



The Florida Senate

Local Funding Initiative Request

Fiscal Year 2026-2027

LFIR # 2017

1. Project Title

2. Senate Sponsor

3. Date of Request

4. Project/Program Description

Els for Autism broke ground on a specialized sensory friendly recreation complex on The Els Center of Excellence campus that will include an aquatics center, splash pad, and gymnasium. The aquatic center is greatly needed to teach specialized water safety and swimming skills for drowning prevention with drowning being the number one cause of death for young children with autism and Florida leading the country in the number of deaths by drowning. The gymnasium will reduce barriers to participation in sports and fitness that include high temperatures leading to overheating, sensitivity to inclement weather. The requested funding will provide continued support for construction. The complex will include an aquatic center with swimming lanes, grated entrance, wheelchair access, aqua therapy area, pavilion and splashpad, alongside an indoor gymnasium with teaching kitchen and multi-purpose dining area, basketball court, yoga and fitness room, and sensory escape spaces.

5. State Agency to receive requested funds

State Agency contacted?

6. Amount of the Nonrecurring Request for Fiscal Year 2026-2027

Type of Funding	Amount
Operating	0
Fixed Capital Outlay	3,000,000
Total State Funds Requested	3,000,000

7. Total Project Cost for Fiscal Year 2026-2027 (including matching funds available for this project)

Type of Funding	Amount	Percentage
Total State Funds Requested (from question #6)	3,000,000	17%
Matching Funds		
Federal	0	0%
State (excluding the amount of this request)	4,400,000	24%
Local	0	0%
Other	10,679,597	59%
Total Project Costs for Fiscal Year 2026-2027	18,079,597	100%

8. Has this project previously received state funding?

If yes, provide the most recent instance:

Fiscal Year (YYYY-YY)	Amount		Specific Appropriation #	Vetoed
	Recurring	Nonrecurring		
2025-26	0	2,500,000	243B	No

9. Is future-year funding likely to be requested?

a. If yes, indicate nonrecurring amount per year.

b. Describe the source of funding that can be used in lieu of state funding.



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Complete questions 10 and 11 for Fixed Capital Outlay Projects

10. Status of Construction

a. What is the current phase of the project?

☐ Planning ☐ Design ☒ Construction ☐ N/A

b. Is the project "shovel ready" (i.e permitted)?

Yes

c. What is the estimated start date of construction?

10/30/2025

d. What is the estimated completion date of construction?

01/30/2027

e. What funding stream will be used for ongoing operations and maintenance of the project?

individual donations, corporate partners, grants, program fees, and registration fees and donations from fundraising events.

11. List the owners of the facility to receive, directly or indirectly, any fixed capital outlay funding. Include the relationship between the owners of the facility and the entity.

Els for Autism Foundation a 501c3. It is run by the Board of Directors and Executive Director. The co- founders are Ernie and Liezl Els, and Marvin Shanken.

12. Details on how the requested state funds will be expended

Spending Category	Description	Amount
Administrative Costs:		
Executive Director/Project Head Salary and Benefits		0
Other Salary and Benefits		0
Expense/Equipment/Travel/Supplies/Other		0
Consultants/Contracted Services/Study		0
Operational Costs		
Salary and Benefits		0
Expense/Equipment/Travel/Supplies/Other		0
Consultants/Contracted Services/Study		0
Fixed Capital Construction/Major Renovation:		
Construction/Renovation/Land/Planning Engineering	Continued construction activities including permits, continued engagement of general contractor, pool contractor, engineers, and vendors for construction to continue, all building materials, landscaping, and fixed equipment, furnishings, and fixtures.	3,000,000
Total State Funds Requested (must equal total from question #6)		3,000,000

13. Program Performance

a. What specific purpose or goal will be achieved by the funds requested?



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The requested funding would support the construction of a purpose built recreation complex, custom designed to meet the needs of individuals with autism spectrum disorder and other disabilities of all ages. The complex would include an aquatic center with swimming lanes, grated entrance, wheel chair access, aqua therapy/teaching area splash pad, and pavilion; along side an indoor gymnasium with multipurpose dining, teaching kitchen, fitness and yoga rooms, basketball court, and sensory escape spaces.

b. What activities and services will be provided to meet the intended purpose of these funds?

