Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project   Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC), as the lead agency, and its partner Safe Routes Partnership are applying for a National Leadership Grant. This 18-month planning project will seek to establish the proof of concept for Safe Routes to Libraries, increasing the physical accessibility of public libraries across the country, and thus contributing to their capacity to support the literacy and health outcomes of all Americans. The total budget for the **Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project** of $149,584 is requested from IMLS and will address IMLS Goal 2 and NLG Goal 2, Objective 2.3.

The **Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project** will:
- Perform a national scan, building a comprehensive understanding of what work libraries are already doing to establish safe paths to their locations.
- Collect feedback from libraries on the Safe Routes program through listening sessions and surveying.
- Leverage existing national models for schools and parks to create a prototype Safe Routes to Libraries toolkit.
- Examine the feasibility of a full-scale Safe Routes to Libraries initiative.

Project Justification

Local government studies consistently express concern over challenges facing leaders in providing access and services to all members of their community due to transportation and physical barriers. These challenges exist at even higher levels in low-income communities and communities of color that have experienced redlining and historic disinvestment in infrastructure and public amenities. According to national statistics, 90% of high-income communities have sidewalks, compared to only 49% of low-income communities, leading to higher rates of pedestrians being struck and killed by cars. Safe travel to and from libraries affects the safety, equity, education access and overall health and well-being of children in low-income families.

Public libraries provide an extensive range of services in the United States and have long been considered an integral part of thriving, sustainable communities. According to the Pew Research Center, 95% of Americans believe that the materials and resources available at public libraries play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed, and 94% say that having a public library improves the quality of life in a community. The physical accessibility of public libraries is crucial, and yet very little national work has been done to eliminate barriers that may impede Americans' ability to get to and from these critical anchor institutions.

Many libraries have had great success in reaching communities without safe access to the library by providing programs and services beyond their brick-and-mortar structures. Outreach efforts have been monumental in helping communities thrive. However, access to the library's physical space would have a greater impact on members of the community, and would also contribute to reducing workforce demands put on librarians who leave to travel themselves (often without safe routes) out into the community.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends public libraries be connected to other everyday destinations via active, friendly and accessible routes, in order to provide their critical services, yet they often are not. In 2023, University of Chicago Professor Emily Talen used publicly accessible data to examine how walkable the catchment area around parks, libraries, schools and transit stops are in the 10 largest cities in America. Talen concluded that "white residents had the greatest access to libraries in all cases," and thus more proactive work is needed to ensure safe routes to these critical destinations for historically marginalized populations. The walkability of public libraries in the U.S. varies greatly and can especially be challenging in rural communities where distances are great.

The Safe Routes Model

The organization Safe Routes Partnership has a proven framework for increasing safe access to public services in urban, suburban and rural settings. The Partnership's 6 Es of Safe Routes to School summarizes the overarching approach:
- Engagement – listening to stakeholders and working with existing community organizations, and building intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.
- Equity – ensuring that Safe Routes to School initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities and others.
- Engineering – making physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods.
- Encouragement - generating enthusiasm through programs, activities and events.
- Education – providing knowledge about transportation options and teaching skills needed to walk, bike and take transit safely and reliably.
- Evaluation – making changes based on what is working and what is not, with a particular focus on supporting equitable outcomes.

Distilled, the Safe Routes to School model focuses on everyday people as agents of change, shifting community contexts, and engaging people in this improved community space. It is a virtuous cycle that builds trust between residents and local governments while improving outcomes related to safety, health and equity.

The Safe Routes Partnership has provided program support and content area expertise to Safe Routes to School programs in all 50 states for almost 20 years. A systematic review of studies shows that within five years, Safe Routes to School programs increase walking among students, reduce risks for traffic-related injury and are cost-effective. The CDC also identifies Safe Routes to School as a Health Impact in Five Years (HI-5) evidence-based intervention to increase youth physical activity. By combining physical infrastructure such as sidewalks, crosswalks and lights with education and encouragement programming to teach and motivate kids to walk and bicycle safely, these programs play a vital role in creating and sustaining access to educational programming and resources and building healthy, thriving communities. In addition, there is federal transportation funding available to communities in every state to improve where people walk, bike and roll through physical infrastructure and education and encouragement programming.

The Safe Routes framework is already proven to be scalable to other public resources beyond schools. Safe Routes to Parks is an established initiative of the Safe Routes Partnership and the National Recreation and Park Association to increase access to local parks. The initiative expanded the established Safe Routes model, fostering a larger Safe Routes community and providing local governments with evidence-based- and practice-based guidance on creating safe and equitable access to parks for all people.

The proven framework provides an opportunity to empower libraries to play an active role in reinvestment in public amenities, allowing youth to access their buildings and their staff for enjoyment, literacy and learning. Expansion of the Safe Routes framework for libraries will address IMLS NLG Goal 2, Objective 2.3, by supporting libraries to assess and leverage their local assets to improve the wellbeing of youth in their communities.

Existing Landscape

The partners are aware of some libraries already addressing the accessibility of physical pathways to their facilities, some in partnership with local Safe Routes initiatives and others independently. One example occurred in Madison, Wis., from 2014 and 2016, when Catherine Duarte of Madison Public Library (MPL) partnered with University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Carolina Sarmiento's community-based research class to examine barriers keeping nearby school-age kids from walking or biking to MPL's Pinney Library. According to the library's 2016 strategic plan, "library staff wanted to understand the infrastructural, social, and/or logistical barriers that keep them from independently accessing the library as a community resource or social space." Student input opened up an array of discussions and interventions for Pinney Library staff to collaborate with the community to build a neighborhood library and surrounding infrastructure that includes safe routes to the library.

This story unambiguously illustrates the power of new collaborative networks that involve public librarians working with others to increase the accessibility of their buildings. Unfortunately, in October 2016 Duarte left the library for a position in the City of Colorado Spring planning department, and with her departure the nascent, national conversation on safe routes to libraries also dissipated. This highlights the need for a planning project focused on exploring sustainable infrastructure for conversation and action.

Additional examples include:
- In rural Missouri, the East Carroll Parish Library partnered with Louisiana State University's AgriLife Extension and the Center for Planning Excellence for a walk audit of roads around the library.
- In Northwest Iowa, the Sheldon Public Library hosted a Bike Rodeo supported by Safe Routes to School Iowa.
- Seattle Public Library participated in a Seattle Department of Transportation-led initiative for a 1.2-mile path between the library and a local park.

The Opportunity

Safe Routes to Libraries is therefore not a new concept, but the planning project provides an opportunity to build a comprehensive understanding of the work being done nationally. Each of these existing projects has been executed independently and with its own methodology, leaving a gap in understanding of the national landscape. The establishment of the national picture will also provide an opportunity to explore proof of concept for a larger initiative and prepare prototype resources to amplify and support the work being done between libraries and their partners at the local and regional levels.

Beneficiaries

Under-resourced youth (aged in grades K-12) are the target group for this project. The targeted population will vary between communities that explore this model. However, research indicates that young people of color will be overrepresented among the targeted youth. Ultimately, under-resourced youth across the United States will be beneficiaries of Safe Routes to Libraries upon its national expansion, for which this project lays the groundwork.

Librarians and the library field will also benefit from the exploration of the Safe Routes to Libraries concept. Library accessibility is key to the fulfillment of library strategic goals and overall success, and a framework for assessing library physical accessibility will support librarians in achieving their desired impacts.

Project Work Plan

About Urban Libraries Council

ULC is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st century. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.

Leading this work will be Michelle Hamiel, Chief of Programs. Michelle is known and respected throughout public libraries for her leadership to diversify the profession, to serve marginalized communities and to increase racial and social equity. Prior to joining ULC, Michelle served as Prince George's County Memorial Library System's chief operating officer and led the mission, vision, innovation and operations of the library's 19 branches and the county detention center.

