testimony and advocacy to both bodies.

Support and communication with applicants

- Explore ways to improve training for applicants to stress the importance of covering/answering all of the questions in application, regardless of format (e.g. written or an alternative format).
- Help applicants understand the expectations and requirements of being a city grantee, including insurance requirements, grant data collection and reporting, grant invoicing, and opportunity for grant advance payments.
- Simplify explanations about application review and scoring. For example, if different parts of the application might be scored by different groups, and then scores totaled for a final score.
- Continue transparency in the funding process through effective communication with applicants about the application process along with the expectations and requirements of managing a PCL grant.

PCL small grants applicant feedback, 2026

Background on the small grants applicant survey

Survey methods

After the conclusion of PCL's 2026 small grants funding process, PCL staff sent an anonymous survey to 55 people to elicit applicant feedback on the experience of the small grants funding process. This audience represents 55 applications from 55 different organizations.

The anonymous survey was online via Microsoft Forms and open for 5 weeks in summer 2026. The survey was in English, however the email message that transmitted it and two reminder emails offered accommodations, including translation. No one requested translation or accommodations for the survey. As context, only one applicant requested translation support for the video component of their application (they submitted the written component in English).

Response rate

PCL received responses from 20 people. The survey was anonymous, and people who received the survey link may have forwarded it to other people in their organization or associated with their application. We estimate a response rate of 36% of individuals receiving the survey from PCL directly via email (20/55).

Respondents' connection to the funding process

The survey asked a few questions about the respondents to understand their connection to the funding process.

Funded applicants: Funded applicants are over-represented in the survey respondents compared to the overall applicant pool. PCL funded 22% of the applications received (12/55), and 55% of survey respondents said they were associated with a funded application.

Applicant funding status	Applications N=55	Survey respondents n=20
Funded application	22%	55%
Not funded	78%	30%
Did not answer the question	n/a	15%

Respondent demographics

This survey did not include demographic questions. The applicant pool overall came from organizations with diverse staffing. The following analyses offer a proxy on demographics of respondents compared to the applicant pool.

As shown in the table, the majority of applications PCL received were from organizations with majority BIPOC staff. Among funded applications, PCL funded proportionally more applications to organizations with majority BIPOC staff; they comprised 62% of the applicant pool and 92% of funded applications. PCL funded proportionally similar number of applications from organizations with majority staff with disabilities compared to the applicant pool. PCL funded proportionally more applications to organizations with majority staff who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ compared to the applicant pool.

Applications by organization demographics	Applications N=55	Funded app(s) N=12
Applications from organizations with majority staff who identify as BIPOC	62%	92%
Applications from organizations with majority staff who have disabilities	9%	8%
Applications from organizations with majority staff who identify as LGBTQIA2S+	9%	17%

Since the applicant pool and the applications funded reflect organizations with diverse staff, and funded applications over-represented in the survey respondents, it's likely the survey respondents are a diverse group, too.

Applicant perspectives: survey results on Likert-scale questions

The survey included Likert scale and open-ended questions. The graphs below show the number of responses for each of the Likert scale questions. The graphs show all respondents. PCL disaggregated survey responses based on whether respondents had an application funded or not funded/didn't answer the question. Discussion with each graph describes these additional disaggregated results. Of the 13 survey questions asked, most of the dissatisfaction expressed was from respondents whose applications were not funded or who chose not to answer that survey question. Only 2 questions on the survey showed responses of dissatisfaction from some funded applicants.

Strengths

- application materials on PCL website, application info sessions, and Q&A process helped applicants prepare their applications
- receiving reviewers' scores forms before providing testimony was helpful
- transparency in the process overall
- funding process reflected a commitment to increasing access and opportunities for children and families experiencing inequities

