Innovation Pilot Program Solicitation

This solicitation invites proposals for pilot projects that test new approaches to reducing the structural, financial, and operational barriers that limit the adoption of efficient electric equipment and contribute to energy waste in buildings across the Denver region. Funded pilots will generate practical, scalable insights that can inform and strengthen broader Power Ahead Colorado programs and those of our partner agencies.

Program Description

About Power Ahead Colorado

Power Ahead Colorado is an ambitious multi-year program led by the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) to improve air quality and community health by reducing climate pollution from the building sector, the largest contributor to the region's end-use climate pollution emissions. Together, efforts through Power Ahead Colorado aim to cut more than 148 million metric tons of carbon dioxide by 2050 and will support safer, more comfortable, and more climate-resilient buildings throughout the region.

> **Mission:** Power Ahead Colorado provides people and businesses with a trusted path to healthier, safer comfort, through expert advising and incentives for right-sized heat pump solutions.
>
> **Vision:** Powering better buildings, stronger communities, and quality jobs for Colorado's energy future.

About the Innovation Pilot Program

The Front Range is growing quickly, and many homes and buildings were built long before today's energy needs. At the same time, policies at the state and local level are increasing momentum toward electrification, and new heat pump technologies are proven to work well in the demanding Front Range climate.

Increasing momentum toward electrification creates opportunities to test new solutions, but also highlights persistent challenges. Contractors are stretched thin. Supply chains haven't caught up with demand. Local codes don't always align with resident needs or installation realities. And paying for new equipment or associated building repairs is out of reach for many. These barriers make it harder for people to upgrade their homes and businesses, even when the benefits are clear.

The Innovation Pilot Program funds community-driven solutions that help us learn how to reduce these barriers and scale the adoption of cleaner, more efficient technologies. Each pilot tests a targeted new approach to improving the customer and contractor experience, whether that's simplifying project delivery, expanding access, improving technical practices, or creating conditions that support wider adoption. What we learn from these efforts will help shape broader Power Ahead Colorado initiatives, from incentives and advising services, to community engagement and workforce development.

The goal is to surface practical approaches that work on the ground and can scale across Colorado- and beyond- helping communities move quickly toward healthier, resilient, and more efficient buildings.[1]

1 For more information on regional strategies to mitigate climate change, please see the 2025 Comprehensive Climate Action Plan https://www.drcog.org/sites/default/files/acc/EO-GF-CCAP-EN-ACC-25-11-18-V1.pdf

Funding Focus Areas and Project Eligibility

A rubric for how proposals will be evaluated is provided at the end of this solicitation.

Project Budget and Schedule

Funding levels will vary by program cycle and project type. The average grant award is expected to be approximately $200,000, and applicants may request up to $350,000 for particularly ambitious or complex pilots. Budgets will be evaluated on the strength of the project's anticipated impact relative to the proposed cost and the unique need for funding. Applicants are encouraged, but not required, to include matching funds, in-kind contributions, or other leveraged funding sources to strengthen their proposed budgets.

There are no categorical restrictions on allowable costs under the Innovation Pilot Program. Budgets should reflect the full cost of implementing the pilot. Eligible expenses may include equipment and materials in addition to other grant administration activities and incurred costs. They may also include end-of-pilot activities for dissemination of project learnings.

Pilots are expected to launch in Fall 2026 and run for approximately 12–16 months. Applications should propose a timeline that is appropriate for the scope of work and realistic within this expected launch window.

Eligible Applicants

Eligible lead applicants include registered for-profit businesses; registered nonprofit organizations (including IRS 501(c) entities); tribal governments or tribal entities; public or quasi-public entities (e.g., human services providers, municipal utilities or electric cooperatives, public authorities, or special districts); and educational institutions (e.g., training centers, public schools, school districts, colleges, universities, or trade schools). State agencies and city/county governments are not eligible as the lead applicant but may be included as subcontractors or partners.

Applicants may submit joint proposals when a partnership model would strengthen project delivery or expand community reach. In these cases, partnerships may be formalized through subcontracts or other established agreements and should be described in the application. Joint proposals must identify one entity as the lead applicant. That entity will enter into the grant agreement and be responsible for oversight and management of the pilot. Joint proposals are subject to the same funding terms described above.

In some cases, applicants may choose to submit separate but complementary proposals. Each proposal will be reviewed on its own merits. Applicants pursuing this approach should ensure that each proposal can be implemented independently if only one of the related proposals is selected for funding.

