



# INVEST IN COOK

Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways  
Call for Projects

## INTRODUCTION

The Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways (DoTH) has administered the Invest in Cook (IIC) grant program since 2017, providing funds to local non-profit organizations and government agencies to advance transportation improvements throughout the region. The annual \$8.5 million program has provided local and regional governments transportation funds to cover the cost of planning and feasibility studies, engineering and construction associated with infrastructure improvements consistent with the County's transportation and economic development policy priorities.

## Connecting Cook County

The IIC grant program is one avenue DoTH uses to implement *Connecting Cook County*, the County's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP). The plan takes stock of the County's transportation assets, deficiencies, and future needs and measures them against the community and economic opportunities that transportation can facilitate. The LRTP outlines a new direction and a more expansive role for the County in funding and collaborating on projects across jurisdictional boundaries and in achieving greater integration of the system across all transportation modes.

The plan identifies five priorities and can be accessed at <https://www.connectingcookcounty.org/plan/>

**Prioritize Transit and Other Transportation Alternatives** – A sustainable mobility network requires complementary modes of transportation that satisfy transit, cycling, and pedestrian needs. An efficient transit system is a signifier of a world class metropolitan region and providing a complete and fully accessible cycling/pedestrian mobility system is also integral to a high quality of life. Projects selected for Invest in Cook grants will improve our transit networks and allow communities to place greater emphasis on walking, biking, and other alternatives to driving.

**Support the Region's Role as North America's Freight Capital** – Freight plays a critical role in Cook County's economy and its continued prosperity. It has also made the Chicago region the largest chokepoint for both trucks and trains in the national freight system. Projects selected for Invest in Cook grants will focus on improving rail and truck movements through the region and on coordinating land uses in proximity to freight transportation facilities, among other freight supportive activities.

**Promote Equal Access to Opportunities** – A transportation network should facilitate easy connections to jobs, schools, healthcare centers, recreation, and much more. Historical economic development practices and land use regulation meant that the opportunities afforded by access to a robust transportation system are not guaranteed by Cook County's current built environment. Projects selected for Invest in Cook grants will address these inequities by targeting transportation investments in in disadvantaged communities, and through partnerships with other agencies that make equity a priority in their work.

**Maintain and Modernize What Already Exists** – Postponing regular maintenance adds to long-term costs, reduces the appeal of public transit services, causes delay and congestion,

creates safety hazards, and makes transportation more expensive for users. Projects selected for Invest in Cook grants will help communities modernize their local transportation networks and/or provide regionally significant improvements for the changing needs of 21st century.

**Increase Investments in Transportation** – Increased investments in the region’s transportation network is critical to its economic success. Flexible and more reliable investments in transportation will help our economy grow and make communities more livable. Projects selected for Invest in Cook grants will leverage local resources to support infrastructure and using state and federal funds to implement transportation improvements.

### **Implementing Cook County’s Transportation Vision**

The IIC grant program balances equity, local prioritization, and community need in project selection, alongside advancing projects that have multi-jurisdictional impacts throughout the County. DoTH understands that quality project delivery requires good planning over a project’s life. IIC funding can be used for projects at any stage of development, from planning and feasibility studies, to engineering design, and all the way through construction and/or implementation. This helps foster the development of quality projects, and help projects meet qualifications required to receive federal funding.

## **ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION PROCESS**

The following sections describe which entities are eligible to apply, application deadlines, match requirements, and project readiness criteria that must be met in order to qualify to apply. If your project qualifies under these basic criteria and the application is received on-time, your project will be evaluated.

Please note that due to funding limitations, applications that are selected may receive less than the amount originally requested. In those cases, the applicants must be able to demonstrate that the proposed projects are still viable and can be completed with the amount awarded.

### **Deadlines and How to Apply**

The call for projects opens on January 14, 2026 and ends at 5:00 PM on March 20, 2026. Application materials are posted on Cook County’s DOT website at: <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/investincook>. Applications will only be accepted electronically and must be submitted by the deadline.

### **Eligible Applicants and Projects**

Eligible sponsors include local governments, regional transportation authorities, transit agencies, natural resource or public land agencies, and any other local or regional governmental entity with responsibility for transportation or recreational trails within Cook County. For projects that involve multiple jurisdictions, the application should identify a lead applicant and provide letters of support from partner entities. Private for-profit or non-profit organizations can submit project proposals as a lead applicant, but they are required to partner with a public sponsor that meets the above criteria. Proposals for multimodal projects in any phase of development will be considered. **Municipal and Township applicants are limited to a single project application.** Staff salaries are not an eligible expense under this program. Also, the purchase and/or maintenance of diesel based rolling stock (rail cars, buses, vans, etc.) and stand-alone lighting projects are not eligible under the Invest in Cook program. Due to limitations in the use of Motor Fuel Tax, Invest in Cook cannot fund electric vehicle infrastructure at this time.