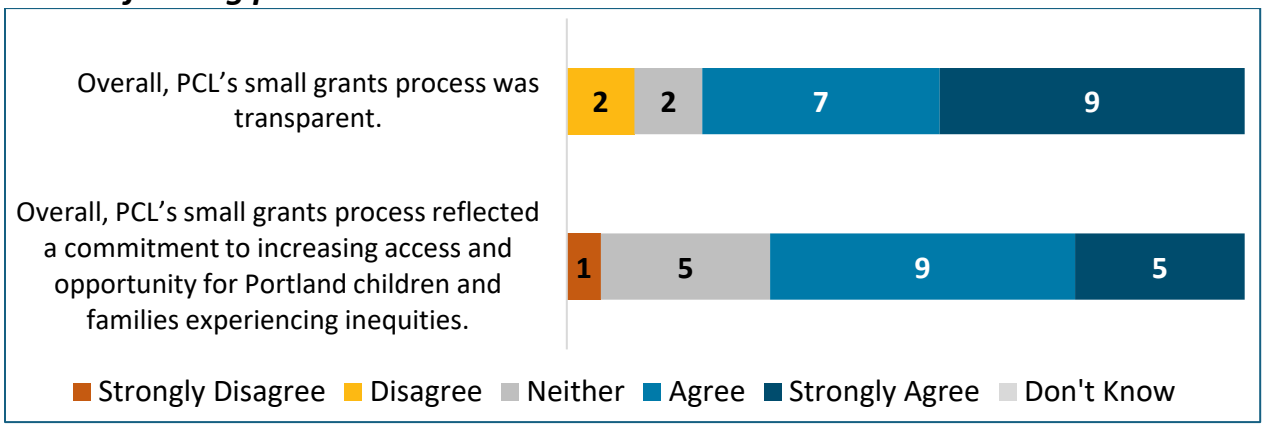
Areas for improvement

- workload for applicants with the video portion of the application
- understanding the facilitation process used for Community Council recommendations and for the Allocation Committee decision-making, including the Committee's rationale for decisions

Overall, respondents with funded applications showed more satisfaction than respondents with unfunded applications or who did not answer that question.

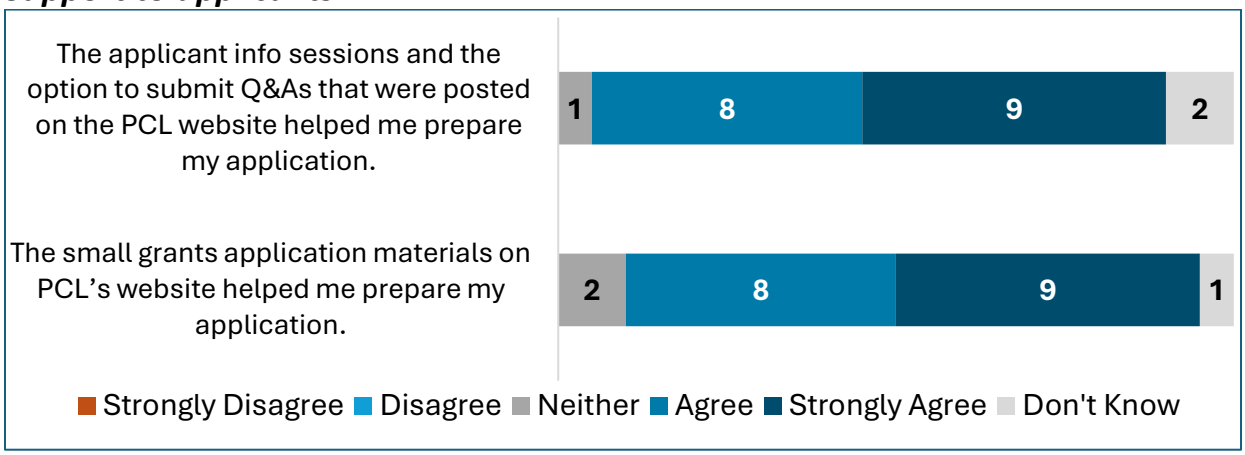
The graphs on the following pages summarize results by topic and survey questions. Results are generally listed in descending order by most agreement to least agreement within the topic.

Overall funding process



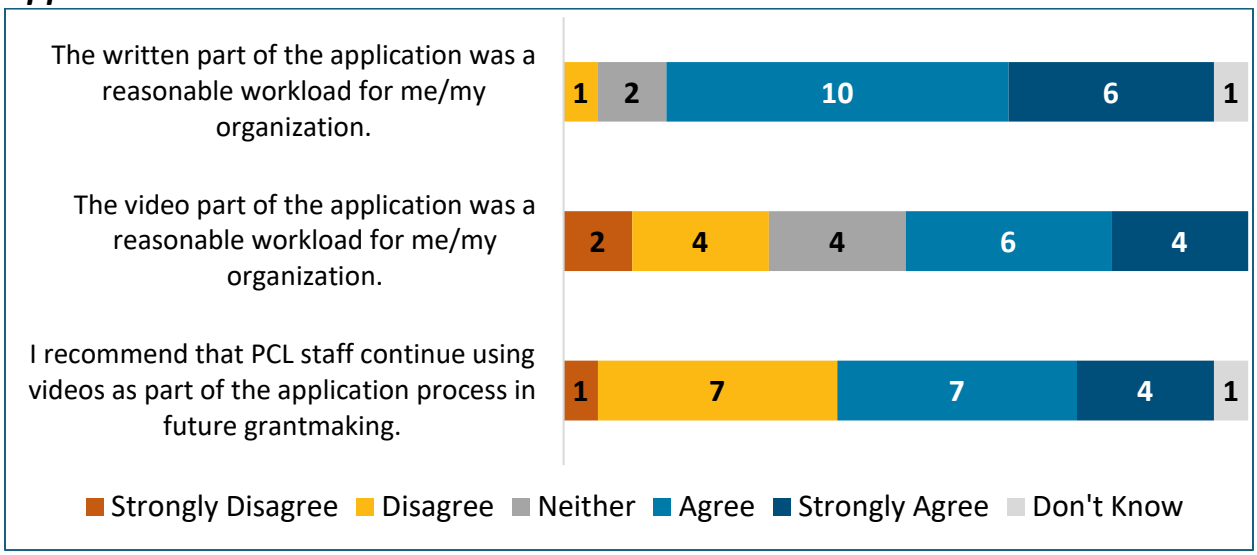
In general, respondents felt the overall small grants process was transparent and reflected a commitment to increasing access and opportunity for children and families experiencing inequities. Among those who disagreed or were neutral, all were respondents with unfunded applications or funding status unknown.

Support to applicants



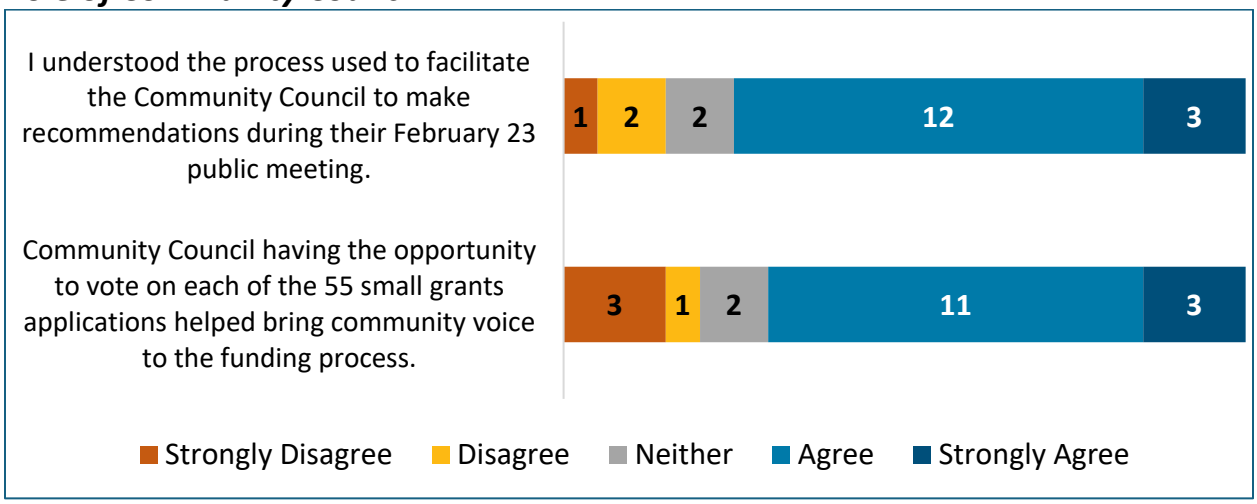
Most respondents, regardless of whether their application was funded, were generally satisfied with the support PCL provided to applicants through its website, info sessions, and opportunities for Q&A support.

Applicant workload



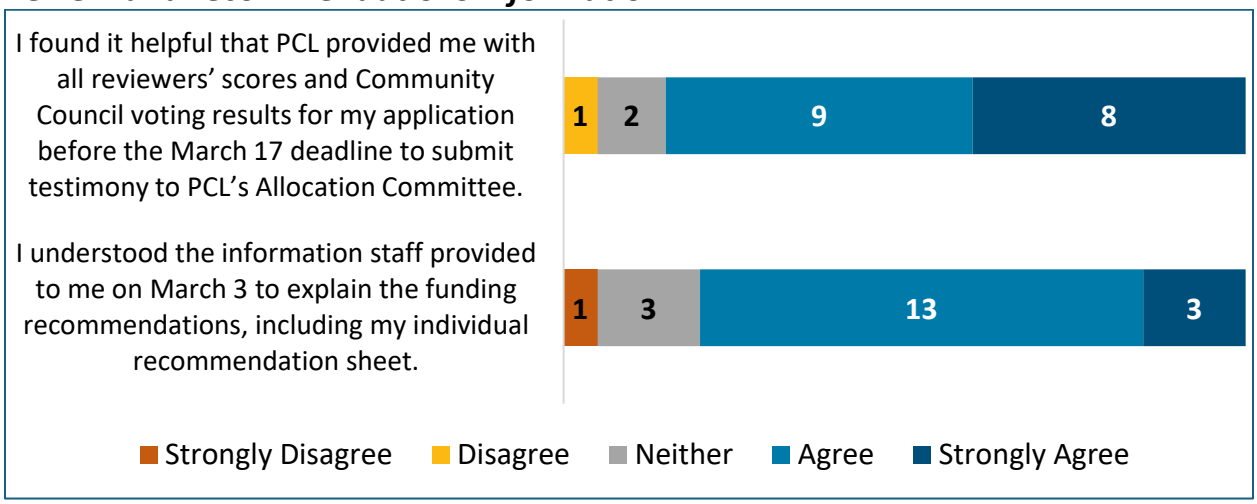
Respondents indicated that the written application was a reasonable workload, but feedback about the video was mixed. This part of the process showed the most dissatisfaction among survey respondents. Among the 20 respondents to the survey, 11 indicated that they would recommend offering the video again while 8 indicated they would not recommend using videos. Among those 8, they are split evenly between respondents with funded applications and those not funded or with status unknown.

Role of Community Council



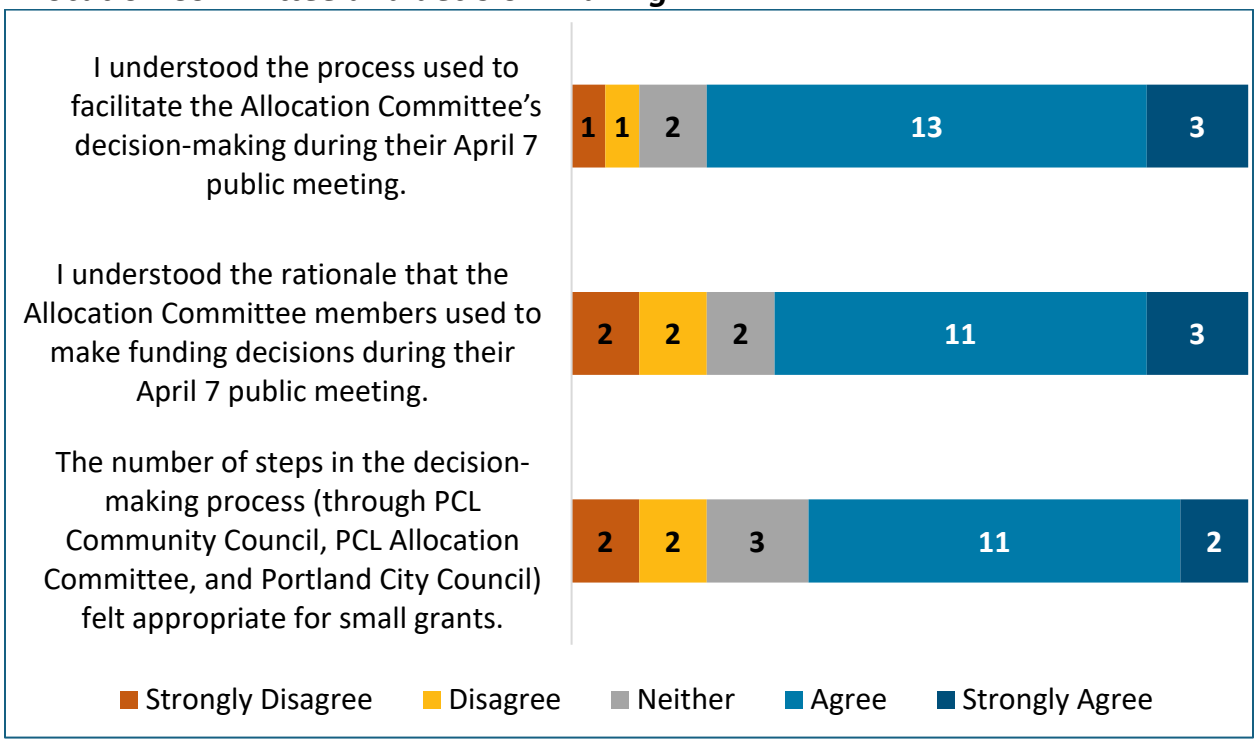
Most respondents understood how the Community Council was facilitated to make recommendations and felt that their voting role brought community voice to the funding process. Among those who disagreed or were neutral with this perspective, all were respondents with unfunded applications or funding status unknown.

Review and recommendations information



Most respondents found receiving reviewer scores and Community Council voting results helpful before they submitted optional written testimony to the Allocation Committee. They generally understood the recommendations materials provided to them. Among those who disagreed or were neutral with this perspective, all were respondents with unfunded applications or funding status unknown.

Allocation Committee and decision-making



Most respondents indicated that they understood the process used to facilitate the Allocation Committee meeting and understood the Committee's rationale for its decisions. Similarly, most felt that the number of steps in the decision-making process was appropriate for small grants. Interestingly, none of the funded applicants "strongly agree" that the number of steps felt appropriate, and the 2 respondents who "strongly agree" had applications not funded or funding status unknown. Among those who disagreed/strongly disagreed with these perspectives, all were respondents with unfunded applications or funding status unknown.

Applicant perspectives: survey comments

The survey asked one open-ended question for any other feedback that applicants wanted to share with PCL.

Of the 20 respondents, 13 left comments. Among the comments, 8 mentioned strengths of the process and 8 mentioned challenges or suggested improvements.

Comment themes indicate transparency as a strength and that the video part of application was challenging and needs to be reconsidered.