Continued construction activities including permits, continued engagement of general contractor, pool contractor, engineers, and vendors for construction to continue, all building materials, landscaping, and fixed equipment, furnishings, and fixtures.

c. What direct services will be provided to citizens by the appropriation project?

Specialized swim and water safety instruction, therapeutic aquatic interventions, indoor cool/shaded sports & fitness activities, vocational teaching kitchen & multipurpose dining hall. Instruction in specialized sports curricula for parents, teachers, and coaches. Networking & support for families of individuals participating in rec programs on campus. Reduce barriers to participation in sports and fitness including high temperatures leading to overheating, sensitivity to inclement weather with fears of thunder & sensitivity to being in the rain. On any given day, we have over 300 people with autism on our campus. They know this space and they count on being in this space where they feel safe.

d. Who is the target population served by this project? How many individuals are expected to be served?

Individuals of all ages with special needs, specifically autism and related disabilities, their families, and the surrounding community. The campus serves over 300 people with autism each day in addition to thousands served through telehealth services, virtual programs, spring and summer camps, and local/national/international education and outreach. The public charter school on our campus is expanding the number of students they serve and will access the recreation complex on a daily basis. Currently the school has ~180 students.

e. What is the expected benefit or outcome of this project? What is the methodology by which this outcome will be measured?

1. 80 % of participants in the Ernie Els #GameON Autism (R) Sports programs will improve sport, athletic, and social communication skills measured by pre/post tests.
2. Reduce stress and anxiety in an environment that is purpose built to meet the needs of individuals with autism and allowing them to be in an environment they are comfortable and familiar with. Staff will monitor the behaviors and anxiety levels, collecting data and using caregiver and participant surveys.
3. Reduce barriers to participation in sports and fitness for people with autism that have sensitivities to extreme weather. Collect data on the number of participants.
4. Reduce potential for drowning by providing specialized swim instruction and water safety in a custom designed pool with specialized curriculum. Collect data on the number of swim/water safety students and complete the design of a specialized aquatics curriculum.

f. What are the suggested penalties that the contracting agency may consider in addition to its standard penalties for failing to meet deliverables or performance measures provided for in the contract?

If deliverables are not met due solely to Els for Autism, we will forego a commensurate percent of funding and immediately implement an improvement plan with associated measurable results.
If deliverables are not met due to circumstances beyond the control of Els for Autism (extreme weather or construction supply issues causing delays), we will coordinate with the sponsoring Representative to negotiate acceptable terms for deliverables, timelines, an/or appropriations..

14. Is this project related to mitigation, response, or recovery from a natural disaster? ☐ No

a. If Yes, what phase best describes the project?

- ☐ Mitigation (reducing or eliminating potential loss of life or property)
- ☐ Response (addressing the immediate and short-term effects of a natural disaster)
- ☐ Recovery (assisting communities return to normal operations, including rebuilding damaged infrastructure)



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b. Name of the natural disaster (or Executive Order # for events not under a federal declaration):

15. Has the entity applied for or received federal assistance for this project?

- ☐ Yes, Applied
- ☐ Yes, Received
- ☐ No
- ☐ No, but intends to apply

a. If yes, provide the FEMA project worksheet ID#:

b. Provide the total project cost listed on the FEMA project worksheet:

16. Has the entity applied for or received state assistance for this project (other than this request)?

- ☐ Yes, Applied
- ☐ Yes, Received
- ☐ No
- ☐ No, but intends to apply

a. If yes, specify the program and state agency (ex. Local Government Emergency Bridge Loan, Department of Commerce):

17. Requester Contact Information

a. First Name Last Name

b. Organization

c. E-mail Address

d. Phone Number Ext.

18. Recipient Contact Information

a. Organization

b. Municipality and County

c. Organization Type

☐ For Profit Entity

☒ Non Profit 501(c)(3)



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- ☐ Non Profit 501(c)(4)
- ☐ Local Entity
- ☐ University or College
- ☐ Other (please specify)

d. First Name Last Name

e. E-mail Address

f. Phone Number Ext.

19. Lobbyist Contact Information

a. Name

b. Firm Name

c. E-mail Address

d. Phone Number

The information provided will be posted to the Florida Senate website for public viewing if sponsored by a Senator.