Council Agenda Item 26-0479R

MEETING DATE: June 15, 2026

SUBJECT/TITLE: Resolution Authorizing Acceptance of a Grant from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety for a Dedicated Auto Theft Investigator

SUBMITTED BY: Kerry Cronin-Jones

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL ACTION:

23-0563R – 2023-2026 Auto Theft Investigator grant
21-0356R – 2021-2023 Auto Theft Investigator grant
19-0522R – 2019-2021 Auto Theft Investigator grant
15-0399R – 2015-2017 Auto Theft Investigator grant
11-0583R – 2011-2013 Auto Theft Investigator grant

BACKGROUND:

The Duluth Police Department has participated in the Minnesota Auto Theft Prevention Program for more than 15 years. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Department did not apply for grant funding during the 2017–2019 cycle. During that period without a dedicated investigator, reported auto theft-related crimes increased significantly, rising from 150 incidents in 2016 to 232 incidents in 2017. This interruption demonstrated the value of maintaining a consistent, focused approach to auto theft prevention and investigation.

The Duluth Police Department serves approximately 87,986 residents, according to 2024 Census estimates, in addition to roughly 10,000 college students who are not included in census totals. The City also welcomes approximately 6.7 million visitors annually. Duluth's geography presents unique public safety challenges, spanning more than 27 miles in length and 5 miles in width. A substantial number of residents rely on on-street parking, and cold winter conditions frequently contribute to vehicle thefts involving unattended, idling vehicles.

The impact of a dedicated Auto Theft Investigator has been measurable. Vehicle theft incidents have declined each year since 2021, with 2025 reflecting the lowest number of vehicle thefts in more than a decade within the Department's service area. Over the past several years, the assigned investigator has supported these reductions through focused investigations, collaboration with regional partners, public education efforts, and timely follow-up with crime victims.

In addition to vehicle theft investigations, the Department has experienced increased incidents of vehicle prowls and catalytic converter thefts. These crimes are often interconnected and can create significant financial hardship for residents. A recent increase in catalytic converter thefts between January 2025 and February 2026 resulted in repair and replacement costs for victims of over $50,000 across the region. Through coordinated investigative efforts by DPD's dedicated investigator along with neighboring agencies, a suspect connected to numerous thefts was identified and arrested, and stolen property was recovered.

A significant percentage of vehicle thefts in Duluth are crimes of opportunity. Common contributing factors include vehicle prowls in which keys are left inside vehicles and unattended vehicles left running during cold weather. The dedicated Auto Theft Investigator position supports proactive prevention efforts, public awareness initiatives, coordination with investigators and prosecutors, and timely investigation of vehicle-related crimes that impact residents' safety and quality of life.

BUDGET/FISCAL IMPACT:

This reimbursement grant fully covers salary and fringe benefits associated with a dedicated Auto Theft Investigator position. Without acceptance of these grant funds, the position would be reassigned to general patrol duties, and auto theft investigations would be distributed among existing investigators, reducing proactive enforcement capacity and impacting investigative timeliness and victim support.

OPTIONS:

Approve:
The dedicated Auto Theft Investigator position will continue to be funded for an additional three-year period.

Do Not Approve:
The position will be reassigned to patrol operations, and investigations will be absorbed by remaining investigative staff, negatively impacting proactive enforcement efforts, case resolution timelines, and victim communication and support.

NECESSARY ACTION: Please approve.

ATTACHMENTS: 2026 Auto Theft Grant Contract Agreement