Successful applicants may be requested to provide documentation validating their organization's status prior to award, such as IRS 501(c) documentation, Colorado Secretary of State letter of good standing, and insurance documentation. Applicants must also certify that they are not suspended, debarred, or otherwise ineligible to receive federal funds. Selected pilots will be subject to the Program Terms and Conditions.

Eligible Pilot Locations

Pilots must occur within territories of DRCOG member governments at the time of award. A complete list of member governments can be found here.

Proposals for pilots located in communities facing higher environmental and economic burden, as defined by Colorado EnviroScreen 2.0, are highly encouraged, but not required. At least 40% of Innovation Pilot Program funds will be awarded to applications from organizations directly serving or based in these communities.

Pilots may focus on residential, multifamily, mixed-use, or commercial buildings. Projects serving small businesses, leased commercial spaces, community facilities, and other non-residential building types are encouraged where the proposed approach can reduce barriers to electrification and generate lessons that are transferable across the region.

Eligible Pilot Types

Any proposal that advances the use of efficient electric technologies in buildings, primarily through heat pump technologies, is eligible for consideration.

The Innovation Pilot Program will prioritize approaches that address persistent market barriers to electrification, particularly those for which no dedicated funding mechanism currently exists. The program primarily seeks scalable innovations in delivery models, technical practices, customer experience, affordability, and market infrastructure.

Field demonstrations of emerging or new-to-market technologies are also eligible when the technology is already commercially available or near-commercial, and when the pilot is structured to answer real-world adoption questions. Pilots may additionally focus on technical barriers or emissions impacts related to building electrification (for example, electrification readiness or refrigerant management practices). These efforts must still align with the program's core goal of accelerating electrification and advancing energy-efficient solutions in buildings.

Pilots must demonstrate a credible pathway to scale across the region. Projects focused solely on single-property retrofits or do not offer relevance across broader building types or market segments are ineligible for funding. Activities that remain in pre-commercial stages, such as basic research, prototype development, and laboratory-stage product R&D, are also not eligible for funding.

Solicitation Focus Areas

The Innovation Pilot Program invites proposals that can demonstrate practical early wins and generate actionable insights to inform the region's broader electrification efforts. Each track below outlines a prompt to guide proposal development, encouraging applicants to articulate what the pilot will test, why the approach is well-suited to the Front Range context, and what lessons may be transferable to future programs.

Track 1: Making Electrification Easier to Deliver

Innovation Challenge: How might we reduce the time, cost, complexity, and delivery barriers that make electrification difficult for residents, contractors, property owners, and businesses?

What success can look like:

- A simpler, more predictable experience for customers, contractors, and building owners
- Faster project completion or meaningful reductions in soft costs and administrative burden
- Better contractor participation, project quality, or confidence in sizing, selection, and installation

- Higher completion rates, including emergency replacement situations and harder-to-serve market segments
- A delivery model or tool that can be repeated across different communities, building types, and jurisdictions

Example approaches might include:

- New service models that make it easier to navigate local policies, incentives, permitting, and project sequencing
- Delivery models that support diverse business types or commercial buildings in completing electrification projects
- New tools, workflows, training, or quality assurance approaches that help contractors deliver high-quality installations and improve customer comfort
- Approaches that support residents or businesses with strategic early replacement, decarbonization planning, or during emergency replacement situations
- Quote comparison, project-scoping, or customer guidance tools that reduce confusion and improve decision-making

Track 2. Demand Flexibility and Technical Performance

Innovation Challenge: How might we test technical approaches that expand what is possible for building electrification?

What success can look like:

- Technical approaches that reduce peak demand, improve load flexibility, or avoid unnecessary infrastructure upgrades without reducing comfort or service
- Real-world evidence about the cost, performance, operability, maintenance implications, or replication potential of flexible or underutilized electrification technologies
- A clearer understanding of where emerging electrification approaches can work, what they require, and how they could be adopted more widely

Example approaches might include:

- Methods to combine efficient electrification with load reduction, load flexibility, controls, thermal storage, or other technical strategies to reduce peak impacts or avoid oversized upgrades
- Field demonstrations of commercially available or near-commercial technologies in occupied buildings that may expand electrification options in harder-to-serve buildings or constrained retrofit conditions
- Applied research related to emissions impacts associated with electrification technologies, such as improved refrigerant management practices or validation of low-global warming potential equipment
- Technical strategies that make electrification more feasible in existing buildings by addressing infrastructure needs, working within existing building conditions, or addressing key performance barriers

Track 3. Coordinated Deployment and Planning Strategies

Innovation Challenge: How might we identify the places, properties, or portfolios where electrification can move faster, cost less, or reach more people at once?

What success can look like:

- Clearer ways to identify and convert good candidates for near-term electrification
- Fewer handoffs and less piecemeal work across electrical, envelope, and related pre-electrification upgrades
- Practical, replicable approaches for community- or neighborhood-scale electrification

Example approaches might include:

- Zonal or block-level pilots that bundle or phase electrification and related improvements across homes, multifamily properties, building portfolios, or neighborhoods
- Community-scale technical assistance, planning, or implementation support models that reduce fragmentation and help local partners plan upgrade decisions across multiple units, homes, or buildings
- Models to target and sequence electrification, efficiency, and related upgrades to minimize local electric system impacts and support long-term rate affordability

Track 4. Expanding Access, Health, and Trusted Delivery

Innovation Challenge: How might we increase access to clean, healthy, and efficient buildings for all households – especially those facing financial or structural barriers?

What success can look like:

- Stronger interest and participation among groups or building types that are often left out of traditional programs, including renters, mobile/manufactured housing, or multilingual communities
- More practical pathways for households, tenants, landlords, or small businesses facing cost, credit, reimbursement, or split-incentive barriers
- Outreach and recruitment strategies that utilize trusted messengers, community-based partnerships, culturally relevant materials, or innovative educational approaches as an avenue to authentically engage with communities about electrification
- Clearer ways to incorporate non-energy benefits into program design and decision-making

Example approaches might include:

- Creating tools or case studies that help address barriers faced by renters, mobile/manufactured homeowners, or other tenants occupying leased spaces through shared incentives, decision tools, or trusted intermediaries
- Testing or developing financing and capital solutions that are more accessible for low-income or credit-restricted households
- Designing community-led models that improve participation, build trust, and reduce confusion in historically underserved populations
- Approaches and partnerships that use health, comfort, safety needs or other non-energy benefits as the entry point for project screening, outreach, or project design

Application Form Instructions

The application form will be available the Power Ahead Colorado website. Applications must be submitted online between April 17 and May 15, 2026. All required fields in the application form must be completed, and any optional supporting materials may be uploaded directly through the portal.

Before applying, we encourage you to review the Program Terms and Conditions. If you're unsure about your organization's eligibility or have questions about whether you can meet the requirements laid out there, please reach out to *info@innovation.poweraheadcolorado.org*. You may also contact us with any other questions that come up during the application period. All questions we receive will be answered directly and added to a publicly available Q&A document on the Power Ahead Colorado website. This document will be updated weekly so applicants have access to the most current information.

Applications and supporting materials submitted to the Innovation Pilot Program may be subject to the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA). CORA requires that most "public records" be available for inspection by any person. Under Colorado law, public records are broadly defined as writings, documents, or electronic files "made, maintained, or kept" by a state or local government entity for use in carrying out public functions or involving the receipt or expenditure of public funds. Because this grant program uses public funds and is administered through DRCOG and its contractors, many components of an application qualify as public records.

In practical terms, information such as project descriptions, budgets, and supporting documents may be released in response to a CORA request. Some information may be withheld or redacted if it falls under established exemptions, such as certain personal data or trade-secret information.

Applicants should avoid including highly sensitive or proprietary information unless it is essential for review, and clearly mark any information they believe qualifies for an exemption. DRCOG and VEIC will review and respond to CORA requests in accordance with state law but cannot guarantee that all information can be withheld.

Scoring and Approval Process

Once the application period closes, all proposals will be screened for eligibility and evaluated. VEIC, the Innovation Pilot Program vendor, will lead this process in consultation with DRCOG staff. Each proposal will be reviewed and scored independently by at least two evaluators with relevant expertise. After scoring, evaluators will meet to compare results, resolve major differences, and identify the proposals that best align with program goals. Scores may be adjusted at this stage.

Applicants whose proposals advance to the final round will be invited to take part in short interviews. These conversations give applicants a chance to present their idea and respond to key questions or areas that emerged during the review. VEIC will provide guidance materials in advance, including feedback and the evaluators' specific questions. Each interview will last approximately 20 minutes: about 15 minutes for the presentation, followed by 5 minutes of open Q&A.

