



≡ GOVERNMENT

# THE 2022 GOLDEN TURKEY AWARD

American Experiment's annual award highlights the state's wasteful spending of taxpayers' money.

By Bill Walsh

**The Golden Turkey Award is a light-hearted contest to bring attention to the various budget projects funded by taxpayers that go beyond the usual education, welfare, or transportation spending, and allow Minnesotans to weigh in on the silliest spending of the year.** Past winners include Gov. Tim Walz's \$6.9 million unused morgue, an extravagant rest stop on Highway 35 and an expensive bus stop that sits empty.

This year's Golden Turkey was too big to ignore, recognizing waste and fraud that begins at \$250 million and will likely end up closer to a billion dollars when the dust finally settles.

Of course we're talking about the pandemic-related free food program we dubbed Feeding Our Fraud. "It's easy to see how the Feeding Our Future fraud program won this year's Golden Turkey with the sheer size of the fraud, with at least \$250 million stolen from the taxpayers," says John Hinderaker, president of Center of the American Experiment. "While most nominees for this award are merely silly or wasteful, this program was actually criminal."

Indictments related to the program have identified \$250 million in fraud, a number to grow as the FBI and U.S. Attorney continue their investigation. One thing that won't need investigating (or a recount) is the final vote tally for this year's award, with Feeding Our Fraud winning almost 80 percent of the online vote. Almost 3,000 Minnesotans participated in this year's contest.

## The Winner Feeding Our Fraud

As the pandemic caused uncertainty throughout the nation, politicians in Washington, D.C. reverted to doing what they do best: spending taxpayers' money. They passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020, sending billions to the states to feed presumed hungry children who found themselves locked out of America's schools. The plan was to use the current federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to distribute meals through feeding sites across the state.

Most of the sites were schools and childcare centers already enrolled in the program. But due to COVID-19, more sites were needed to distribute meals to needy children. The Minnesota Department of Education was the agency in charge of distributing the money to schools and non-profits who would in turn fund meal distribution sites.

All the pieces were put in place for bad actors to swoop in and take advantage of the generosity of American taxpayers to help those in need:

- Big money from Washington to Minnesota to respond to a crisis.
- Bureaucrats at the Minnesota Department of Education blindly approving contracts from their work-from-home bunkers.
- Non-profits springing up overnight to act as intermediaries between the state agency and food distribution sites.

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Everyone knows what happened next.

Fraudsters at non-profits like Feeding Our Future and Partners In Nutrition used computer programs to generate fake children's names and enroll them in the free meal program. Sites were allegedly run out of small offices claiming to feed thousands of meals a day. Bureaucrats at MDE ignored their duty to oversee the program and failed to make routine site visits that would have exposed the fraud immediately. Millions of dollars were stolen before the FBI finally stepped in and shut it down in January 2022.

But not before the fraudsters bought luxury cars, boats, houses, and overseas trips. Even worse, much of the stolen money left the county

and will never be recovered.

The Minnesota Department of Education wins this year's Golden Turkey award for their lax oversight of the Summer Food Service Program. They allowed hundreds of millions of dollars to be stolen, making *us* the turkeys.



The other nominees for the 2022 Golden Turkey Award include:

## Runner Up

### \$1.3 million to pay kids to go outside

How bad has it gotten in Minnesota when we need a state program to pay kids to go outside and play? That's the purpose behind the Department of Natural Resources' No Child Left Inside program, which awarded \$1.3 million to 153 organizations in 2022. Nominations are currently open for another round of grants in 2023.

This program is another sad example of Minnesotans ceding responsibility to government. Playing outside used to be handled by families. In fact, most kids used to play outside voluntarily.

The grant program was inspired by Gov. Tim Walz's Children's Cabinet and its Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights which states that "each and every Minnesota child is entitled to experience outdoor recreational activities and discover the natural environment regardless of where they live, learn, or play." One of the 15 enumerated rights is the right to "explore and play outdoors in a safe, welcoming, and culturally affirming place." Is the backyard a culturally affirming place? Asking for a taxpayer friend.

Many of the 153 grants went to school districts for outdoor programming they were probably already providing to students. Ice fishing was a popular activity for grant makers, with \$45,000 going to the Big Fish and Fry High School Ice Fishing League, and \$6,000 going to White Bear Lake schools for their Ice Fishing Club Field Day, where presumably some kids walked to White Bear Lake and went ice fishing, obviously something that could not have happened without state government funding.

Grants were also given for environmental education since children have the right to "protect and preserve our environment for future generations." St. Raphael Catholic School in Springfield received \$2,548 for environmental field trips.

All jokes aside, the next time a governor or legislator tells you we can't cut taxes, schools are underfunded, or people are suffering from a lack of proper health care, show them this article. Clearly, we have money to burn if there is a state grant program to encourage children to play outside. That's why the No Child Left Inside program of the Minnesota DNR was nominated for a Golden Turkey.

## Third Place

### Self-love, strippers, and dancing in the dark — state arts grants

To protect everyone from the COVID virus, the Minnesota state government shut down all the bars, restaurants, and theaters, putting already starving artists

**\$1.3 million** RUNNER UP



**\$3.1 million** THIRD PLACE

out of work. But have no fear: the Creative Support for Individuals grant fund was created to hand out \$6,000 grants to help "Minnesota artists and culture bearers sustain their practice and stay relevant and connected to audiences." You know, the audiences that disappeared when the very same state government shut everything down.

When we say, "handed out grants," we mean it. The Arts Board distributed \$3.1 million to 525 grantees.

