

EPA pulls Gonzaga's climate grant aimed at protecting city's vulnerable

Leaders say cancellation could handicap efforts to save lives



COLIN MULVANY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW With temperatures well over 100 degrees, firefighter Sean Condon, left, and Lt. Gabe Mills, assigned to the Alternative Response Unit of Station 1, check on the welfare of a man in Mission Park in June 2021. Leaders of Gonzaga University and the city of Spokane are lobbying federal officials to rescind the cancellation of a nearly \$20 million grant that would have supported efforts to bolster the region's resiliency to extreme weather events inspired in part by the deadly heat wave of 2021.

BY NICK GIBSON THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Spokane's most vulnerable residents will no longer have assistance in preparing for the devastating effects of climate change, if the Trump administration follows through on its intent to rescind nearly \$20

million in federal funding.

Citing a change in “administration priorities,” the Environmental Protection Agency notified Gonzaga University on May 2 of the impending cancellation of a \$19.9 million grant devoted to climate resiliency in Spokane’s disadvantaged, low-income communities, according to a joint news release from the city of Spokane and the private Jesuit school decrying the move.

The Gonzaga Institute for Climate, Water, and the Environment was awarded the Community Change Grant last July as one of 21 climate change-related projects funded by the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. It was the university’s single largest grant award in Gonzaga’s nearly 140-year history, and school and city officials say it would have contributed greatly to the region’s adjustment to the ongoing climate crisis.

Hundreds of low-income homes were to be retrofitted with heat pumps and high-quality air filtration systems, five community centers and libraries were going to be bolstered to serve as extreme weather shelters, and several prospective workers were to be trained for jobs in clean energy – all as a result of the funding.

“It always feels hyperbolic to say people’s lives are at stake,” said institute director Brian G. Henning. “But it’s literally true right now.”

Fearing significant consequences to Spokane residents if the EPA follows through, leaders for the city and Gonzaga University are now calling on the agency to change course. They argue the Trump administration’s move lacks legal standing and jeopardizes the public health and safety of the region.

“We are concerned not only about the process by which this decision was made, but even more so about its very real consequences for the people we serve,” Gonzaga President Thayne McCulloh said in a statement. “Our mission is to educate and serve. This grant enables our community to learn how to deal with dangerous climate conditions and help the thousands of community members who lack the ability to protect themselves from the extreme heat and wildfire smoke that is all too common in the Inland Northwest today.”

The plea from the private-public coalition includes a call for federal legislators “to intervene for their constituents by urging immediate

reinstatement of the grant,” in addition to stressing its importance and requesting a formal explanation on the legal grounds of the decision – a request Congressman Michael Baumgartner indicated he would not be considering.

“I’ve not been briefed on the project and don’t know much about it, but with \$36 trillion in federal debt and a federal 20% budget deficit, some tough decisions need to be made about sending some spending decisions back to the local government level,” Baumgartner said.

“It could be that it’s a very good program, but just not one that a broke federal government can afford.”

While Baumgartner appeared to agree with the grant’s termination, Senator Patty Murray came to its defense in a heated budget discussion with Environmental Protection Agency administrator Lee Zelding at a Senate Appropriations Interior Subcommittee hearing Wednesday. In an exchange specifically about the cancellation of the grant to the Gonzaga Climate Institute, Murray pried for details and told Zelding he was “abandoning communities.”

“There was no explanation for that cancellation,” Murray said. “That is a community that saw 19 people die and over 300 people hospitalized during a heat wave a few short years ago, where wildfires are a constant threat. So let me ask you, is it woke to protect people from wildfires and heat stroke?”

“I don’t know if you’re going to get anyone in America to answer yes to the way you put that question out there,” Zeldin responded.

Zeldin did not offer a specific reason for the cancellation, as Murray continued to probe, only stating that “there are hundreds of grants,” and he would need the Spokane award in front of him to discuss details.

Spokane Mayor Lisa Brown said in a statement Friday the work to which the funding was devoted was already underway when the EPA sent their notice. She argued the goals and scope of the program, while receiving bipartisan support, are “not about politics,” but about people and “protecting neighbors and investing in a healthier, safer future for Spokane.”

“The decision to terminate this grant puts lives at risk and undermines locally led solutions to climate and public health challenges,” Brown said.

“Make no mistake, recent history shows just how critical this funding is to ensure the health, safety, and economic stability of so many Spokane families.”

More than 150 people statewide, including 20 Spokane County residents, died from heat-related causes during the record-breaking multiday heat wave that blanketed the Pacific Northwest in July 2021. The majority of local heat-wave deaths were elderly people who died in their homes, according to Spokane County Medical Examiner Dr. Veena Singh.

It was the deadliest weather event in state history and drives home exactly why the work covered by the grant was needed, Henning said. In the past 30 years, heat has killed more people nationally on average than tornadoes, floods or hurricanes, according to the National Weather Service.

“It’s only a matter of time before it happens again,” Henning said. “So we’ve been racing against the clock to try and do whatever we can to improve the resilience to the next such event, and these resources were going to make a big difference in helping to do that.”

Nearly 95% of the grant funding was devoted to tangible services and infrastructure improvements, like the establishment of extreme weather shelters and upgrades to qualifying houses, the release states. The Gonzaga Institute for Climate, Water, and the Environment was the lead recipient and pass-thru administrator for the funds, but the work was to be spread among several nonprofits and civic bodies, including Spokane Neighborhood Action Partners, the city of Spokane, Spokane Public Library and the Carl Maxey Center.

“It’s really a huge investment that will save lives and make a difference for those people who are most vulnerable,” Henning said. “As you can imagine, spending millions of dollars on infrastructure improvements has a lot of impact on jobs and the economy in an immediate way.”

Around \$2.6 million was going to be set aside into the “Community Climate Action Fund,” which is intended to be a resource for community organizations seeking funding to do climate-resilience work. The Gonzaga Climate Institute is encouraging groups to still apply by its May 31 deadline regardless of the uncertainty surrounding the fund’s future, citing a need for ideas and action to address the climate crisis.

The school is “actively recruiting additional funders who might be willing to

invest in work proposed through the Climate Fund,” according to a statement on the application portal.

“I understand why people would consider whether or not they want to apply for these funds, but I am strongly of the view that having good ideas that are well formulated, that are shovel ready, is worth everybody’s time,” Henning said. “Because we need these good ideas, and then we can find ways of funding it. We urgently need to do that, so we’ll find other means, over time, if necessary.”

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