



CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Monday, June 01, 2026
6:00 PM

Mayor
Amáda Márquez Simula
Councilmembers
Connie Buesgens
Rachel James
Justice Spriggs
Laurel Deneen
City Manager
Aaron Chirpich

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Márquez Simula at 6:00 pm.

Present: Mayor Márquez Simula, Councilmember Deneen, Councilmember Buesgens, Councilmember James, Councilmember Spriggs

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Dan O'Brien, Fire Chief; Jesse Hauf, IT Director; Matt Markham, Police Chief; Rochelle Widmer, Director of Engineering and Facilities; Sarah Zonn-Schmittiel, Office of the Minnesota Attorney General

Columbia Heights City Council and Staff Norms.

While we are accountable to each other for these norms, the Mayor and City Manager will help us adhere to them with respectful reminders and reinforcement as needed.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

- 1. Group Ice Breaker: What is one thing you are looking forward to in Columbia Heights this summer.**

Presenting Item: Amáda Márquez Simula, Mayor

Mayor Márquez Simula led the group in an ice breaker, asking participants, "What is one thing you are looking forward to in Columbia Heights this summer?"

- 2. Introduction of Sarah Zonn-Schmittiel, Office of the Minnesota Attorney General. (10 Minutes)**

Presenting Item: Amáda Márquez Simula, Mayor

Mayor Márquez Simula introduced Sarah Zonn-Schmittiel from the Office of the Minnesota Attorney General.

Ms. Zonn-Schmittiel noted she has been with the Attorney General's Office for eight years. She encouraged the community to communicate with the Attorney General's Office for any issue they may be dealing with. She showed the Council the Attorney General's official website and provided an overview of the available resources, including mediation services, publications, translation support, and guidance on expungement and prescription drug abuse.

3. Municipal Consent for MnDOT Central Avenue Reconstruction Project. (30 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Rochelle Widmer, Director of Engineering and Facilities

Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer presented details on the MnDOT Central Avenue reconstruction project, including layout changes, municipal consent requirements, stormwater maintenance agreements, and Council concerns about property acquisition, crosswalks, and bus lane enforcement. She requested that the Council have a brief discussion regarding MnDOT's Municipal Consent submittal for the Central Avenue Reconstruction project.

Councilmember James noted page 20 of the Agenda Packet that references the shared costs, specifically drainage costs. The drainage costs state, "For MnDOT-initiated projects, MnDOT will be responsible for the cost to perpetuate the existing drainage system required for a trunk highway improvement. MnDOT will be responsible for the costs of any improvements to the existing drainage system necessitated by the project, unless a local agency requests improvements or requests changes, for which the local agency will be responsible for the costs." She asked if the costs included purchasing property from the City and other private areas. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer replied that MnDOT would be responsible for the cost. Councilmember James noted it says "perpetuate" and wondered if the language meant to initiate the existing drainage system. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer replied that the language meant to initiate the existing drainage system.

Councilmember James mentioned that there were several Central Avenue-facing properties that are prime for redevelopment, and she does not believe they should be used solely for wastewater because it would be a waste of the City's space. She referenced some properties that would make sense for wastewater space.

Councilmember Deneen asked if there was an estimate on when the Council would be getting an updated plot map from MnDOT. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer explained that the layout the Council has is the most recent on MnDOT has provided as of April. The comments MnDOT received will be included in the municipal consent. The layout will not change during this phase.

Councilmember Deneen requested that the map be updated to show the proposed crosswalks before the open house. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer replied that she would speak with MnDOT to see if staff could make edits to the map, but would be able to include the information in the handouts.

Councilmember Spriggs asked if MnDOT would be assisting the City in enforcement for bus lanes and vehicles using bus lanes to get around other vehicles. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer replied that MnDOT plans to do an educational campaign to increase driver awareness for the northbound bus lane. Metro Transit will be monitoring the impact of violations on the bus lane efficacy and exploring the possibility of a camera-based enforcement.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there was information that could be posted for the public to see. Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer replied that she could post the MnDOT presentation. City Manager Chirpich added that staff could create a packet that could be included in a Council letter so the public could see the information before the open house.

