

*US EPA Region 5
Environmental Finance Center
for Water Infrastructure*



FUNDING RESOURCES REPORT FOR DRINKING WATER INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

PREPARED FOR THE CITY OF SAULT STE. MARIE,
MICHIGAN

October 15, 2024



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Delta Institute (Delta) has developed this funding resources report in response to a technical assistance request from the City of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan (the City). The City has sought assistance with identifying funding for several projects that address aging water mains, which present reliability and capacity issues for the City. The City's drinking water distribution system serves the entire City, facilities of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians (Sault Tribe) within the City, Lake Superior State University, and a portion of Soo Township.

The City has received preliminary approval from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy for a Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) loan with partial principal forgiveness for fiscal year (FY) 2025. That DWSRF funding is intended for several aging water main projects, as well as lead service line replacements and raw water intake improvements. As a result, Delta focused on funding resources to supplement the anticipated FY2025 DWSRF loan and to consider for projects in FY2026 and later.

Delta identified several web-based portals the City can use to track water infrastructure funding opportunities in Michigan. These portals include the [Michigan Water Navigator](#), [MI Funding Hub](#), [Water Program Portal](#), [EGLE Grants System \(EGX\)](#), and [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) Water Finance Clearinghouse](#). The MI Funding Hub, EGX, and EPA Water Finance Clearinghouse will likely contain the most comprehensive and applicable funding information.

Delta also identified several federal funding programs the City may consider:

- EPA's [Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act \(WIFIA\)](#) program provides loans with interest rates that are generally lower than most other financing sources, except for the DWSRF. Delta recommends the City consider WIFIA as a backup financing option to the DWSRF because WIFIA has a more flexible application timeline than the SRF programs
- The [Economic Development Administration \(EDA\) Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Programs \(PWEAA\)](#) provide grants for critical infrastructure that implements regional development strategies and advances regional development goals. Delta recommends the City consider this program in the future if the City has private sector partners with a demonstrated need for water infrastructure improvements – specifically needs that will expand workforce opportunities or economic impact.
- Although the City is not eligible to directly apply for EPA's [Drinking Water Infrastructure Grants Tribal Set-Aside Program](#) or the Department of Housing and Urban Development's [Indian Community Development Block Grants](#), these programs may be of interest to facilitate water infrastructure partnerships with the Sault Tribe.

Delta did not identify any open and relevant state funding programs that the City has not already applied for as the City has been proactive at applying for funds. For any grant applications that are not successfully funded in this round, Delta recommends setting up debriefing calls to receive feedback on the scoring breakdown to increase application chances in future submittals.

Delta hopes that this report can serve as a resource for the City to advance its drinking water projects towards implementation and enhance the reliability and resilience of the distribution system. Please do not hesitate to contact Delta for any future SRF or water infrastructure technical assistance needs.

About Delta Institute's Region 5 Environmental Finance Center

As one of the EPA Region 5 EFCs, Delta Institute is providing targeted technical assistance centered around funding for projects that achieve the goals of either the [Clean Water Act](#) or the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#). These projects focus on water infrastructure for local governments, states, Tribal governments, and non-governmental organizations. Delta and our partners are engaging with historically underserved communities that have struggled to access federal water infrastructure funding.

Over the next five years of EFC operations, we plan that more than **200 communities will benefit from our eligible clean water and drinking water finance technical assistance services**. We will provide technical assistance to 30 communities in 2024, and plan to scale in 2025-2028 to serve at least 50 communities per year.

Learn more at delta-institute.org/epa-region-5-water-infrastructure/.

Acknowledgements

This project was produced via cooperative agreement 4Q00E03341 with the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Delta Institute (Delta) has developed this funding resources report on behalf of the City of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan (the City). Delta hopes that this report may serve as a resource for the City to advance its critical drinking water distribution projects towards implementation in a fiscally sustainable manner.

Community and Water System Background

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is located in Chippewa County in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. With a population of 13,337 according to the 2020 census, the City is the second largest in the Upper Peninsula. Situated along the US-Canada border, the City is directly across the St. Mary’s River from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians (referred to as the Sault Tribe in this report) maintains its tribal headquarters in the City, and many tribal members live within the current City limits. The City is also home to the Soo Locks, which allow for ship traffic through the St. Mary’s River between Lake Superior and Lake Huron, and Lake Superior State University (LSSU).

The City owns and administers a water treatment and distribution system that serves the City, Sault Tribe facilities within the City, LSSU, and a portion of Soo Township. The raw water intake for the system is in the St. Mary’s River through which water flows from Lake Superior to Lake Huron, and the City treats raw water at the Water Treatment Facility at Sherman Park. The City also owns and administers a wastewater collection system and wastewater treatment plant (with an eight million gallons per day design capacity). A map of the City’s existing water distribution system is in Figure 1.

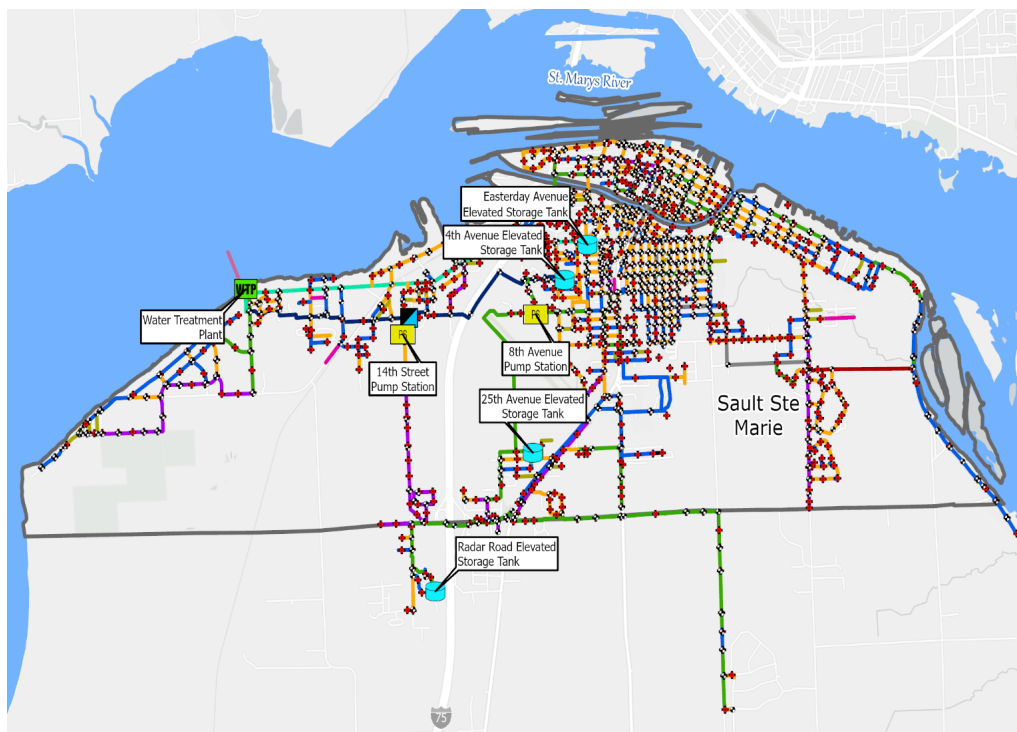


Figure 1: City of Sault Ste. Marie existing water distribution system (OHM Advisors, 2023).

Portions of the City have been designated as “disadvantaged” federally and at the state level. The federal [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#) (CEJST) has listed multiple census tracts in the City as “disadvantaged,” and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Social Vulnerability Index](#) for Chippewa County is 0.64, indicating a medium-to-high vulnerability for the County. The City also meets the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) “Overburdened Community” criteria. Although Delta does not believe a community should be wholly characterized by these metrics, the metrics are important to track for funding eligibility.

Technical Assistance Request

The City submitted a technical assistance request to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on December 12, 2023. EPA approved the request for Delta on January 5, 2024. In the technical assistance request, City staff noted that they have a few miles of aging water mains that are “creating limitations in the distribution system” serving the City. In particular, the City identified one water main “holding up a Sault Tribe development” due to lack of capacity and another water main that is “becoming burdensome to provide reliable water” to LSSU. The City sought assistance with identifying funding for projects that address aging water mains.

Through meetings with the City in February, April, and July, Delta further clarified the assistance we would provide to the City. Delta confirmed that the City wanted help finding additional funding sources, determining which funding programs to focus on, and identifying any funding portals or other tools to track opportunities. At the same time, Delta also learned that the City had been awarded or applied for funding through several state and federal programs, including the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF). Although EGLE has indicated that the City would be eligible for \$17 million of fiscal year (FY) 2025 DWSRF funding, the City has identified over \$140 million worth of needed infrastructure projects for the next several years. As a result, this report intends to supplement and complement the other funding and assistance the City has already received, or will be receiving.