Joining her will be Shamichael Hallman, Director of Civic Health and Economic Opportunity, as the program lead, and Femi Adelkun, Director of Research and Data.
- Shamichael is a social, civic and tech innovator. As a 2023 Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, he explored how urban design and planning can make for socially inclusive cities. He has served as the Senior Library Manager with Memphis Public Libraries, guiding the reimagining

of the historic Cossitt Library. His 2020 TEDx talk, [Reimagining the Public Library to Reconnect the Community,](#) garnered international acclaim. In 2021, he co-founded Libraries as Bridges, which evaluates how libraries build social cohesion, promote civic renewal and advance the ideals of a healthy democracy.

- Femi has extensive experience in weaving together leading-edge spatial science and policy design for the purpose of helping places and locations serve their residents and users better. Femi has a demonstrated history of developing and managing Location Intelligence systems in the private sector, and in government administration and city management.

About Safe Routes Partnership

The Safe Routes Partnership is a nonprofit organization that improves the quality of life for kids and communities by promoting healthy living, safe infrastructure and physical activity, starting with bicycling and walking to school and beyond. They advance policy change; catalyze support with a network of more than 800 partner organizations, as well as schools, policymakers and grassroots supporters; and they share their deep expertise at national, state and local levels with those helping propel their mission. The Safe Routes Partnership works in the areas of Safe Routes to School, Safe Routes to Parks, active transportation, shared use and healthy communities.

Founded in 2005, the Safe Routes Partnership's mission is to advance safe walking and rolling to and from schools and in everyday life, improving the health and well-being of people of all races, income levels and abilities, and building healthy, thriving communities for everyone.

Project Collaboration

The **Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project** provides a unique opportunity to leverage the expertise of two leading institutions to test the Safe Routes to Libraries concept. The planning project work plan will integrate the strengths of both ULC and the Safe Routes Partnership into a cohesive work plan:
- ULC will be the lead on this project on components including library engagement, partnership development and grants administration. ULC will bring its experience with informal evaluation, collecting library field data, project management, and its brand as a thought leader in the library field. ULC will perform project management and facilitate communications with libraries.
- Safe Routes Partnership brings its extensive expertise in improving health and wellbeing through community walkability and accessibility, as well as its existing and tested framework for Safe Routes initiatives. Safe Routes Partnership will lead on content development, including the Safe Routes to Libraries prototype toolkit and listening session content.

In addition to the national partners, senior advisors on the project will contribute to its inclusivity, effectiveness, and evaluation:
- Dr. Noah Lenstra of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro will support the development of a landscape analysis and provide general project advising. Lenstra is a member of [Rural Libraries Promoting Walking,](#) a project funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research.

- The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) will advise on the translation of the Safe Routes to Libraries model to rural communities and facilitate the partners' access to their rural library membership.

Approach

The activities of the work plan fall into four major categories:
- National Scan
- Feedback Collection
- Prototype Development
- National Awareness

National Scan: The partners will take a comprehensive look at how public libraries can and already are interacting with Safe Routes.

National scan deliverables will include:
- A landscape analysis of work libraries are already doing to build safe pathways to their locations.
- A GIS analysis of library branches within two miles of K-12 public schools, which we see as foundational to providing support for libraries physically close enough to schools that walking and biking from school to library should be possible, easy, and safe. It will also assess library eligibility for existing Safe Routes to Schools funding.

Feedback Collection: The partners will perform an expansive process of engaging with libraries on the Safe Routes to Libraries concept and collecting their feedback.

This feedback process will include:
- Virtual listening sessions with ULC's large and urban library membership.
- An in-person listening session at the 2025 ARSL Annual Conference with ARSL's small and rural library membership.
- Virtual listening session(s) with experts from national organizations with critical perspectives, tentatively including ARSL, the Association of Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums and the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services.
- A survey distributed to both ULC and ARSL's memberships, to provide an asynchronous option for feedback provision. This will be critical especially to reach smaller library systems that have limited staff capacity and working hours.