4. Ongoing ALPR Discussions. (30 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Chief Matt Markham

Chief Markham introduced the item and noted that staff is seeking the Council's input and direction on additional information or analysis needed regarding Flock Safety or Axon ALPR systems; approval to schedule a second town hall meeting, and proceed with securing an independent facilitator; approval to initiate the formation of the ALPR Technical Advisory Task Force, with MCAC conducting member selection; and any other guidance on public engagement or evaluation processes the Council wishes to include.

Mayor Márquez Simula suggested putting together a technology task force to help research and work with the Police Department to see the bigger picture. People would apply for the position, and the Multicultural Advisory Committee (MAC) would interview the candidates.

Mayor Márquez Simula stated she would be in favor of taking a pause on the cameras until there is a task force to guide what the City does. The task force would have diverse backgrounds, a technology background, and people from immigrant communities.

Councilmember Deneen expressed her concern that one of the terms of the contract is a link to a living document. She explained that there needs to be written, signed, and agreed-upon contingencies for the City to continue with the program.

Councilmember Buesgens supported the idea of having a task force. She added that she would like a mix of residents and business owners in the task force. She noted that there are some business owners who are in support of the cameras for the safety of their businesses and explained that there needs to be a balance, and suggested changing the flock company.

Councilmember James stated she is in favor of cancelling the contract immediately and having a task force. She noted that she would be against moving to a new automatic license plate reader company. She stated she was disappointed that the Council was not able to get to the online comments during the listening session because many people feel unsafe coming to the meeting to express their opinion. She added that she spoke to many community members who did not support the cameras. She stated she did not believe there needed to be a second town hall meeting.

Councilmember Spriggs agreed with Councilmember James' comments. He noted that the community is concerned about data privacy. He stated he would be in favor of cancelling the contract instead of pausing the contract. He agreed that there is no need for a second

town hall meeting because the community has been strong in expressing its opinion. Moving forward with the contract would sever the trust between the City and the community.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked what the procedural steps were for terminating the contract. She wondered if there was a way to track data to determine when a license plate reader would be beneficial. She mentioned she would like to discuss other ways cameras could help the City and the Police Department.

Police Chief Markham stated he is in favor of the Council's decision and noted it would be a big ask to track data. City Attorney Chirpich added that staff would need to speak with the City Attorney to determine how to terminate the contract.

Councilmember James noted that if the data were stored locally and there were locally controlled servers, it would address many of her concerns. Councilmember Deneen agreed and added that there needs to be a way to support the Police Department.

The consensus was that the staff would speak with the City Attorney to determine how to cancel the flock contract, create a task force, and find a way to store the data locally.

5. Discussion of Fire Service Delivery and Organizational Study. (10 minutes)

Presenting Item: Daniel O'Brien, Fire Chief

Fire Chief O'Brien presented the need for a new fire service delivery and organizational study. He detailed historical staffing challenges, increased call volume, recruitment and retention issues, and options for future service models. He requested that the Council discuss and provide directions regarding the inclusion of a comprehensive Fire Service Delivery and Organizational Study in the 2027 Fire Department budget.

Councilmember James asked if there was a vendor determined for the study. Fire Chief O'Brien replied that he would consider using the vendor that did the previous study because they are familiar with how the City operates, and they have the most recent staffing study.

Mayor Márquez Simula expressed support for the study and moving the property inspections out of the Fire Department.

City Manager Chirpich stated the process would be about five years to make structural changes, after the study is conducted and a plan is made.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if two of the staff from the Fire Department would move to the Community Development Department if the Community Development Department took over property inspections. Fire Chief O'Brien agreed and noted that all firefighters are certified in inspections.

Mayor Márquez Simula noted that inspections were originally put under the Fire Department because it was helpful to firefighters to have an idea of what the layout was

for buildings in the City. It would be helpful to continue to have some involvement from the Fire Department.