Methodology

Delta performed two primary activities for this technical assistance request.

1. **Michigan DWSRF Application Review:** As part of the original scope of work, Delta had planned to review the City’s FY2024 DWSRF application and provide recommendations to improve the City’s priority score. Delta reviewed the FY2024 DWSRF application and the associated Project Priority List scoring sheet and compared the City’s FY2024 scoring sheet with [EGLE’s scoring criteria](#). Delta identified any categories that had zero points and assessed whether the City could reasonably take any actions to achieve more points in those categories.
2. **Funding Resources Investigation for Drinking Water Projects:** Delta reviewed websites and funding portals for federal, state, and private funding resources the City has not already pursued for drinking water projects. Delta also reached out to funding agencies for additional information. Based on conversations with the City, Delta focused on programs relevant for the water distribution system projects the City is planning to construct from 2025 through 2028.

MICHIGAN DWSRF APPLICATION REVIEW

In meetings with the City, Delta learned that the City had worked with OHM Advisors through the Michigan Municipal League to submit a DWSRF application in FY2024, but the City did not receive enough points to receive funding during that cycle. The City continued working with OHM Advisors to submit an application for the FY2025 DWSRF funding cycle. The FY2025 application included two modifications that helped improve the City's application score to 85 points. As a result, EGLE listed the City's FY2025 application as fundable in the Draft FY2025 Project Priority List released with the Draft Intended Use Plan (IUP) in September 2024.

The FY2025 DWSRF application included modifications to (1) document that the projects achieved the source water protection (Category I.E) criterion and (2) clarifying that the projects achieved the criterion for looping to eliminate dead-end water mains (Category III.A). Delta had also identified these categories as opportunities to improve the City's score.

Because the City has additional drinking water projects (e.g., the Ridge St, Pine St, and Ryan St water mains) in the queue for 2026 and beyond, Delta has two recommendations for future DWSRF applications.

1. **Consider whether the City has any plans or ongoing efforts for regionalization to support technical, managerial, or financial capacity.** This recommendation is based on Category I.B in EGLE's [current scoring criteria](#). Actions that might qualify include sharing financial resources among the City and other nearby public water supplies; providing meter reading, sampling, or other services for other public water supplies; and procuring materials as a consortium with other public water supplies. Qualifying for this criterion (Category I.B) would add five additional points.
2. **Check EGLE's DWSRF scoring criteria website for updates regarding how EGLE allocates points before assembling an application package.** EGLE often updates the agency's DWSRF scoring criteria for new funding cycles. Learning about new or modified scoring criteria as early as possible can help the City strategically bundle projects and draft application language that account for as many points as possible.

FUNDING RESOURCES FOR DRINKING WATER PROJECTS

Delta reviewed funding resources available to the City to supplement the anticipated FY2025 DWSRF loan and to consider for projects in FY2026 and later. The resources Delta investigated include strategies for tracking funding opportunities, federal funding programs, and state of Michigan programs. Delta has documented these strategies and programs in the following sections. Delta also investigated a few private funding resources but did not identify any programs applicable for the City's water infrastructure needs. Note that this section does not include a discussion of the DWSRF program because the City has significant experience navigating that program.

Strategies to Track Funding Opportunities

We identified five current web-based portals the City can use to track water infrastructure funding opportunities in Michigan. We have provided summaries of and links to each portal in the table below. The MI Funding Hub and EPA Water Finance Clearinghouse cover the most comprehensive breadth of funding opportunities, whereas the EGLE Grants System (EGX) may provide the most up-to-date information for state-administered funding opportunities. Note that EGX also serves as EGLE’s new grant application portal.

Table 1. Water Infrastructure Funding Tools and Portals

Tool Name	Types of Programs	Description and Funding Resources	Link
Michigan Waer Navigator	State and Federal	Database with summary information and links to select federal and state funding programs. The database is currently limited, with fewer than 20 programs. Offers a Helpdesk, where users can ask questions about funding opportunities and seek technical assistance.	MI Water Navigator
MI Funding Hub	State and Federal	Documents over 2,000 past, present, and future funding opportunities. Tool is not water- or environmental-specific, but it allows users to filter funding programs based on the type of project.	MI Funding Hub
Water Program Portal	Federal	Opportunities Dashboard summarizes federal funding from the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). The dashboard is helpful for reviewing federal opportunities but has limited functionality for checking status, deadlines, and notices of funding opportunity (NOFOs).	Water Program Portal
EGX	State	Provides tools and a consistent process to apply for EGLE-administered grants. Includes current information on grants issued by EGLE. Users need to create an account to access this resource.	EGX
EPA Water Finance Clearinghouse	State, Federal, and Private	Offers a searchable database of available funding resources and a database with other reports, webinars, and other resources on funding water	Water Finance Clearinghouse

Tool Name	Types of Programs	Description and Funding Resources	Link
		projects. Users can filter the funding database by sector, location, use, eligibility, and source.	

