Overview:
The City of La Crosse is committed to supporting community members, especially youth, in launching impactful climate action projects. Over the past two years, a key initiative in this endeavor has been the Youth Climate Action Fund (YCAF), funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies. YCAF empowered youth-led teams would receive $1,000-$5,000 microgrants to develop and implement innovative projects that align with the city's climate action plan. For the 2025 grant year cycle, the City partnered with the La Crosse Area Community Foundation and the Sustainability Institute to optimize fund distribution and increase youth and community outreach and engagement. This successful partnership resulted in 19 completed youth-led projects.

While the City did not receive Bloomberg funding for the YCAF program for 2026, the Sustainability Institute is looking to build on the momentum of past YCAF success. Combining what we learned about what works (and what doesn't) from the past two YCAF cycles with the structure of a previous multi-year program we led with local businesses (Mpower), the **Sustainability Institute is in the early stages of developing a cohort-based Climate Fellows program for local college students that culminates in one or more youth-led local climate-action projects.**

As currently conceptualized, the Climate Fellows pilot program would run from September 2026 – May 2027. We would seek up to 10 participants (total) from the three institutions of higher education in La Crosse. During monthly 2-hour meetings, the cohort would engage with local sustainability leaders and design and, as a cohort, implement one or two capstone climate action projects aligned to the City's climate action plan. Opportunities could exist for public engagement with the youth team via potential public listening sessions as the team refines its capstone project and at the annual Earth Fair. Participants who successfully complete the program (as measured through attendance and participation) would receive a $500 stipend for their time and effort.

Outcomes:
- Complete of 1-2 local climate mitigation or resilience projects, aligned with the city climate action plan
- Connect local youth to climate leaders and climate/sustainability-focused organizations
- Develop future climate action leaders who are aware of how they can contribute to climate work
- Strengthen student collaboration and project management skills

Funding request:
The Sustainability Institute is requesting $20,000 from the City of La Crosse Climate Action Plan Steering Committee funds to implement this program. These funds would help cover supplies, marketing, and administration of this program, costs for a community-based climate action project aligning with the City's climate action plan, and stipends for up to 10 participants. The Sustainability Institute is also pursuing funding from the La Crosse Area Community foundation mini-grant program (up to $7,500) and from the Wisconsin Climate Action Navigators network.