The listening sessions will provide critical feedback from the library field and illuminate the feasibility of implementing a Safe Routes to Libraries Initiative. They will also help build an understanding of the needs of libraries in this work and therefore ways in which the existing Safe Routes model may need to be adapted.

Through the listening sessions, the partners will seek to understand:
- Potential barriers for libraries to getting started with Safe Routes to Libraries.

- The applicability of various Safe Routes to Schools practices in the library context, such as performing [walking audits] and partnership assessments.
- How libraries can build support for Safe Routes work among local policymakers and other stakeholders, especially considering the particular political positioning of libraries in different communities and local government structures.
- How public library staff at different levels can be most effectively engaged in Safe Routes to Libraries. (For example: What does the participation of a children's librarian look like? How does that differ from a library director? How does the size of the library influence the roles of different types of library staff?)
- Program sustainability in the library context.

The survey will collect additional library feedback and support the development of the national scan.

The survey will collect information from libraries on topics including:
- Existing library initiatives to support accessibility.
- Existing data collection strategies related to physical accessibility, including assessing current library methods and norms.
- Library interest and buy-in, especially at the library director level, to bring this program to communities and advocate for funding.

Lastly, the partners will build an internal repository of library-specific learnings, collected through the listening sessions and surveying, and analyze these findings.

Prototype Development: Using learnings from the feedback stage, the partners will develop a prototype toolkit. This resource will strive to provide libraries interested in implementing Safe Routes to Libraries program with recommendations and tools to get started. The toolkit will also support libraries in working authentically with their communities to plan and establish routes to make a potentially dangerous walk to the library safe. Lastly, it will empower libraries to build partnerships with established Safe Routes partners in schools and parks, rather than build from scratch.

The prototype toolkit will tentatively include:
- Findings from the national scan.
- A Safe Routes to Libraries framework.
- Recommended steps to getting started.
- Guidance on partnership development, stakeholder communication and program marketing.
- Guidance on and embedding equity and the voice of community members throughout the implementation process.
- Case studies highlighting exemplary library initiatives to date.
- Profile options for individual libraries to tailor the Safe Routes framework to their library, based on specific factors including size, resources and governmental structure.
- Recommendations for libraries to collect impact data, including draft pre- and post-surveys.

- Recommended funding sources, including highlighting access to existing Safe Routes to Schools funding for libraries within two miles of a K-12 school.

The toolkit produced during the planning project will be a prototype. The partners hope to refine and publish the toolkit online in a future implementation phase.

National Awareness: The partners will conclude the planning project by co-hosting a national webinar showcasing the project's learnings to date and beginning to build national interest in the Safe Routes to Libraries model. Webinar participation will be open to all U.S. and international libraries. The webinar will overview the importance of this work, successes, barriers and pitfalls, community impacts and why libraries should be involved.

The partners will also strive to share the work at national conferences including those of the American Libraries Association, Public Libraries Association, National League of Cities, National Association of Counties, Main Street America, National Bike Summit, National Association of City Transportation Officials and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Project Timeline
1. **Project Planning and Administration** (2 months)
   a. Build program plan
   b. Establish partnership agreements
2. **National Scan and Groundwork** (4 months)
   a. Design listening sessions and surveys
   b. Develop outreach strategy
   c. Perform landscape and GIS analyses
3. **Feedback Collection** (6 months)
   a. Host listening sessions
   b. Deploy survey
   c. Develop repository of library learnings
4. **Analysis and Prototype Toolkit** (4 months)
   a. Analyze library learnings
   b. Finalize prototype toolkit
5. **National Webinar and Awareness** (2 months)
   a. Co-host national webinar
   b. Apply to present sessions at ARSL, ALA and PLA (2026)

Diversity Plan

Diversity is embedded into this initiative in several ways. Communities that have experienced historical disinvestment continue to have the least safe access to local public libraries. The Safe Routes Partnership is committed to ensuring that these types of "initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students

of all genders, students with disabilities, and others." They understand that rural and low-income communities are disproportionately affected by the lack of safe routes in their communities and need to be the priority.