Among the positive comments:

- 3 mentions of overall transparency in the grantmaking process
- 2 mentions the ability to see review scores and/or voting results
- 1 mention of each of the following parts of the process: videos as part of the application, support for applicants, option to provide testimony to decision makers
- 2 other comments provided general appreciation

Among the comments indicating challenges and areas for improvement:

- 4 mentions on the video part of the application, including that videos reveal the identity of people involved in an application, that videos felt intimidating to make, and that videos seemed to make little difference in which applications were selected, and applicants that scored highly on the written component were selected.
- 2 mentions of score variance in reviewer scores, and one suggested that applicants receive more information explaining the reviewers' reasons for scoring and voting.
- 1 mention of each of the following issues: too much communication by staff which created false hope for applicants; repetitive application questions; disconnect between staff/non-profit reality; not do reimbursement-based grants; providing information earlier to applicants about grant requirements, including insurance, reporting, timelines, and other details of grants management.

Implications for process improvement

Based on results of the applicant survey specifically, PCL staff have identified the following recommendations for improving future small grants funding processes.

Options for alternative to written application

- Gather additional input and perspective from past applicants and/or potential applicants on what types of alternative application formats to offer, and options for minimizing applicant workload. As part of additional

feedback, ask past and/or potential applicants if they prefer only written formats.

- Consult/brainstorm with PCL Community Council on alternative application formats, other than videos and interviews, and options to minimize applicant workload.
- Consider making certain section(s) of the application in written format and in alternative format (other than written). Offer applicants choice to complete that application section in writing or in alternative format.

Review and scoring

- Simplify explanations about review and scoring to ensure that applicants understand how applications will be scored. For example, if different parts of the application will be scored by different groups, and then scores are totaled for a final score, ensure that applicants understand how review led to a total score and how total score was used in voting and decision-making.

Communication with applicants

- Balance frequency of communication with applicants to avoid over-communication and provide context on competitiveness of process, clarity on scoring, and other information that may help reduce/avoid creating false hope in applicants.

PCL Community Council feedback, 2026

Background on gathering feedback from Community Council members

Community Council purpose and membership

The Community Council is composed of 11-13 volunteers who advise staff and Allocation Committee members on PCL policies and procedures. At the time of the small grants funding process, 12 volunteers served on the Community Council: 8 of 12 identified as Black, Indigenous, or people of color; 3 of 12 identified as having a disability; and 3 of 12 identified as a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Community Council role in the small grants funding process

The Community Council played an integral role in shaping the small grants funding process:

- Provided input on the application questions for the video component of the application;
- Watched and scored the video component of all 55 applications to the small grants fund; and,
- Made funding recommendations to the Allocation Committee for review and decision-making.

Community Council feedback: overall findings

Strengths

Overall, Community Council members felt they had a voice in making funding recommendations. In response to Likert-scale survey questions, all Community Council members agreed or strongly agreed that Community Council members had a voice in making funding recommendations; in interviews, 10 of 12 Community Council members reported feeling like their voice and perspective was heard by staff and reflected in the outcomes of our work together. In addition, all Community Council members agreed or strongly agreed that the small grants process reflected a commitment to increasing access and opportunity for children and families in Portland communities experiencing inequities.

Staff support was highlighted as a strength by Community Council members. Members found the video reviewer training to be helpful and appreciated staff

integration of Community Council input throughout the small grants funding process.

Opportunities for improvement

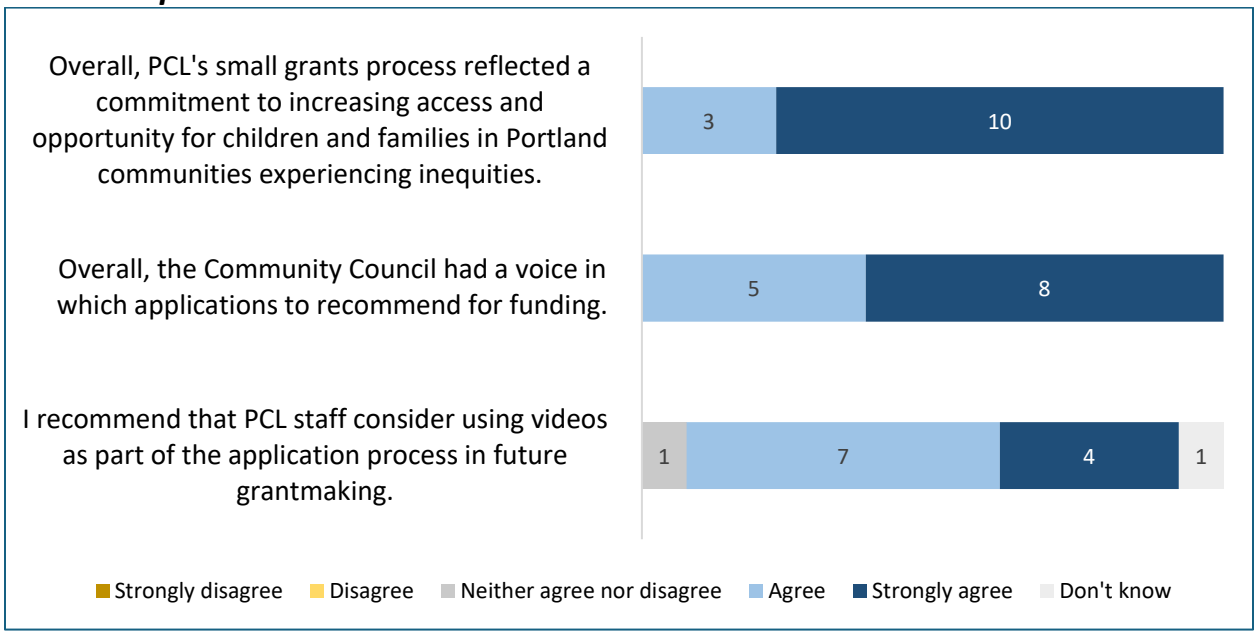
Community Council members shared that some aspects of the video review process were challenging:

- Video review workload: 4 of 12 interviewees expressed a desire to reduce the video review workload, and 2 of 13 respondents to the survey disagreed that the workload was reasonable. This feedback stands in contrast with the finding that a majority of survey respondents (11 of 13) agreed or strongly agreed that watching all 55 videos prepare them to make funding recommendations (the remaining 2 respondents selected 'don't know' or 'neither disagree nor agree').
- Ensure applicants provide requested information: 4 of 12 interviewees shared a frustration with accurately evaluating videos when applicants didn't provide requested information.

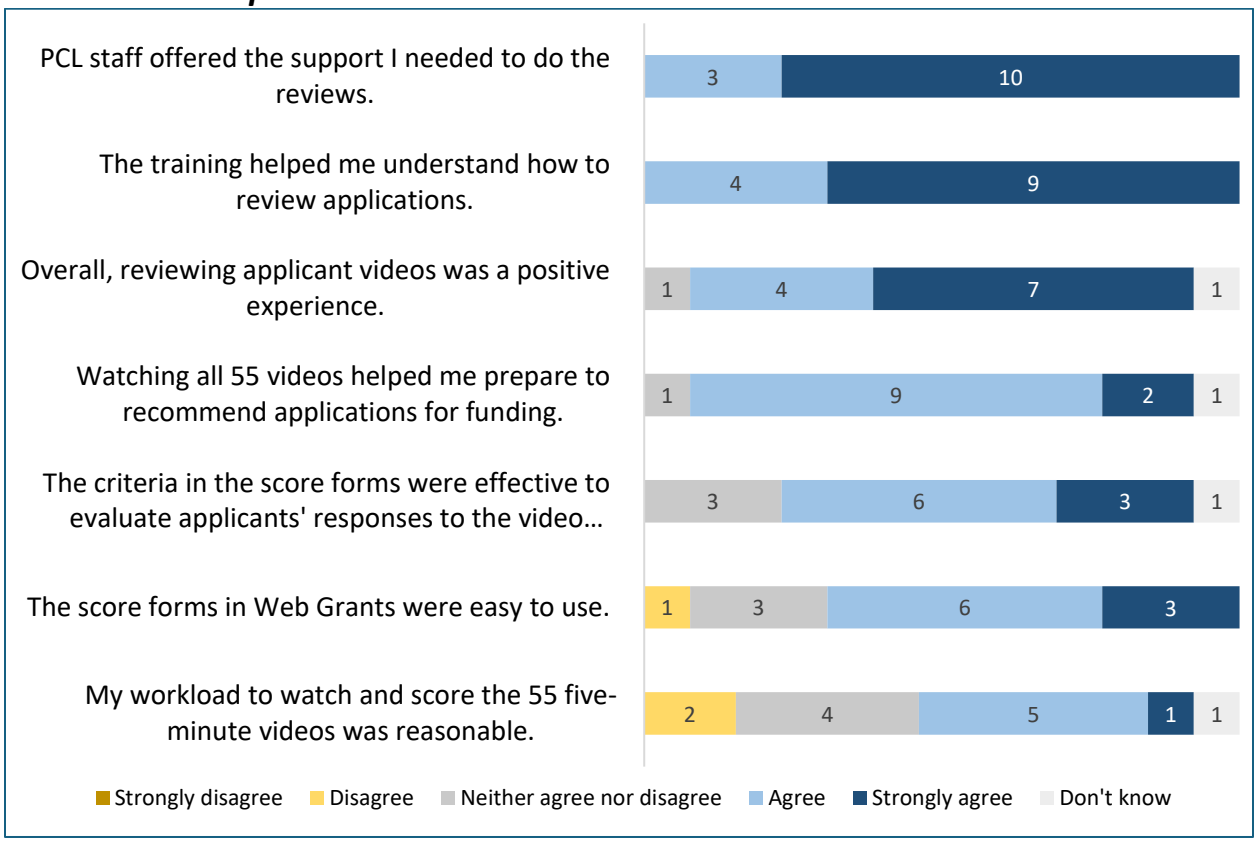
Community Council feedback: survey results on Likert-scale questions