After interviews conclude, VEIC and DRCOG will convene to select the proposals recommended for award. VEIC will present a formal funding recommendation that includes a list of proposed projects whose total requested amounts fall within the funds available to DRCOG. The recommendation must also outline the funding level for each project and identify which project phases are expected to begin in each funding year. In addition, it should include a ranked wait list of projects that cannot be fully funded at this time but could move forward if additional resources become available. VEIC, in consultation with DRCOG, may choose not to recommend certain proposals based on their evaluation scores, how they compare to similar submissions, or evolving program priorities.

These recommendations will then be presented to the Power Ahead Colorado Technical and Oversight Committees and the DRCOG Board of Directors for approval. If the Board does not approve a recommendation,

VEIC and DRCOG staff will work to determine whether adjustments could address the concern or whether the proposal is not feasible as submitted.

VEIC will notify all applicants of their status as decisions are made throughout the evaluation process.

Scoring Rubric

Each criterion in the table will be scored on a scale of 0-5. These will then be multiplied by the weighted percentage and totaled to create a weighted average score.

Category	Description	Scoring Weight
Project Scope and Problem Framing	Evaluates how clearly the applicant describes the problem, who is affected, and the conditions in which the issue appears today. Considers whether the project focuses on a meaningful barrier to electrification in residential, multifamily, or commercial building markets and aligns with the program's priorities.	**10%**
Innovation	Examines the extent to which the project introduces new or significantly improved approaches, tools, partnerships, or delivery models. Also considers whether the effort is likely to generate practical insights that could improve customer or contractor experience, inform future program design, or advance electrification across the region.	**20%**
Replicability and Scalability	Considers how well elements of the project could transfer or expand to other communities, markets, or contexts within the DRCOG region. Focuses on the potential for broader application beyond the initial pilot.	**30%**
Feasibility and Budget	Assesses whether the proposed activities are realistic within the grant period and supported by a clear, coherent plan. Evaluates the budget for clarity, appropriateness, alignment with activities, and overall ability to deliver the expected results.	**30%**
Qualifications	Reviews the applicant's experience and capacity to implement the work effectively. Takes into account the team's relevant technical skills, organizational strengths, and any prior work with the communities, partners, or technologies involved.	**15%**
Potential for Equitable Market Transformation	Considers how the project will have the potential to benefit populations historically underserved by clean-energy programs and the strength of the proposed approach to engaging those communities in a meaningful, thoughtful way.	**10%**

Post-Award Process

If additional funding becomes available (such as through project cancellations or the return of unused funds), wait-listed applicants will be contacted in rank order and offered the opportunity to accept funding. If an applicant declines (for example, because the available amount is insufficient or the project is already proceeding with other resources), the project will remain on the wait list unless the applicant requests removal.

The wait list applies only to the funding year in which it is created. Projects placed on the wait list do not automatically carry over or receive priority in future solicitation cycles; they will be re-evaluated under future criteria if, and only if, the proposal is resubmitted.

Award Notification

Following Board action, VEIC will issue award notifications to selected applicants. Each notification will outline the amount of funding awarded, next steps for the applicant organization, and the primary contacts at VEIC and DRCOG for ongoing coordination.

Innovation Pilot Program Contract

After Board approval, applicant organizations will enter into a contract with VEIC, the Power Ahead Colorado vendor administering the Innovation Pilot Program, in order to receive grant funding. Contracting will begin immediately. The scope submitted within the application will guide the scope included in the contract. All reimbursable activities (milestones) must be explicitly listed in the contract scope to qualify for reimbursement. Any changes during contract development will be reviewed under the conditions described in the Scope Change section.

Delays

VEIC will monitor and report progress toward milestone completion to DRCOG. If it becomes clear that a milestone will not be met (whether identified by the grant recipient or observed by VEIC), VEIC will work with the grant recipient and DRCOG staff to understand the cause. Regular engagement with VEIC project coordinators is intended to provide reasonable flexibility; delays are expected at times and do not, on their own, warrant termination. However, if delays pose a risk to achieving the project's objectives, VEIC will develop an action plan, enforceable by VEIC and reported to DRCOG. Failure to follow the action plan may result in early termination of the grant agreement.

Scope Changes

Projects are expected to be implemented, at minimum, according to the scope defined in the contract and drawn from the submitted application. Occasionally, grant recipients may request adjustments to scope elements while staying within the same budget. VEIC must approve these changes, in consultation with DRCOG staff. If the change is limited to adding reasonable and related activities within the existing budget, and the original scope can still be delivered, a formal contract modification may not be required, though VEIC and DRCOG review will still be necessary. If additional funding is needed due to cost increases or scope expansion, the grant recipient is responsible for securing funds from sources outside the Innovation Pilot Program.