Eligible project proposals should be consistent with the priorities set forth in *Connecting Cook County*. The following is a representative, but not exhaustive, list of the types of projects eligible for funding under the Invest in Cook Program:

- Transit Improvement Projects
  - Transit Studies and Needs Assessments
  - Transit Facility Improvements or Equipment Improvements
  - Fleet Retrofits
  - Paratransit Opportunities
- Transit Service Enhancements or Improving Transit Accessibility
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Facility Projects
  - Bicycle or Pedestrian Master Planning
  - Adding Bike Lanes
  - Traffic Calming/Road Diets
  - Multi-Use Trails
  - Filling Sidewalk Gaps
  - Intersection Safety Improvements
  - ADA-Related Improvements
- Freight Projects
  - Truck Route Planning
  - Increased Viaduct Clearance
  - Safety Improvements to Highway-Rail Grade Crossings
  - Roadway-Rail Grade Separations
  - Roadway Improvements on Truck Routes and High Truck Traffic Road Segments
  - Railroad Improvements
  - Environmental Needs Assessments
- Traffic Flow Improvement Projects
  - Eliminating Bottlenecks
  - Intersection Improvements and Modernization
  - Interconnected Signal Technologies
- Bridge Improvements
- Demonstration Projects for New Technology
  - First Mile/Last Mile Gap Studies
  - Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)
  - Service Improvements to Existing Routes
- Corridor Studies
- Economic Development Projects
  - Transit Oriented Development Plans
  - Transportation Improvements to Support Local Business Districts
  - Local Comprehensive Transportation Plans
- Other Projects – Please consult with County staff to determine eligibility

### **Project Submission Instructions**

Project information, helpful resources, and submission forms can be found on the Cook County – DoTH Invest in Cook Home Page at <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/investincook>. Project applicants must fill out the application and schedule as completely as possible and submit the form electronically at the Cook County DoTH Invest in Cook [Submission Page](#). The form was designed to provide descriptive information that evaluators will need to understand the scope of the project and its benefits in relation to the county-wide priorities set forth in *Connecting Cook County*.

Supporting documentation like existing plans should be referenced in the application with links provided to copies of the plan. If a link is not available, applicants should provide a pdf with excerpts from the plan that apply to the proposed project or a summary of all studies/plans of no more than five pages. Other documentation like cost estimates, board resolutions, etc. should be uploaded with the application.

Application documents should be uploaded with cover pages that accurately identify the applicant's name, the project name, and the project location.

If an applicant needs assistance filling out the application or has questions about any part of the application process they should contact Laura McFadden at [InvestInCook.CC@cookcountyil.gov](mailto:InvestInCook.CC@cookcountyil.gov) or (312) 603-1223. County staff will be available to answer questions about the application, how to submit a competitive application, and other general questions. Depending on availability, the County will also set aside staff time to assist with more technical tasks like developing cost estimates or mapping project information. Applicants are encouraged to contact the County as soon as they know they will be requesting technical assistance. The County will prioritize aid to disadvantaged communities/applicants but cannot guarantee staff availability to help in every instance where it is required.

Please submit the completed application form and all supporting attachments like maps, studies and plans, resolutions, detailed cost estimates, and other supporting documentation through the County's Invest in Cook [Submission Page](#).

### **Invest in Cook FY26 Call for Projects Timeline**

Invest in Cook will be conducted according to the following timeline. If you intend to apply, please mark the following dates in your calendar.

- January 14, 2026, Invest in Cook program opens
- February 4, 2026, Cook County DOTD will host an online informational webinar
- March 20, 2026, applications due
- March - June 2026, project evaluation team will review applications
- July 2026, projects will be approved by the board and awardees will be notified of award

# PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA AND PROCESS

Cook County staff will evaluate applications using a three-step process.

## I. General Measures of Application Quality

The first level of review is meant to determine the quality and completeness of applications as prepared by the applicants. During this portion of the evaluation, projects will not be scored, but will be screened at a high level. Projects passing this stage will then be scored using criteria and measures tied to the LRTP's priorities.

To perform well in the initial screening, applicants should ensure the quality and clarity of their responses. All mandatory fields in the application must be filled out and any fields that pertain directly to the type of project for which the applicant is requesting funds should also be filled in. Applicants should clearly describe the need for the project in their application, demonstrate how the proposed project addresses that need and spell out its benefits. The scope of the project and its geographic limits should be clearly delineated. Applications should include specific information about the area that may be difficult for reviewers to discern on their own.

Images are often a good way to describe a project, including its limits and potential benefits. Applicants should include maps and other photos that help to illustrate needs and benefits. We ask that applicants provide no more than 6 graphic files (can include maps, pictures, excerpts from studies or other types of graphics). A map showing the project's limits is required, as are photos showing the condition of the project area.

Cost estimates are required for projects seeking construction funding. The project budget for projects in other phases should be as complete as possible. County staff can help develop a cost estimate in cases of need, contingent upon staff availability and the applicant's level of need. The schedule should reflect a reasonable timeline for completion of a project with high-level milestones and start and end dates. These dates can be flexible, but proposed projects will be assessed for the likelihood that they will begin and end as forecasted. Construction projects will be held to standards consistent with IDOT's Project Implementation procedures outlined in Chapter 13 of the Bureau of Local Roads & Streets Manual. Federally funded projects, or projects seeking Federal funding, should be prepared to follow all policies and procedures outlined in Part III of IDOT's BLRS Manual.

Reviewers will consider past experiences and fiscal factors (where available) in assessing an applicant's capacity to lead and complete a project. Reviewers will also take note of barriers to implementation that might suspend activity on a project or prevent it from being completed by noting obstacles such as known environmental concerns, lack of consensus among community residents, businesses, or elected officials, and/or engineering feasibility concerns.

Very low- and low-need communities (as designated by CMAP) will be expected to match County funds on at least a one-to-one basis. Very high- and high-need communities may not need a local match to County funds.

Applicants lacking the capacity to implement a project can ask that the County lead the project.

## II. Support for the Priorities of Connecting Cook County

Projects submitted in response to the Call for Projects will also be evaluated using performance-based measures directly related to the priorities set forth in *Connecting Cook County*. DoTH staff will download publicly available data for each of these indicators to ensure the consistent application of data across all project submissions. Projects performing well for the various measures will receive the most points; fewer points will be awarded as project performance declines. Projects will be ranked according to their

score. In order to promote modal diversity, projects will be evaluated and ranked by mode: Transit, Bicycle and Pedestrian, Freight, and Roadways.

The following indicators are derived from our priorities. They will be applied to project proposals as part of the quantitative phase of the evaluation process:

<b>Priorities</b>	<b>Measures</b>
<b>Transit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of users served</li> <li>• Equity of project benefits</li> <li>• Transit access to jobs</li> <li>• Facility condition</li> <li>• Improved ADA accessibility</li> </ul>
<b>Bicycle and Pedestrian</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving access to low-stress bike facilities</li> <li>• Equity of project benefits</li> <li>• Increase in access to jobs and other key destinations</li> <li>• Filling gaps in bike and pedestrian network</li> <li>• Number of users served</li> <li>• Improved ADA accessibility</li> </ul>
<b>Freight Transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits to employers</li> <li>• Truck and/or train traffic count</li> <li>• Equity of project benefits</li> <li>• Traffic safety</li> <li>• Facility condition</li> </ul>
<b>Roadways</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facility condition</li> <li>• Traffic safety and operational improvements</li> <li>• Equity of project benefits</li> <li>• Improved ADA accessibility</li> </ul>

Projects will be mapped, and buffers of varying size will be applied based on project type. A project’s performance on any given measure will be determined by impacts captured within the projects buffer, not solely along the project corridor itself.

While it is the responsibility of County staff to aggregate this data for proposed projects, applicants should include locally sourced data for measures relevant to their application to enhance reviewers’ understanding of the project.

### **III. Qualitative Assessment**

Project reviewers will also conduct a qualitative review of applications that assesses project readiness, the applicant’s capacity to complete the project, and the benefits to be derived from the project as described in the project summary. Once reviews have been completed, the Department will make project selections and build a proposed program constrained by the available Invest in Cook funding. Cook County will consider factors such as geographic equity, the mix of different types of transportation projects, the distribution of projects across phases and project feasibility in putting together final program awards.

### **PROJECT TRACKING AND MILESTONES**

Once selected, project applicants will be expected to develop a detailed project schedule with estimated milestone dates. County staff will ask that awardees provide brief status updates every quarter and more detailed updates as they are needed throughout the development of the project.

## **APPLICATION COMPLETENESS**

Applicants should double check their applications and make sure that all applicable fields have been filled in completely and accurately. If the evaluation team finds data missing or requires more information to make a determination, a department representative will contact the applicant and make a request for the information. Applicants will have 7 days to provide the information.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

Questions or requests for assistance should be directed to:

Laura McFadden  
(312) 603-1223  
[InvestInCook.CC@cookcountyil.gov](mailto:InvestInCook.CC@cookcountyil.gov)