After the conclusion of the small grants funding process, staff sent an anonymous survey of 14 Likert-scale questions to the 12 members of the Community Council. Staff received 13 completed surveys, indicating that one member likely accidentally completed the survey twice. The following three stacked bar charts visualize their responses.

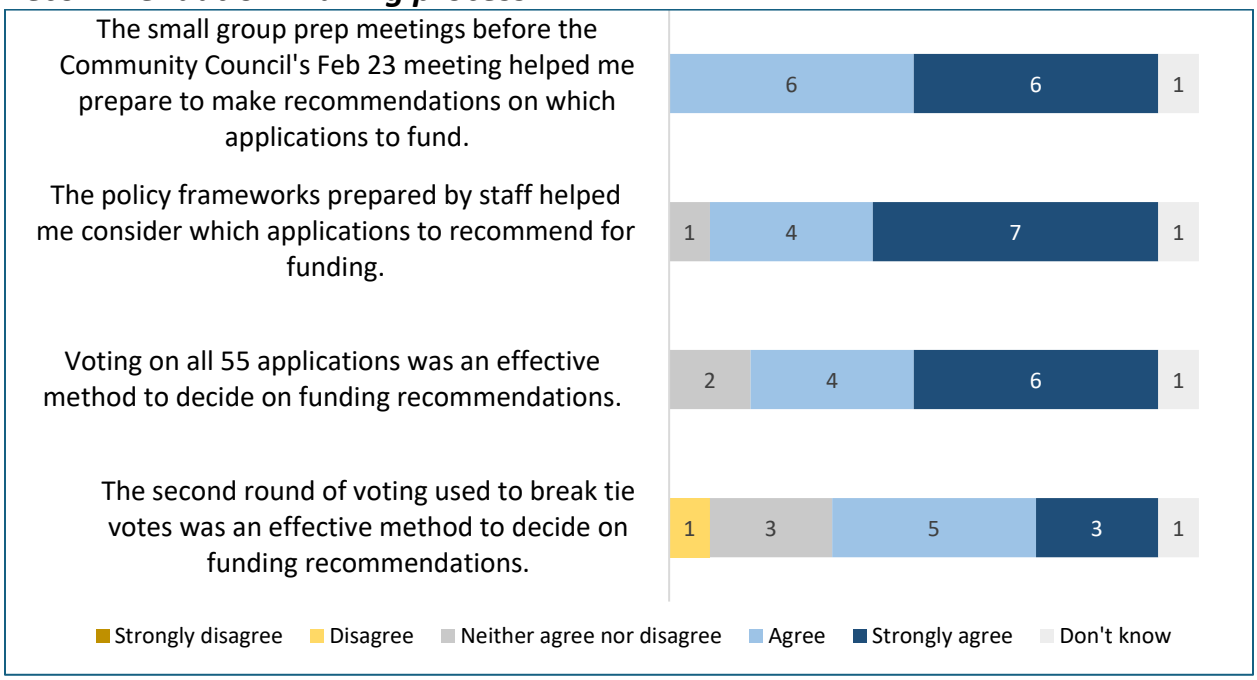
Overall experience



Video review experience



Recommendation-making process



Community Council feedback: 1-1 interviews

After the conclusion of the small grants funding process, staff also conducted 1-1 interviews with all 12 Community Council members. Staff asked the following three open-ended questions in the interview, took notes of Community Council member responses, and themed responses.

Question 1: What worked well about how the Community Council participated in the small grants funding process?

Staff's structuring of the small grants funding process and support of Community Council participation in the process emerged as the top theme. 11 of 12 Community Council members commented on the following features as strengths of the process:

- Opportunity to provide input throughout the small grants funding process (5 comments)
- Video reviewer training (4 comments)
- Staff support (4 comments)
- Staff review of written application and Community Council review of video application (3 comments)
- Opportunity for discussion with peers (3 comments) and small group work (2 comments)

- Policy frameworks for recommendation-making meeting (2 comments)
- Timing of video application review (2 comments)

In addition, five Community Council members commented on how they liked applicant videos.

Question 2: What would you change about how the Community Council participated in the small grants funding process?

The desire to improve aspects of the video review process emerged as the top theme in response to this question. Seven Community Council members asked how PCL might:

- Reduce the video review workload (4 comments)
- Ensure applicants provide the necessary information in video applicants to accurately evaluate them (4 comments)
- Increase video quality (2 comments)
- Reduce the subjectivity of video review (2 comments)
- Improve the timing of video application review (2 comments)
- Align scoring criteria with video prompts (2 comments)

Three Community Council members commented on how to improve the recommendation-making process, including ideas for how to improve the voting process (2 comments), the desire to discuss individual applications (1 comment), and the desire for solo processing time of council member discussion before voting (1 comment).

Question 3: Do you feel your voice and perspective was heard by PCL staff and reflected in the outcomes of our work together (i.e. grant review process, application questions, funding recommendations)?

10 of 12 Community Council members felt like their voice and perspective was heard by staff and reflected in the outcomes. 2 of 12 somewhat felt like their voice and perspective was heard by staff and reflected in the outcomes.

Allocation Committee feedback, 2026

Background on gathering feedback from Allocation Committee members

During summer 2026, PCL staff met individually with each of the five Allocation Committee members and asked for reflections on the small grants funding process. Below is a summary of their reflections.

Allocation Committee perspectives on strengths

- 4 of 5 members mentioned ***Community Council's involvement***, and different members mentioned different ways their involvement was a strength, including: their review of videos; their role in grant funding recommendations; they provide another layer to inform decisions; and that generally they were involved well in the process.
- 4 of 5 members mentioned ***staff's preparation of the process and support of the Allocation Committee***, including individual check-ins with members and staff's ability to answer questions from Allocation Committee members on applications and recommendations rationale; staff's work together as a team and communication with Allocation Committee, Community Council and public on PCL requirements and capacity; and staff's support of applicants.
- Other strengths mentioned by 1 member include development of the ***alternates policy for small grants***; small grants ***focus on building organizational capacity*** along with funding services.

Allocation Committee perspectives on areas for improvement

- 3 of 5 members mentioned ***wanting to have funded more small grants***. One member said they were "happy" with the number of applicants and would have liked to have funded more. Another mentioned that they would have liked to have awarded more grants since several scored highly. Another explained that funding applicants at their full request means PCL may "miss out" on funding more applications by funding applicants at less than they requested.
- 2 of 5 members mentioned ***clarifying roles between staff, Community Council, and Allocation Committee.*** One member mentioned wanting to ensure the Allocation Committee, Community Council, and staff are clear on

their own roles and can communicate them clearly to the public, including how the Allocation Committee and Community Council members work together to brief City Council as needed. Another mentioned feeling like the Allocation Committee had "little wiggle room to make changes" like bringing on more grants, but also noted PCL had a solid process so there's no clear solution.

- One member mentioned each of the following areas for improvement: more ***outreach and applicants from the disability community;*** continue to consider ***top score over lower scoring applicants*** and ensure program ***performance is key consideration*** in the future; ensure that ***communications reach all applicants*** during the process.

APPENDIX: Comments from applicant survey, as written, ordered by responses to strengths question, then dissatisfaction question and sorted by theme with most comments.

1. We appreciate PCL grants.
2. The process was accessible and transparent.
3. Overall, the PCL process has been positive, and we appreciate the support provided throughout the application and implementation process. One area that could further strengthen the program would be providing earlier communication on reporting requirements, timelines, and documentation expectations to help organizations plan staffing and operations more effectively. Additionally, creating more opportunities for grantees to connect, share best practices, and collaborate with one another would add significant value. Thank you for your continued investment in community-based organizations and the important work this funding makes possible.
4. For a process that involved this much funding and this many steps I appreciated how transparent PCL was - as an applicant I enjoyed seeing other applicants and their scores too.
5. I appreciate the transparency of the process.
6. I appreciated the opportunity to make a comment that would be read by the decision makers.
7. The video portion was intimidating. I believe it is a helpful part as it provides different opportunity to share about our organization mission and work, but I felt self conscious that it wasn't polished enough. I appreciate the reminders that it didn't need to be a highly produced video. I would be concerned that future applicants may spend additional money to produce a more impressive video.
8. While it was helpful to see our scores, it would be further helpful if a general comments or voter justification section was required of each evaluator in why they scored the application as they did. This would greatly help in understanding in instances of outliers.

9. In a word. Disappointed. The meetings I viewed left me with the impression, that only high scored written were considered. And the video added no value.
10. Video centers applicant identity in an inappropriate manner and favors applicants with comms teams
11. You'all overshared about the process, taking time away from other things. You also dangled hope in front of organizations when it would have been better to be more direct with nos early on. Also it's clear a lot of time is spent behind computers, which requires nonprofits who are in the field to spend more time on computers because you are. Also curious if anyone on PCL has extensive experience applying for grants in the past. Many of the way questions were answered did not reflect this.
12. There was weird variance in my scores between reviewers. Video also introduced my identity into the process and I didn't love that.
13. I suggest not doing reimbursement grants, it's just not realistic to the reality of nonprofits.