



Hidalgo County • Department of Budget & Management
American Rescue Plan Act 2021

**Hidalgo County American Rescue Plan Act Recreational
Development Program**



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Table of Contents

Background Information	3
Program Description	4
Response to COVID-19 Public Health Emergency:	4
Identification of Eligibility Category:	5
Community Need Assessment:	5
Projects	6



Hidalgo County • Department of Budget & Management

American Rescue Plan Act 2021

Background Information

The COVID-19 public health emergency has collectively impaired the psyches of Americans. Pandemic-related stress has exacerbated behavioral health difficulties. As isolation and distancing guidelines have become the norm, depression, anxiety and substance abuse cases have risen.

Public parks serve an important societal function as recreational spaces for diverse communities. However, access to parks and other recreational spaces is limited among disadvantaged people. Amid the public health emergency, the well-documented physical and mental health benefits can be crucial to the well-being of struggling constituents. In the age of isolation and social distancing, the ability to go outside and get some fresh air has never been so important.

As those who can afford to do so converge on recreational spaces, seeking exercise and solace amid the COVID-19 public health emergency, parks & hike & bike trails have become stages for collective joy, anxiety, and social-distancing infringement crackdowns. The multitude of benefits parks have always offered us — physical and mental health relief, community building, and free public open space in tight, increasingly privatized communities.

Despite the many benefits of parks, however, many states have instituted park shutdown orders due to fears that public parks could facilitate COVID-19 transmission. This has caused open remaining parks & hike & bike trails to experience elevated visitation levels. In results, parks indicate to continue providing crucial services to society, particularly in stressful times when opportunities for recreation are limited.

In addition, parks & hike & bike trails have not been getting the deserved attention in dollars in the years leading up to the public health emergency. Due to this crisis, state and local governments will need to address accessibility, funding and space for parks. New infrastructure and renovations are needed for parks, as they are in poor conditions, not big enough or lacking facilities.

Hidalgo County will begin its ARPA initiative by researching funding strategies and seeking community input in order to efficiently execute project planning and development. Immediately after, potential projects will be identified and prioritized. As projects are officially introduced, updates and results will be shared to actualize Hidalgo County's goal of maintaining transparency and accountability to constituents and community members.



Hidalgo County • Department of Budget & Management

American Rescue Plan Act 2021

Program Description

The Recreational Expansion Program will improve the accessibility and function of parks to constituents living in Qualified Census Tracts (QCTs). Treasury's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds recognizes parks and other recreational spaces as methods of creating stronger communities, addressing social determinants of health and confronting public health disparities.¹

The current pandemic has changed the way we appreciate public spaces and sparked conversations about parks and how parks should be designed to benefit the health and well-being of populations.

As they have always served a critical function as free recreational spaces particularly for low income communities. Parks and green spaces more generally are known to have positive impacts on mental health. Also parks will be expansive, allowing for safe enjoyment while maintaining social distancing.

Parks and green spaces contribute to environmental and human health in a variety of ways, from mitigating heat and air pollution to promoting physical activity and psychological restoration. The potential parks have to promote health has been further amplified during the pandemic. Staying physically active is the best thing everyone in our community can do to keep mind and body healthy.

Implementation of the Fiscal Recovery Funds also reflect the importance of public input, transparency, and accountability. In an effort to maintain transparency with Hidalgo County resident's, quarterly reports to include, reports on projects funded, expenditures, programmatic data, if needed and public input will be included for further progression. These reporting requirements reflect the necessary transparency and accountability, while recognizing and minimizing the burden, particularly for smaller local governments with ARPA funds.

Response to COVID-19 Public Health Emergency:

The importance of engaging in any type of physical activity regularly, for both physical and mental health, is well established, and may be particularly beneficial in protecting the body and limiting the damage caused by the coronavirus disease. Exposure to nature or green space also has positive physical and mental health benefits.

¹ Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds FAQs. (pg 7)
<https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/SLFRPFAQ.pdf>



Hidalgo County • Department of Budget & Management

American Rescue Plan Act 2021

Prior to the COVID pandemic, trails, parks, and open space were already major drivers of tourism. While other parts of the tourism and hospitality sector remained shuttered for much of the pandemic, outdoor amenities proved their resiliency even during times of economic and social disruption. Most parks and trails experienced exponential growth in visitation—both from local visitors and tourists—which helped sustain local economies across the state. Use of state parks and forests increased by 27% during the pandemic, while many trails across the commonwealth experienced increases of more than 200%.²

Identification of Eligibility Category:

One of the priorities highlighted in the American Rescue Plan Act is to ensure funds reach historically-disadvantaged communities. Communities of low-income level suffer from disparities in access, but many rural areas also lack access.

The Rescue Act gives latitude to counties and municipalities to invest in their economic recovery and impacted industries. To improve spaces in areas that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This provision refers to projects in a “Qualified Census Tract” and can include improving park space that will benefit the health and wellness of these communities.

Municipalities that invest in parks, trails and open space are creating platforms for economic development that will serve them well during and after COVID.³ The public health benefits of the outdoors were well-known prior to the COVID pandemic, but the last 18 months have significantly elevated the importance of public open space during public health emergencies. These amenities provide socially-distanced space for recreation at a time when other facilities, such as gyms were closed or had limited capacity. They also provide essential benefits to mental health, which is specifically identified in the Rescue Act guidelines

Community Need Assessment:

The purpose of this recreational expansion program is to be responsive and committed in providing essential park, hike & bike trails, and other recreational services making our community a more desirable place to live, work, and play. The pursuit of a park system that is

² Funding Conservation, Trails, Parks, and Recreation with Federal Rescue Act Funds (pg 3)

³ Funding Conservation, Trails, Parks, and Recreation with Federal Rescue Act Funds (pg 2)



Hidalgo County • Department of Budget & Management

American Rescue Plan Act 2021

equitable and balanced and provides engaging recreation programming for people of all abilities, ages, and socio-economic levels.

ARPA funds, tends to recreate and renovate current parks by adding more recreational space, restrooms for the public, and better equipment. In addition to creating more recreational space, Hike & bike trails are being created for the community to enjoy outside areas where they can exercise, explore, and create that access that lacks from low to moderate income communities.

Projects

Numerous projects will be included as part of the Hidalgo Parks, Hike & Bike Program, including but not limited to the projects listed below.

- Hidalgo County Precinct 3 Katrina Park Improvements - Project Number: ARPA-21-123-023