None of these funding portals contain an all-inclusive list of state and federal funding programs, so Delta recommends using several portals to track opportunities. The MI Funding Hub, EGX, and EPA Water Finance Clearinghouse may be most useful to identify new funding opportunities because these tools are the most comprehensive portals. Additionally, the MI Water Navigator Helpdesk can help the City connect with grant funding support.

Federal Funding Opportunities

Delta identified four different federal funding programs that may be of interest to the City for various reasons. The four funding programs are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Federal Funding Opportunities

Funding Program Name	Administrator	Funding Type	Link
Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA)	US EPA	Loan	WIFIA
Economic Development Administration (EDA) Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance (PWEAA)	US EDA	Grant	EDA PWEAA
Drinking Water Infrastructure Grants (DWIG) Tribal Set-Aside (TSA) Program	US EPA Region 5	Grant	DWIG TSA
Indian Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)	US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	Grant	Indian CDBG

Additional information about each program is provided in the subsections that follow the table. Each subsection includes a brief program description, eligibility information, the type and amount of funding available, relevant details about the application process, and a discussion of how the program might be relevant for the City’s drinking water infrastructure projects.

Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act

[WIFIA is a federal credit program](#) administered by US EPA that offers direct loans and loan guarantees to local governments for water infrastructure projects. Through WIFIA, EPA can offer credit assistance with extended payback timelines, and WIFIA interest rates are generally lower than most other financing sources, except for the DWSRF. Delta has summarized relevant WIFIA program details and offered some considerations for how the City might approach WIFIA for future projects in Table 3.

Delta recommends that the City treat WIFIA as a backup financing option to the DWSRF because WIFIA has a more flexible application timeline than the SRF programs. Because the City is listed in the Draft DWSRF IUP for FY2025, WIFIA is not the best financing option for FY2025 projects. However, WIFIA can supplement DWSRF financing and principal forgiveness if a DWSRF award does not cover the entire project cost for future applications. WIFIA can also provide financing if the City does not receive DWSRF funding in future years.

Table 3. WIFIA Program Details

Program Element	Program Details	Considerations for City
Eligible Applicants	Credit-worthy borrowers including local and Tribal governments.	City is likely an eligible borrower.
Eligible Projects	Funds water infrastructure projects that support clean and safe water access and helps communities address various challenges, including aging infrastructure.	Planned 2026-2028 drinking water projects are eligible.
Funding	Offers loans with fixed interest rates equal to or greater than the US Treasury rate (i.e., higher than SRF rates). Minimum project size for small communities (25,000 people or less) is \$5 million, but WIFIA allows bundling projects under one loan. Can fund up to 80% of eligible project costs. Total estimated project costs between \$250,000 and \$350,000 to reimburse EPA for credit assistance (only paid if invited to submit a full application).	None of the City's 2026-2028 drinking water projects cost enough individually to qualify. City would need to bundle at least three projects to pursue WIFIA.
Application Process	First step is to submit a Letter of Interest Form (LOI) to EPA (see also LOI Checklist). There is no cost to submit a LOI. LOIs are accepted by EPA on a rolling basis, but EPA releases a Notice of Funding Availability each year (i.e., WIFIA is competitive). EPA reviews the LOI for eligibility, creditworthiness, feasibility, and alignment with EPA's policy priorities. If EPA expects the project to reasonably proceed to loan closing, EPA invites the prospective borrower to submit a full application. Loan close timeline is four months or longer.	Although the LOI does not have a submission cost, the form requires significant documentation to be competitive.

Economic Development Administration Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Programs

[The PWEAA](#), administered by the US EDA, provides grants to design, engineer or construct critical infrastructure that implements regional development strategies and advances regional economic development goals. According to discussions with the City and EDA, the City has applied for PWEAA funding (i.e., for a dock project) in the past, and the City is familiar with the program. Although EDA confirmed that there is still funding available in [the current NOFO](#), the Eastern Upper Peninsula Regional Planning and Development (EUPRPD) Commission has advised the City that the current water main projects likely would not be competitive. Despite that feedback, PWEAA funding may still be applicable for future water projects, especially if the City has private sector partners with a demonstrated need for water infrastructure improvements.