Some of the grants went to woke artists happy to take taxpayer money to push their activist agenda. Like Monica Sheets of Minneapolis, who produced issue three of *The GRIND*, a "full-color, printed zine in which current and former erotic dancers present writing and art about the current conditions of and utopian visions for stripping in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest region." Or Atlas O. Phoenix, also of Minneapolis, who gathered footage for his documentary *Beautiful Boi*, a "Black/multiracial, disabled, transmasculine journey to self-love."

Some grants went to people doing things that can only be described as weird. Like Morgan Thorson of Minneapolis, who researched with local dance artists "the gifts of really dark night through outdoor night dancing." Or Gabriel B. Rodreck of Minneapolis, who researched and experimented with a method of dance that

involves "getting dancers out of the wheelchair and onto the floor." Other grants were given to artists like Dave Sandersfeld of North Mankato, who received a grant to purchase recording equipment to allow him to "explore his musical ideas at home and in a cost-effective way."

Zachary S. Ploeger of Pipestone got \$6,000 to "create content to engage with Minnesota audiences in a virtual format." Wait a minute — that's exactly what we do at Golden Turkey! We should have applied for a grant.

Again, these grants are made possible by the Legacy Amendment to the State Constitution, which dedicates a portion of sales taxes to pay for Arts and Cultural Heritage programming. The amendment expires in 2034 and programs like these are a strong reason to let it expire.

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The projects we listed are just a few examples of the money given to “artists” during COVID to sustain them through the shutdowns. The full list will make you mad. It made us mad enough to nominate the State Arts Board for a Golden Turkey award for their Creative Support for Individuals Grant Program.

### Fourth Place \$19,700 to promote outrageous home remedies for COVID-19

Forget about ventilators, masks, test kits and vaccines. During the height of the pandemic, Walz’s Department of Health spent \$19,700 on the real solution to COVID-19: sauerkraut. A grant awarded to the Lower Phalen Creek Project directed it to produce a video about COVID titled *Traditional Ways of Health and Wellness: How to stay healthy during Covid-19 and beyond*. The grant also funded “wellness bundles” full of herbal teas, dried sage, dried sweetgrass, and immunity supporting lozenges.

The first speaker in the two-hour taxpayer supported video advised Minnesotans to eat homemade sauerkraut to build up the lining of the gut because gut health is tied to immunity. It also promoted fire cider as a “huge immunity booster” that provided “a lot of respiratory support” for COVID patients. According to the grant agreement, the combined reach of the video was supposed to be 5,000 Minnesotans. The video currently has 17 views on YouTube, one of them from the Golden Turkey Committee.

The grant also funded the creation and distribution of 500 wellness bundles with included instructions on how to use the contents to repel COVID. The grant agreement also required the distribution of more conventional COVID information about vaccines, testing, case interviews, and contact tracing.

The Department of Health was nominated for a Golden Turkey for calling out COVID “misinformation” while simultaneously promoting sauerkraut and sage home remedies with taxpayer money.

### Southwest Light Rail boondoggle receives Golden Turkey Lifetime Achievement Award

From the beginning, the Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT) budget was eye-popping: \$1.25 billion for 15.8 miles of track connecting Eden Prairie to downtown Minneapolis. The line was supposed to open in 2018. As of this writing, the project cost

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has ballooned to at least \$2.74 billion and is set to open in 2027, almost 10 years behind schedule.

It’s a boondoggle project sponsored by government and it deals with transportation, a category that has dominated Golden Turkey nominations and eventual winners. Because this boondoggle has been with us for so long and doesn’t appear to be going away any time soon, the SWLRT project and the Metropolitan Council were granted the first ever Lifetime Achievement Award. In other words, it’s going straight to the Hall of Fame.

### Beginning of a boondoggle

As with all transit boondoggles, SWLRT began with a relatively small appropriation from the legislature to “study” routes and possibilities. In 2014, the Minnesota Legislature granted \$37 million to the Met Council to hire staff, open an office, and start planning. Once that happens, the inertia to build is almost unstoppable, with the Rush Line in Ramsey County being one notable exception. “We’ve spent this much, we can’t turn back now” becomes the rallying cry of bureaucrats and urban planners everywhere.

The first big problem for SLWRT was the railroads. Planners wanted to move the freight tracks owned and operated by the railroads. The railroads refused, causing the project to share the corridor with freight trains, setting up a difficult engineering problem between Cedar Lake and Lake of the Isles.

### You can’t change the laws of physics

There was not enough room for freight trains and commuter rail, so the geniuses at the Met Council said, “Let’s build a tunnel!” Construction of a half-mile underground tunnel through a very narrow corridor would increase the cost, delay the opening date, and test the laws of physics. It also caused cracks to appear in a nearby condominium tower, surprising no one.

This was the moment in time that planners could have and should have stopped. The original route wouldn’t work. The tunnel was too expensive and risky. The project should have been shelved.

But of course, that didn’t happen and in October 2013 the Met Council switched gears and began promoting their “colocation” plan for SWLRT that required the tunnel.

As the project costs continue to expand and lags painfully behind schedule, the Met Council is *still* \$500 million underfunded, and Chair Charlie Zelle told reporters he would announce “soon” where that money would come from. Zelle’s timeline of “soon” meant after the 2022 election and most suspect he plans to raid other programs and budgets at the Met Council to pay for the SWLRT overages.

With no end in sight and no turning back, the Southwest Light Rail Transit boondoggle of all boondoggles becomes the first ever Golden Turkey Lifetime Achievement Award winner. ★