City Manager Chirpich stated that the study would be funded through special project reserves rather than tax increases, with a five-year outlook for structural changes and ongoing evaluation of staffing and service delivery. The fund is getting low due to body armor for firefighters being purchased.

The consensus of the Council was support for the comprehensive Fire Service Delivery and Organizational Study, and moving the property inspections out of the Fire Department.

Mayor Márquez Simula recessed the meeting at 7:44 pm. The meeting reconvened at 8:50 pm.

6. Just Cause Update (15 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Chirpich provided the Council with an update regarding a Just Cause eviction ordinance. Staff requests that the Council have a discussion regarding the legal considerations that have been raised before moving forward with the enactment of an ordinance.

Councilmember James stated she would like to hear from the City Attorney regarding the 2021 court-ordered injunction issued on St. Paul. She added that she would like clarification from the City Attorney on how Minnesota law compares to other states and the likelihood of legal challenges. She asked if there was a state-level preemption. She expressed concern about cutting off the Just Cause eviction because a court case was that was not tried. She noted that she disagreed with the League of Minnesota Cities' conclusion and noted that there is nothing about the non-renewals, and wanted to have more information about that. She wondered if the City would be interested in looking into adverse rental licenses as a way for enforcement, or to use administrative fines.

Councilmember Buesgens asked how the City would know if a lease was terminated. Councilmember James replied that other cities have a way to post on a tenants' rights website, and the tenants have to let the city know. Councilmember Buesgens asked what department would be responsible for managing the rental licenses. City Manager Chirpich replied that staff do not know yet.

Councilmember James noted that it would be a small step the City could take and that it would not change the eviction powers, but would report the justice for cause for non-renewals.

Councilmember James noted that there is not much language included in the proposed ordinance regarding the right to cure the issue with the tenant. Councilmember Buesgens noted that the Council needs to consider what it would cost the City if the City were taken to court. The Council discussed where else the just cause ordinance was implemented.

Councilmember Deneen stated she supported the ordinance. She mentioned that the Council would need to think through how to deal with tenants who do not have a record with law enforcement but may be harassing someone. She added that she would want there to be documentation on how to deal with those situations.

Councilmember Buesgens suggested that the City have a discussion with landlords to get feedback on language for the ordinance. She added that there could be educational information at the library, and newsletters distributed to renters to include education. She noted it would be helpful to have informational meetings with renters and landlords separately.

Councilmember Spriggs noted he would like to meet with the City Attorney to better understand the previous court cases.

Councilmember James asked if it would make sense to develop a task force of a smaller group of the Council to meet with the City Attorney and bring it back to the Council. City Manager Chirpich replied that he would speak to the City Attorney to see if the Council should do a task force or a public meeting.

The consensus of the Council was to have City Manager Chirpich speak to the City Attorney about having a Council task force, and then determine who would be on the task force to refine the ordinance language and narrow down viable options before presenting to the full Council.

7. Transition to City Administered 18-Day Early Voting and Delegation of 46-Day Absentee Voting Operations to Anoka County. (5 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Chirpich led the discussion regarding the transition to City-administered 18-day early voting and the delegation of 46-day absentee voting operations to Anoka County. Staff requests that the council review the implementation of the 18-day early voting period so that the draft notice can be submitted to Anoka County Elections to begin at the upcoming August State Primary Election.

The consensus of the Council was that they were in favor of the early voting with the 18-day process.

8. City Manager Follow Up on Previous Work Session Topics. (15 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Aaron Chirpich introduced the item to the Council to give status updates on several items that the Council had discussed at previous work sessions. He updated the Council on cannabis and hemp regulations, campaign finance report redactions, and Coalition of Cities participation.

9. Council Corner.

Presenting Item: Amáda Márquez Simula, Mayor

The Council reviewed the June calendar, notified each other of upcoming events, and discussed proclamations for upcoming meetings.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Márquez Simula adjourned the meeting at approximately 8:42 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Ion, City Clerk/Council Secretary