Delta has summarized relevant PWEAA program details and offered some considerations for how the City might approach the program for future projects in Table 4.

Table 4. EDA PWEAA Program Details

Program Element	Program Details	Considerations for City
Eligible Applicants	Local governments are eligible. Must meet EDA “distress” criteria (unemployment rate, per capita income, or “Special Need,” as determined by EDA).	Per conversation with EDA, the City is an eligible applicant.
Eligible Projects	Projects must be consistent with at least one of EDA’s Investment Priorities (e.g., equity, recovery & resilience, workforce development, sustainable development) and with the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. While water infrastructure projects are eligible, applicants need to show that public infrastructure is an impediment to or necessary for private sector growth. The program primarily emphasizes projects that benefit manufacturing, industry, or other private sector investment that involves high-skilled labor.	The City is required to coordinate with EUPRPD. The City also needs to obtain written support from private sector partners when applying.
Funding	Provides grants (\$600,000 to \$5 million) for Public Works projects. EDA typically receives \$30 million annually for all six Region 5 states (i.e., funding is usually competitive). Funding distributed as reimbursements, so upfront cash flow is needed. Applicant must provide 20% - 50% match, depending on unemployment rate and per capita income. Federal grants cannot be used as match, but federal loans (e.g., DWSRF and WIFIA) are eligible as match.	For future fiscal years, the City might consider this program to offset DWSRF or WIFIA costs for water projects with an explicit private development connection.

Program Element	Program Details	Considerations for City
Application Process	EDA accepts applications on a rolling basis until a new NOFO is published or funds are expended. EDA recommends reaching out to the local Economic Development Representative to assess eligibility and competitiveness before developing an application. EDA preliminary review takes 30-45 days. EDA will inform the applicant whether an application merits further review. If approved for further review, the remaining review process typically lasts about 4 months until EDA makes an award. Environmental review may extend the process.	Please contact Lee Shirey, Economic Development Representative, at lshirey@eda.gov to discuss future projects.

Drinking Water Infrastructure Grants Tribal Set-Aside Program

EPA administers the [DWIG TSA](#), which offers grants to drinking water systems that serve Tribes. The DWIG TSA program may function to advance the partnership between the City and the Sault Tribe. Although the City provides drinking water to the Sault Tribe, the City is not eligible to apply for the DWIG TSA program. Only federally recognized Tribes may apply. If the City is considering a drinking water project that directly benefits the Sault Tribe, the City could encourage and work with the Sault Tribe to apply for the program.

Delta has summarized relevant DWIG TSA program details and offered some considerations for how the City might approach the program for future tribal partnerships in Table 5.

Table 5. DWIG TSA Program Details

Program Element	Program Details	Considerations for City
Eligible Applicants	Community water systems that serve a Tribal population are eligible to have projects funded, in whole or in part. Per the program guidelines: EDA has “authority to award grants directly to Tribes...” After the funds are awarded, the Tribe may provide “some or all the funds to a local government... or a non-Tribally owned water system that serves Tribal members” to conduct the project. A Tribe may not receive funds from both the DWIG-TSA and a state DWSRF for the same project.	The City cannot apply directly for this funding. The Sault Tribe would need to apply and distribute funding to the City. The Sault Tribe would be responsible for “proper management of the funds.”
Eligible Projects	Funds improvements to public water systems serving Tribes, focusing on facilitating compliance with National Primary Drinking Water Regulations improving access to drinking water. Projects include installation or replacement of transmission or	Elements of the Riverside Drive project necessary for the Sault Tribe Housing Expansion Project may have been suitable for this

Program Element	Program Details	Considerations for City
	distribution pipes and replacement of aging water system infrastructure. Funding may be used for construction, engineering reports, design, and project administration.	program. The program may be worth investigating for future projects with a direct benefit for the Sault Tribe.
Funding	Approximately \$2.8 million for EPA Region 5 for FY2024. FY2025 allocations have not been announced.	Funding for this program is limited, compared with other programs.
Application Process	EPA recommends contacting the Region 5 Tribal Drinking Water Coordinator for information on how to apply.	Please contact R5TribalPWS@epa.gov .