By piloting this initiative in communities facing economic and other challenges, equity is embedded into the framework rather than trying to fit a model developed in highly resourced communities into a context where communities face multifactorial challenges. Similarly, by surveying rural libraries and hosting a listening session at the ARSL conference, the prototype toolkit will be developed taking into account the transportation challenges and opportunities for rural communities from the beginning. The ULC team will ensure a connection with urban and rural libraries that serve racially and socioeconomically disinvested communities.

The Safe Routes Partnership's [Community Engagement Framework](#) outlines practices of diversity and equity in the existing Safe Routes model, which holds the potential to have long-term impacts on the diversity and engagement strategies of the library systems. This framework will be adapted to libraries as appropriate. As such, strategies featured in the prototype toolkit will highlight opportunities for libraries to connect with parents, children, school leaders, potential partners, local governments and other stakeholders during program implementation to ensure everyone has a voice and a seat at the table.

ULC has led race equity work in libraries for almost ten years. With more than 200 signators, ULC's [Statement on Race and Social Equity](#) resonates with library systems, addressing the systems and structures that prevent people and communities from reaching their full potential. In 2020, ULC developed an Antiracism Action Team that assisted libraries in helping leaders analyze data, set benchmarks and tell their stories about the systems and structures in place that prevented libraries from becoming antiracist organizations. At the same time, ULC established a Digital Equity Cohort to help libraries meet the digital literacy and access needs of the communities they serve.

Further, Michelle Hamiel, Chief of Programs at ULC, is responsible for the development, implementation and evaluation of all programs and initiatives within the organization. Since joining ULC in 2022, she has led all of ULC's race equity initiatives and worked to apply an equity lens to all of ULC's work. She is working to assist libraries as they meet the ever-changing roles and needs of the urban library ecosystem. With more than 38 years of library experience, an MLS and an Executive Certificate in Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion from Georgetown University, Michelle is committed to helping libraries increase their ability to center equity, diversity and inclusion in a way that helps disinvested communities thrive and families live safely. Michelle previously led the race equity work for the Maryland State Libraries and the Maryland Library Association, establishing Maryland's first affiliate of the Black Caucus of American Library Association (BCMLA).

Project Results

The project deliverables will lay the groundwork for Safe Routes to Libraries implementation. In the long term, libraries will be able to audit and improve walking and biking accessibility to their branches, leading to increased access to education, lifelong learning, and literacy. Eventually, the toolkit will assist advocates and

library systems through the process of assessing safe access to libraries, determining key stakeholders, engaging these stakeholders in critical conversations, beginning the initial phases of planning for improvements, collecting data through pre- and post-surveying and sustaining the work.

There are key elements that must happen to get buy-in, activate communities, organize partners, and get the local government involved. Safe Routes to School began charting the course for schools over 20 years ago and no two school communities are alike. The involvement of the Safe Routes Partnership will support the development of a toolkit that is broadly helpful, easily adaptable, and usable by any organization and community. For example, the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School Alliance Partner List includes nine public libraries, including the Mattapan Branch of Boston Public Library. Recommendations for individual libraries based on specific factors including size, resources, and governmental structure, will increase the opportunity to improve outcomes on a national scale.

This planning project will result in:
- Understanding of challenges and barriers to safely arriving at libraries, particularly among K-12 youth.
- Recognition of library-specific needs in adapting the traditional Safe Routes model to be effective and useful for libraries.
- Understanding of library field interest and buy-in to a larger Safe Routes to Libraries initiative, especially at the decision-making level.
- Proof of concept for an established and sustainable Safe Routes to Libraries program.
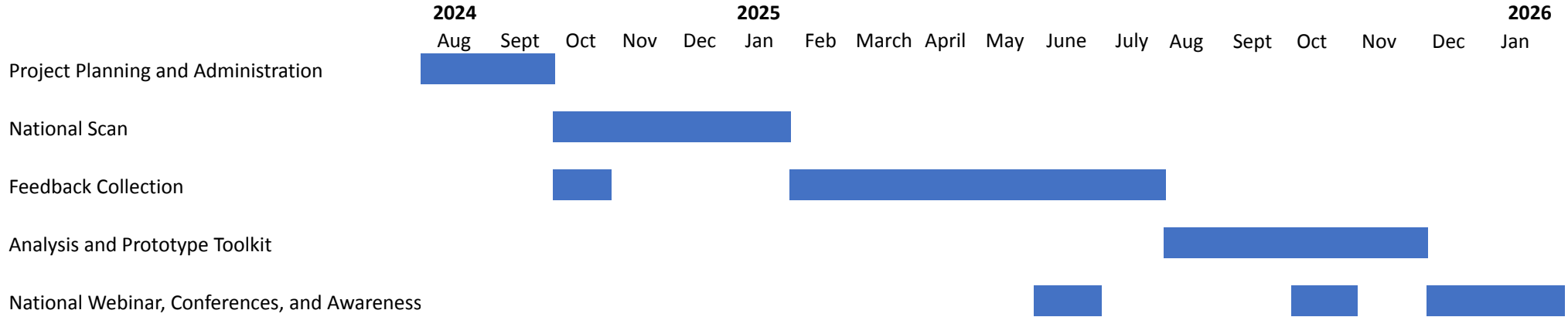
The benefits of the project will be sustained beyond the performance period. The recorded webinar will remain accessible online and the findings will continue to be shared with the library field. The partners also hope to engage in a subsequent implementation phase to finalize the prototype toolkit and engage in national scaling. This will increase access to library services for low-income youth, improve literacy and health in library communities, build community and trust between anchor institutions and members of the public, and create an opportunity for community members and partners to iterate on community-based solutions.

Sustainability

The partners envision a future for Safe Routes to Libraries with sustainability that mirrors that of existing Safe Routes programs. Safe Routes to School programs have had access to federal funding through three different federal transportation bills since 2005. Today, Safe Routes to School programs are eligible for a number of funding opportunities including the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) discretionary grant program through which the U.S. Department of Transportation has made funding available for each state, local government and tribal community. The Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project will begin a groundswell to help libraries understand how to access these existing funds and programs.

Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project   **Urban Libraries Council**
Schedule of Completion

	2024					**2025**												**2026**
	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan

Project Planning and Administration

National Scan

Feedback Collection

Analysis and Prototype Toolkit

National Webinar, Conferences, and Awareness

Digital Products Plan

The following digital products will be made available by ULC as a result of the Safe Routes to Libraries Planning Project:

- **Webinar:** The partners will conclude the planning project by co-hosting a national webinar showcasing the project's learnings to date and beginning to build national interest in the Safe Routes to Libraries model. Webinar participation will be open to all U.S. and international libraries. The webinar will overview the importance of this work, successes, barriers and pitfalls, community impacts and why libraries should be involved.

The toolkit produced during the planning project will be a prototype. The partners hope to refine and publish the toolkit online in a future implementation phase.

Availability

In addition to opening webinar registration to all U.S. and international libraries, ULC will make the webinar recording available to the public and libraries on its website without charge.

Access

ULC will copyright any work that is subject to copyright and that was developed under an award or for which ownership was purchased.

However, ULC will grant IMLS, for Federal Government purposes, a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable right to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use the work and authorize others to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use the work.

Terms and conditions will be linked to from the copyright statement which will appear at the bottom of the tools, publications and resources and will include the creative commons license: Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International.

Sustainability

ULC is committed to sustaining the resources and their online availability for the foreseeable future after the grant period, including the use of organizational funding to maintain relevant web pages as necessary.