



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION
City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, January 13, 2026
6:00 PM

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jensen Christen at 6:00 p.m.

Members present: Commissioners Carlson, Evenson, Jensen Christen, Groseth, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka

Staff present: Mitchell Forney, Director of Community Development
Drew Chirpich, Stormwater Specialist
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist
Zekima Rashid, Green Corps Member

Members absent: Commissioners Johnson, Kurek, Small

Council Liaison: Rachel James

COMMUNITY FORUM

No community members were present.

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approve December 9, 2025 Regular Sustainability Commission Meeting Minutes

MOTION: Move to approve the Consent Agenda with corrections noted.

Motion to approve by Chairperson Jensen Christen, seconded by Commissioner Evenson. The motion was approved unanimously.

BUSINESS ITEMS

2. Introduction to New Stormwater Specialist, Drew Chirpich

The new member of the Engineering Department, Stormwater Specialist Drew Chirpich, introduced himself to the commission and provided a brief summary of his background experiences. Stormwater Specialist Chirpich described his educational background and his work experience in agricultural surveys, the MN GreenCorps, and for the City of Golden Valley in a very similar position for the last seven years. The commissioners then took turns introducing themselves to Stormwater Specialist Chirpich. Councilmember James also introduced herself and told the commission that this would be her last meeting as the City Council liaison; Mayor Marquez Simula will be the City Council liaison to the commission for 2026.

3. 2026 Goal Revisions

Director Forney recapped some of the goal setting discussion from the previous meeting, as well as some ongoing projects. The commission had come to a consensus that major new goals should not be set until new commission members join in April, instead choosing to focus on advancing current projects for the interim. Director Forney provided an update on current sustainability-related initiatives that are being worked on by staff and the commission. Initiatives that are currently in progress that align closely with the commission goals include pursuing GreenStep Cities Step 3 status, which includes a review and reporting updates by GreenCorps Member Rashid. Rashid is also supporting expansion of the Partners in Energy program and has begun developing a GIS-based tool to track progress on sustainability initiatives. City Planner Brandt is working with Commissioner LaPlante to finalize a Sustainable Purchasing Policy, which is a major remaining requirement for GreenStep Cities step 3 status. Planner Brandt is also working on a request for proposals for the development of a comprehensive parks master plan for the city. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked if the commission wanted to focus on goals that can be accomplished in the short term. Commissioner Evenson stated that focusing on short-term goals seemed like the best idea given the number of larger in-progress items that will not need to be reviewed by the commission in the short-term. Evenson said that GreenCorps Member Rashid had sent examples to her of ways that other cities had used GIS tools to share sustainability initiatives. Rashid stated that the good examples that had been found so far were St. Anthony Village, MN, and Charlottesville, VA. Rashid said that these examples included many of the features that the commission was interested in, including green stormwater infrastructure, native plantings, and green energy usage. Director Forney said that the examples would be added to the Teams chat for commissioners to reference. Commissioner Evenson said that it is nice to see what other cities are doing while keeping in mind that different data sets may be available to use for the GIS communication in Columbia Heights. Evenson said that Burnsville was a good example because they have been able to track metrics since 2017, allowing users to see current initiatives as well as progress over time. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that the first step would be to identify which metrics are already being tracked by the city. Director Forney asked Chairperson Jensen Christen if she would want staff to prepare an agenda item for the next meeting about GIS communications. Jensen Christen said that it should be included on the next meeting agenda, with a focus on which sustainability-related metrics the city was already tracking. Jensen Christen said that one item that could be accomplished in the short term is a sustainability related fact page for businesses and volunteers. Commissioner Groseth asked where the proposed fact page would be housed when created. Director Forney replied that it would be up to the preference of the commission, but that it could be included on the sustainability commission page of the city website. Forney said that if the commission could decide on the content of the fact page it could be added to the website by city staff. Forney elaborated that the city would be soon launching a new website with a more user-friendly interface, which will make the sustainability commission website much easier to access and use. Commissioner Evenson said that the sustainability commission website would be a good forum for city staff from different departments to provide updates on sustainability related topics from their work and communicate the city's ongoing sustainability initiatives. Councilmember James said that the archived sustainability commission newsletter items would also be a good fit for the page. Commissioner LaPlante said that most of the work would be