Indian Community Development Block Grants

HUD administers the [Indian CDBG program](#), which offers grants annually to develop “decent housing, a suitable living environment, and economic opportunities, primarily for low and moderate income persons.” In addition to housing and economic development projects, the program has historically funded “Community Facilities,” which include water infrastructure projects. Eligible applicants are “any Indian Tribe, band, group, or nation... which has established a relationship to the Federal government.” Unlike the DWIG TSA program, the program does not expressly state that funding can be transferred to an entity that is not a federally recognized Tribe. Given the City’s ownership and oversight of the water transmission infrastructure, this program will likely not apply to any of the City’s proposed projects. However, the City may consider sharing this program with the Sault Tribe as a resource if the Tribe is not already familiar with the program.

Inapplicable Federal Programs for Current Drinking Water Projects

Delta investigated other federal funding programs that we deemed were not applicable to any drinking water projects the City has planned for 2025-2028. Delta has briefly summarized these federal programs below.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA): Delta investigated whether there are any remaining unobligated ARPA funds and observed that there are no ARPA funding opportunities currently offered by EGLE that the City has not already applied for. However, Michigan still needs to obligate [a large portion of ARPA funding](#) by the end of 2024. The City should continue to check whether EGLE announces any new ARPA-related funding through the end of 2024.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC): The [FEMA BRIC program](#) funds projects that mitigate the risks from future disasters and natural hazards. Delta reviewed whether any of the City’s planned drinking water projects might be eligible, but the current suite projects do not align with the BRIC criteria.

These criteria focus on projects that address natural hazards, not aging infrastructure. Additionally, eligible projects must be consistent with a Local Mitigation Plan, and the [Chippewa County Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan](#) does not cover drinking water distribution system resilience. However, the City might consider the FEMA BRIC program for future hazard mitigation projects.

Get the Lead Out (GLO) Initiative: EPA administers the [GLO Initiative](#), which provides technical assistance for LSL inventories, community engagement planning, replacement planning, and DWSRF applications. The program does not provide funding support.

Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Grants: None of the current or recent [WIIN grants](#) are applicable for the City – either because the City is not eligible or funding for the programs have been expended.

State Funding Opportunities

Delta reviewed funding resources currently or recently available from the State of Michigan. Delta has briefly summarized these federal programs below.

EGLE Affordability and Planning Grant: The City submitted an application but did not receive funding for EGLE’s most recent funding cycle. The City should consider applying if EGLE releases another round of funding.

EGLE Community Technical, Managerial, and Financial (TMF) Support for Lead Line Replacement Grant: The City has already received funding through this program.

EGLE Michigan Environmental Justice Impact Grants: This program [funds different types of projects that positively impact residents in environmental justice communities](#). Local governments like the City are eligible to apply, and project types include Community Improvement Projects that improve public health, Pollution Monitoring, School and Childcare Indoor Air Quality, and Contamination or Blight Remediation and Redevelopment. The maximum grant award for the 2024 application cycle was \$500,000. That application cycle closed in July 2024, and EGLE has not indicated whether EGLE will release another round of funding, or related timeline(s).

EGLE Source Water Protection Grant: The City has applied for the latest funding cycle and was still awaiting EGLE’s decision when Delta completed this report.

MI State Housing Development Agency Community Development Block Grants: While some other states provide funding for water infrastructure projects through Community Development Block Grants, Michigan’s program almost entirely covers housing development, not infrastructure projects.

CONCLUSION

City staff have already set the City up for success by pursuing DWSRF, Clean Water SRF, and Michigan grant funding. In responding to the City's technical assistance request, Delta has sought to identify programs that supplement and complement the City's existing funding for FY2025 projects and planned projects in 2026-2028.

- Delta identified WIFIA as a backup financing option if the City does not receive sufficient DWSRF funding for water main and pressure district projects in future years.
- Additionally, the City may consider applying for grants through the EDA PWEAA program if the City can associate future water main projects with private sector needs.
- Lastly, the DWIG TSA and Indian CDBG programs are funding resources the City can share with the Sault Tribe to advance their partnership.

While none of these programs are appropriate for the City's FY2025 water infrastructure projects, they may be useful resources for financing projects in 2026-2028.

Delta hopes that this report can serve as a resource for the City to advance its drinking water projects towards implementation and enhance the reliability and resilience of the City's distribution system. Please do not hesitate to contact Delta for any future SRF or water infrastructure technical assistance needs.

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