



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, September 10, 2024
6:00 PM

DRAFT MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jensen Christen at 7:05 p.m. The first hour of the time normally allotted to a Sustainability Commission meeting was spent observing and participating the Xcel Energy Partners in Energy workshop with the Columbia Heights Energy Action Team.

Members present: Commissioners Jensen Christen, Evenson, Finkelson, Groseth, Johnson, Kurek, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka

Staff present: Sulmaan Khan, Interim City Engineer
Andrew Boucher, City Planner
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist

Council Liaison: Connie Buesgens

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairperson Jensen Christen said the first item on the agenda was to review the minutes from the August Sustainability Commission meeting and asked for comments from the commissioners. Commissioner Finkelson commented that the August meeting minutes are sparse, and in his opinion not reflective of the conversation held. He continued to point out that he felt the minutes were vague and did not correctly characterize the objections of the commissioners to the City's timeline for the Complete Streets Policy. Finkelson also stated that the minutes incorrectly portrayed opinions of City staff as monolithic, and that responsible individuals were not being named. Engineer Khan said that more detail is possible in meeting minutes, but difficult with current resources. Khan was actively participating in the previous meeting while also taking minutes, which made capturing detail difficult. Planner Boucher apologized for taking sparse meeting minutes at the July meeting and suggested a possible middle ground with commissioners also taking meeting minutes and synthesizing them with staff minutes to make sure the meeting is captured from multiple perspectives. Commissioner Johnson stated that it is very difficult to participate actively in meetings while taking minutes. Commissioner Finkelson commented that meeting minutes were better with previous Administrative Assistant Chapman, who is now retired. Commissioner Finkelson re-iterated that he did not find the meetings minutes detailed enough or representative of what was said. Councilmember Buesgens asked why the Sustainability Commission does not have a dedicated staff member transcribing meeting minutes and pointed out that all other City commissions had staff fulfilling that function. Buesgens asked if the recent turnover and vacancy of the Administrative Assistant position at Public Works was the problem. Engineer Khan stated that the turnover and vacancy had been a problem, and that meeting minutes had primarily been taken by Khan and Planner Boucher in recent months. Khan stated that the position was now filled, but that the Administrative Assistant was not present at the current meeting. Khan and Boucher both stated that staff will take steps to improve meeting minutes and capture sufficient detail

to make the minutes useful. Commissioner Evenson brought up the possibility of using AI to transcribe meeting minutes from recordings. Commissioner Finkelson raised the possibility of publishing videos of meetings, including commission meetings and City Council Work Sessions, where he feels all real City business is conducted in a non-transparent manner. Councilmember Buesgens stated that she has an upcoming meeting with the City Manager to discuss publishing more videos of meetings and a potential City YouTube channel. Updates will be made to the August meeting minutes and brought forward at the October meeting of the Sustainability Commission for approval.

OLD BUSINESS

1. Sustainable Purchasing Policy Update

Commissioner LaPlante had no update on the Sustainable Purchasing Policy development for this meeting. Planner Boucher expressed desire to meet with LaPlante for further discussions on next steps in the policy development including accessing the City Amazon account and utilizing embedded tools for improving purchasing by City staff.

2. Complete Streets Policy Update

Commissioner Boucher and Engineer Khan provided an update on the Complete Streets Policy. Boucher and Khan met with Public Works Director/City Engineer Kevin Hansen to discuss the policy, the concerns from the commission, and creating a revised draft. A revised draft will be presented to the commission for review before the next meeting in October. Commissioner LaPlante asked if it is an edited version of the previous policy or whether the Complete Streets Policy had been included into larger planning elements. Planner Boucher said that it will be a combination of the previous policy with new context specific elements. Commissioner Kurek asked if the City of Columbia Heights had its own standard plates for curb cutouts or for green infrastructure elements and stated that these would be good things for the City to have. Khan responded that the City does have standard plates for certain engineering details, while for others like ADA accessibility cutouts the City would utilize MnDOT standard plates.

3. Information on SolSmart Program

Planner Boucher provided a description of the SolSmart program, and its potential role in the upcoming Comprehensive Plan cycle. Planner Boucher discussed his desire to include the Sustainability Commission in this future planning process. Planner Boucher asked commissioners to review the Solar Statement and provide him with any feedback or additional goals to put this forward the City Council at a future meeting.

4. Sustainable Collaborations Sub-Committee Update

Commissioner LaPlante and Chairperson Jensen Christen had no update this month for the subcommittee.

5. Invasive Species Sub-Committee Update

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka discussed a grant opportunity from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for noxious weed management. The subcommittee will be collaborating with Forester Genter to develop a project and apply for the grant to purchase some equipment for noxious weed control. Leoni-Helbacka also described plans to work with Commissioners Groseth and Evenson to

document the presence of invasive plants at City parks to better inform management efforts. Council Member Buesgens asked commission members to send their observations about other elements of City parks that need improvement to her. Commissioner Evenson expressed a desire to collaborate with the Parks and Recreation Commission on a list of wants and needs for City parks. There was general agreement that finding time for the full groups to meet was the main impediment, and that small groups might be a better option for collaboration.

NEW BUSINESS

6. Partners in Energy Workshop Discussion

Commissioner Evenson asked whether Partners in Energy staff had anything to say about parks buildings that are rarely open or used, and expressed desire to audit energy usage and continued need for aging and rarely used park buildings.

7. Round Robin

Commissioner LaPlante asked for any ideas for the next newsletter, potentially with a fall/winter focus. LaPlante also bought up e-bike rebates, smart salting practices, and other things to promote. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that the smart salting practices seemed like a good fit and timely.

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka asked for an update on the Adopt a Boulevard tree program, and if many volunteers are still needed. Forester Genter said that the City can always take more volunteers and provided an update on planting plans and efforts for fall 2024. Forester Genter was asked to provide a brief update on Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) in the City. EAB management is currently in the private property enforcement stage, with approximately 1/3 of the City already covered by staff and over 100 ash trees condemned and ordered removed. Councilmember Buesgens asked if the trees being condemned were on private property; Forester Genter said that they are, and that the vast majority are in very poor condition. Genter said that all remaining City-owned ash trees are being treated and that the vast majority are healthy; the small number of unhealthy treated ash trees are not infested by EAB but are suffering from drought and other environmental stressors. Commissioner Kurek asked if property owners had been informed of the presence of ash trees by the City. Forester Genter replied that all property owners with ash trees identified in a City-wide survey during the winter of 2022-2023 had received a letter informing them of the presence of ash trees on their property and describing the EAB threat. Letters did not require the removal of any trees, but strongly encouraged proactive management by property owners. Councilmember Buesgens asked how many properties and trees were identified in the survey. Forester Genter said that over 770 properties were identified with a total of 1,057 ash trees. Forester Genter said that about 100 of the identified ash trees were being treated by the owners when identified, and that since the letter was sent over half of the identified ash trees were removed by the property owners. Commissioner Kurek asked if any treated ash trees had been identified as infested with EAB and dying, and if residents in those cases had any recourse. Forester Genter stated that recourse would depend on whether the contractor had warranted the treatment; contractors will generally only provide a warranty if the tree is still in good condition at the time of treatment.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Evenson, seconded by Ahmadvand to adjourn the meeting at 7:36 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist