6

# Memo

**Date: 9/30/25**

**To: ETAC**

**From: Carla Vita, Director Energy Transition**

## RE: Grant Opportunities

Background:

After the last ETAC meeting a survey was sent to the ETAC Board inquiring to topics of interest to assist each of you in your important work. Grant opportunities was a top request.

Presentations:

The grant climate is different than last year. The Federal grant opportunities are less and are changing. The Community Energy Transition grant was not funded. Other opportunities still exist.

1. Minnesota Climate Innovation Finance Authority [MnCIFA](https://mn.gov/commerce/energy/consumer/energy-programs/climate-innovation.jsp) , Kari Groth Swan, Executive Director

Kari joined MnCIFA as Executive Director in November 2024. Kari directs all operations and financial management for MnCIFA, including projects for the Board of Directors to consider financing.

Kari brings comprehensive wealth management and banking experience in the broker/dealer, asset management, private bank, family office, non-profit, and CDFI sectors. Prior to joining MnCIFA, she was head of investor relations for Treehouse Management, LLC., and served in leadership positions for the Metropolitan Economic Development Association, Greater Twin Cities United Way, and Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation. Kari has +20 years experience in the wealth management and banking sector including JPMorgan, BMOHarris, MorganStanley, and PiperSandler.

1. Minnesota Technical Assistance Collaborative, Molly Zins, Executive Director UMN Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership

Molly Zins ([zend0007@umn.edu](mailto:zend0007@umn.edu)) is the Executive Director of the University of Minnesota Extension Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (RSDP), a position she has held since 2012. In this role, she leads collaborative initiatives that connect community expertise with University resources to advance sustainability across four key focus areas: agriculture and food systems, clean energy, natural resources, and resilient communities. Molly also manages projects for the *Empowering Small Minnesota Communities* program, a University of Minnesota collaboration designed to help small communities creatively leverage local assets, strengthen sustainable infrastructure, and prepare for future funding opportunities. In addition, she serves on the UMN Extension American Indian Community of Practice Leadership Team, which fosters community opportunities for culturally responsive engagement that deepen appreciation for the contributions and experiences of American Indian peoples. Prior to joining the RSDPs, Molly was the program director for a nonprofit focused on lake and river protection. She earned her master’s degree from the University of Minnesota Duluth, where her research centered on improving access to local food systems for underrepresented community members.

1. Federal Economic Development, Darrin Fleener, Minnesota & Illinois Representative

Darrin Fleener is an Economic Development Representative for the US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA). With 30 of experience in community and economic development, he is known for his work in the forest products industry, rural policy and rural economic development and working with tribal governments to provide economic opportunity to the most underserved. Darrin holds a Bachelor of Science in economics from Southern Oregon University.  Darrin Enjoys local politics and served as the mayor of his community for three consecutive terms until His job brought him to the Midwest 11 years ago. Working out of the Chicago Regional Office Darrin has served the states of Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and Indiana. He is currently serving in the states of Minnesota and Indiana. Outside of work, Darrin enjoys attending live sporting events and new weekend adventures in the Midwest ( including meat raffles).

1. Just Transition Fund, Rachael Young, Deputy Director of Partnerships

Rachael is the Deputy Director of Partnerships at the Just Transition Fund, where she oversees grantmaking and fundraising strategies to support coal-impacted communities navigating economic transition. Before joining the JTF in 2021, Rachael served as Program Officer for over a decade at the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, where she led both place-based and national grantmaking initiatives related to community development and clean energy. She currently serves as Co-Chair of the Energy and Natural Resources Group at the Appalachia Funders Network and as a member of the Appalachian Regional Commission’s Steering Committee on Capacity Building. Rachael holds degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and New York University. She lives with her family in her hometown of Asheville, NC, where she remains deeply connected to a region the JTF serves.

1. Rachael Young, Just Transition Fund

Rachael is the Deputy Director of Partnerships at the Just Transition Fund, where she oversees grantmaking and fundraising strategies to support coal-impacted communities navigating economic transition. Before joining the JTF in 2021, Rachael served as Program Officer for over a decade at the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, where she led both place-based and national grantmaking initiatives related to community development and clean energy. She currently serves as Co-Chair of the Energy and Natural Resources Group at the Appalachia Funders Network and as a member of the Appalachian Regional Commission’s Steering Committee on Capacity Building. Rachael holds degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and New York University. She lives with her family in her hometown of Asheville, NC, where she remains deeply connected to a region the JTF serves.

1. Don Hickman, Initiative Foundation

Don has spent the past twenty-five years in philanthropy, and retired from his role as Vice President for Community and Workforce Development at the Initiative Foundation (of central Minnesota) this past January. In this role a primary focus was to assist the City of Becker (and County of Sherburne) to prepare for the economic transition associated with the decommissioning of the Sherburne County Coal Generation Station.

Prior to his work with the foundation Hickman spent ten years as an environmental consultant in Minnesota and the Rocky Mountain West, and also worked as a policy analyst and lobbyist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and as a biologist and park ranger at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Recreation Area.

1. Department of Employment & Economic Development, Brad Brzezinski, Northeast Business Development Representative