organizing, pulling information into a single place, and providing links to already existing resources. Commissioner Evenson asked if the commission wanted to make any rules regarding the type of outside links provided, whether they should all be state and county websites or whether certain non-profits would be appropriate sources of information also. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that local sources should be included and said that MWMO was a great example. Commissioner Evenson said that especially for natural resources related topics there were many sources of information of variable reliability that exist. Forester Genter said that the University of Minnesota Extension website was an excellent, authoritative, local source of information for all topics natural resources related. Commissioners Groseth and Carlson agreed to take the lead in organizing and aggregating information and other commissioners will provide them with links and information on specific content areas. Chairperson Jensen Christen recapped that the commission has so far decided to focus on GIS story mapping, populating and improving the commission website as a hub for local sustainability information, and asked if the commission wanted to focus on any additional items. Commissioner LaPlante brought up the ongoing Sustainable Purchasing Policy and updated the commission on progress to date. Commissioner LaPlante elaborated that the Sustainable Purchasing Policy could also be ready for review by the commission at large within the next month or two and should be added to the short-term goals list. GreenCorps Member Rashid said that the purchasing policy was one of the main remaining practices that the City of Columbia Heights needed to put in place to reach the next step in GreenStep Cities. Director Forney said that the goal was to have everything in place by April, which is when GreenStep Cities status is reviewed and changed by the state. Commissioner LaPlante reminded the commission that Snow Blast was an upcoming city event and suggested that the Events and Outreach subcommittee should plan something to represent the commission at the event. Councilmember James suggested that smart salting practices with physical displays and hand-on activity would be a natural fit for a winter event. Stormwater Specialist Chirpich said that the MN Pollution Control Agency has good resources available, including how many sidewalk squares can be covered by a small cup of salt. Commissioner Evenson said that MWMO hands out samples of salt alternatives including chicken grit, which could also be presented at the event.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates

Director Forney provided an update that the proposed developer of the Medtronic site has backed out of their proposed development. The proposed development project had included a mix of dense housing and townhomes. Forney stated that though the development project was currently stalled, MnDOT and the MWMO were moving forward on studying stormwater updates for that district. Forney also said that the Comprehensive Plan update continued to move forward and that the City Council would like 2 members of the commission to serve on the resident advisory board for that process. Councilmember James asked if Director Forney could elaborate on the importance of the Comprehensive Plan and how it is utilized as a city. Forney explained that the plan was extremely important and would help to define the city's goals until 2050. Forney said that everything the city does from parks to stormwater is guided by the plan, and that it really sets the stage for the next 20 years of city activities.

Commissioner Evenson related that her firm had been engaged to prepare the Comprehensive Plan and that she would be recusing herself from any discussions about the plan to prevent conflicts of interest.

GreenCorps Member Rashid provided an update on the GreenStep Cities status and related that with the help of Engineering staff the municipal stormwater assessment had been completed. Rashid said that all remaining best management practices needed for step 3 status were already completed or in progress. Rashid also provided an update about the CERTs Community Energy Ambassador program and the development of a plan to complete the training as a group. Director Forney said that the program could be completed by commission members watching videos individually at home and completing group activities in person, or by going through the entire program as a group depending on the preference of the commission. Commissioner Groseth asked what the total time commitment would be for the certification. Rashid replied that the longest video was about 20 minutes, and that it can be paced slowly or quickly. Commissioner LaPlante suggested that commissioners watch videos on their own time and set aside time in a meeting to discuss and complete the final project. Director Forney said that the commission could invite other community members to take part in the training to become ambassadors. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that would be a good idea and would integrate outreach into the process. Commissioner Groseth suggested that the videos could be watched as a group after normal meetings in two sessions, and any members that could not stay could watch on their own. The final project would then be discussed and worked on at a future meeting. Director Forney asked if the commission wanted to start with the March meeting to allow time to publicize and invite community members at large to participate. March was generally agreed upon as the month to begin the viewing.

Forester Genter provided a brief update on urban forestry and natural resources activities, including the development of a management contract for native planting green stormwater infrastructure areas in collaboration with the Stormwater Specialist. Genter said that the Arbor Day Tree Sale would be happening again this year, and that the city's order for future park and boulevard trees had recently been confirmed. Commissioner Evenson asked if any new varieties were being planted in 2026. Forester Genter said that new species for 2026 included bald cypress, bitternut hickory, and black walnut.

Subcommittee Updates

No subcommittee updates were provided.

Commissioner Updates

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka related that February was the Hennepin County plastic free challenge. Leoni-Helbacka said that she was participating this year and that Hennepin County provided great resources including articles and documentaries to help minimize plastic usage.

Commissioner Groseth related that a pet bed and toy making event would be held at the library on February 21st from 11-2 with HeightsNEXT.

Planning and Coordination

ADJOURNMENT

Chairperson Evenson made a motion to adjourn, Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist