

The seal of Hidalgo County, Texas, is a large, light gray watermark in the background. It is circular and features a five-pointed star in the center, surrounded by a wreath of oak and olive branches. The text "THE COUNTY OF HIDALGO" is written along the top inner edge, and "TEXAS" is written along the bottom inner edge.

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



## **Table of Contents**

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<b>Background Information</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Program Description</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Response to COVID-19 Public Health Emergency</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Identification of Eligibility Category</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Community Need Assessment</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Projects</b>	<b>7</b>



## **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 and recreation facilities 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 and trails have become stages for collective joy, anxiety, and social-distancing infringement crackdowns. The multitude of benefits that parks and other recreational spaces offer— physical and mental health relief, community building, and free public open space in tight, increasingly privatized communities is pivotal.

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

In addition, parks, trails, and recreation facilities 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. New infrastructure and renovations are needed for parks, trails and recreation facilities, as they are in poor condition, 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.

## **Program Description**

The Hidalgo County American Rescue Plan Act Recreational Development Program will improve the accessibility and function of parks, trails and recreation facilities 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.<sup>1</sup>

The current pandemic has changed the way we appreciate public spaces and sparked conversations about parks, trails and other recreation spaces, specifically how design may 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, green spaces, and recreation facilities are more generally known to have positive impacts on mental health. Also parks will be expansive, allowing for safe enjoyment while maintaining social distancing. The final rule also recognizes that the public health impacts of the pandemic are broader than just the COVID-19 disease itself and include substantial impacts on mental health and public safety challenges like rates of violent crime, which are correlated with a neighborhood's built environment and features. As such, neighborhood features that promote improved health and safety outcomes respond to the pre-existing disparities that contributed to COVID-19's disproportionate impacts on low-income communities.<sup>2</sup>

Parks, green spaces, and recreation facilities 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 to promote health has been further

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

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Treasury. (2022). Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. *Federal Register*, 87(18), p. 4373



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.

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%.<sup>3</sup>

## **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 American Rescue Plan Act gives latitude to counties and municipalities to invest in their economic recovery and impacted industries. To improve spaces in areas that have

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<sup>3</sup> Funding Conservation, Trails, Parks, and Recreation with Federal Rescue Act Funds (pg 3)



been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This provision refers to projects in a “Qualified Census Tract” and can include improving parks, green spaces, recreation facilities and other projects to revitalize public spaces that will benefit the health and wellness of these communities.

Municipalities that invest in parks, trails and other projects are creating platforms for economic development that will serve them well during and after COVID.<sup>4</sup> 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 American Rescue Plan Act guidelines as equitable and balanced and provides engaging recreation programming for people of all abilities, ages, and socio-economic levels.

US Treasury has enumerated eligible uses to build strong healthy communities. ARPA funds may be used to fund neighborhood features that promote health and safety. Hidalgo County aims to invest in its most vulnerable communities by developing existing and new recreation projects to promote healthier lifestyles and mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19.

## **Community Need Assessment**

The purpose of this recreational expansion program is to be responsive and committed in providing essential parks, trails, and other recreational spaces making our community a more desirable place to live, work, and play. The pursuit of a recreation system that is equitable, balanced and provides engaging recreation programming for people of all abilities, ages, and socio-economic levels.

The investment of ARPA funds in parks, trails and other recreation spaces, including amenities such as public restrooms, equipment, and safety features to name a few are investments in community health. In addition to creating more recreational spaces, the

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<sup>4</sup> Funding Conservation, Trails, Parks, and Recreation with Federal Rescue Act Funds (pg 2)



community will benefit as these enhancements promote general health and well-being and encourage more active and healthier lifestyles.

## **Projects**

Numerous projects will be included as part of the Hidalgo County American Rescue Plan Act Recreational Development Program, including but not limited to the projects listed below.

- Hidalgo County Precinct 3 Park Improvements - Project Number: ARPA-21-123-023
- Hidalgo County Precinct 2 Recreational Trail Connectivity and Development Project - Project Number: ARPA-21-122-040
- Hidalgo County Precinct 2 Boys and Girls Club Community Development Project - Project Number: ARPA-21-122-018
- Boys and Girls Club of McAllen, South Community Development Project - Project Number: ARPA-23-122-329
- Hidalgo County Precinct 1 Hike and Bike Trail Project - Project Number: ARPA-21-121-037