



MINUTES

Call to Order/Roll Call

Andrew Macko called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm

Members present: Michael Deneen, Teresa Eisenbise, Taher Herzallah, Andrew Macko

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Director; Deanna Saefke, Interim Recreation Director; Connie Buesgens, Council Liaison

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Columbia Heights Parks & Recreation Commission is to foster a healthy, inclusive community by providing a diverse park system and recreational opportunities that enhance the quality of life for people of all ages while fostering sustainability and environmental stewardship for future generations.

Community Forum

None at this time.

Consent Agenda

Motion by Deneen, second by Eisenbise, to approve the consent agenda. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

Sullivan Lake Park Update

Saefke indicated the survey results were included in the agenda packet and were discussed at the previous commission meeting but staff wanted to make sure the members had a chance to read through the comments from the online survey. She asked if there were any comments or questions on those results. Macko appreciated being able to see all of the results and the graphs showing what the preferences are. Saefke thanked the members for looking at the results so thoroughly. Macko replied it is intriguing to see the breakdown of the community outreach and the process. It shows what the main concern or most desired amenity is from those who participated in the surveys. When there is a discussion with the public anyone can refer back to what was indicated in the survey results.

Cullen indicated there is a meeting next week and the second round of public feedback will be presented at that time. Between the first round and second round of public feedback there was the expected fall off in response totals. The first survey had a participation of 176 and the second round is closer to 50 or 60 responses. During the open house there was a strong representation of residents from the townhomes. The residents were very polite, staff were able to address many of their concerns, and they could speak directly with the consultant from ISG. There were quite a few less people from the neighborhood that showed up at the recent open house than the first engagement. It will be interesting to see the outcome from the public viewing options A or B and what direction they want to go. Saefke reported the mother at the first park open house who talked about her younger kids using the park and wanting a half basketball court, came to the second open house at City Hall and brought her son with her. He was looking at all of the park amenities and placing stickers on the pictures of playground pieces that he liked. Saefke indicated those same picture examples were in the online survey. Buesgens asked if arrangements were made to place the concept boards at the library to get more interactions with youth. Saefke replied there are time sensitive pieces to the project right now, with grant money, and moving the lift station, so there isn't a lot of time right now to get that feedback from displaying the boards at the

library. In the future this will be a good way to obtain more feedback. Buesgens stated her concern in a past project was not having enough families with kids giving feedback.

Macko stated there was a difference in the survey comments between wanting more amenities and others wanting it to be a quiet park. Cullen replied there will be a clearer direction with the second round of results. At the most recent open house you could see how far playground equipment has evolved in the design and the amount of research that goes into it. One of the questions asked in survey was regarding age groups to focus on for the type of equipment. Cullen reported it was nice to see a more spread out age group that the public wants the equipment to represent and be utilized for. The playground equipment is very expensive. One goal in this project will be to maximize our dollars. Herzallah asked if the survey results are the main driver of what forms the final decision on some things. For example, if people wanted a poured in place structure it wouldn't matter what the cost is, and that would be installed. Cullen replied, the results help to funnel where we want to go with the final design. At the open house there were picture boards set up with futuristic or artistic really colorful play structures and that wasn't popular; they wanted more nature inspired pieces. That directed that trajectory of the design and helped to narrow down one option. It still leaves the process open for a lot of interpretation and adjustment as we move forward.

Cullen reported timing of this project is an issue. We are tied into stormwater work on Central Avenue. The lift station relocation needs to keep moving forward so that project doesn't fall behind. Buesgens reported the large stormwater pipe that comes from Central Avenue will clean up 60% of the water that enters into Sullivan Lake. Eisenbise asked if the Mississippi Watershed involved in the cleanup of the water for Sullivan Lake as well. Cullen replied yes, the MWMO. Buesgens replied it is not locked in but they are budgeting a forecast for ten years and setting aside two million dollars for Sullivan Lake. Cullen reported he has been talking with MNDOT and making sure that whatever the stormwater cleanup site ties in ecstatically with the park area. It will flow with the whole system of the park area, blend in and also treat the water. Saefke added that ties in with the comments from the open house and public desire to see a more natural looking play structure. As previously stated, MWMO and MNDOT want the stormwater treatment area to be interactive and learning area. For example if there is a trail around the area, and native plantings there will be signage explaining the process and types of plantings. Cullen explained those are some of the other moving parts being decided in this project.

Eisenbise asked about the fencing around playground two. She agrees with that piece. Cullen replied that fencing and screenage through trees or shrubs are shown in both concepts. This was put into the plan based on the concerns for separation and noise from the townhome residents. There will be some fencing or natural separation between the little kids play area and the path to the water. That area will be setback further where the old tennis court was located. He stated the survey results are helpful because those aspects are noticed. Cullen mentioned to those in attendance at the open house that their feedback really gets implemented into the project. Saefke reported the online survey had pictures of various types of play structures, fencing options, and other amenities to funnel the ideas down of what the public wants to see. Cullen indicated fencing and lighting are two components staff wanted.

Playground Passport Recap.

Saefke reported two families participated by turning in their playground passports in 2025. The recreation department gave each family one certificate for up to \$40 off of one program in 2026. The participants included three kids in one family and then a mother and daughter in the other family. Eisenbise asked by completed it means they went to all of the parks. Saefke replied yes, they answered all of the questions on the passport and turned them into the recreation department. The question is does the Commission want to try that passport piece again this year or put a pause on it. The plan is to continue the parks guide that was developed, it will be ongoing and updated as needed. This will be available to residents at all times, which is a good thing and that development came out of the playground passport process. Eisenbise replied yes. The playground passport was only available at City Hall. Saefke replied it was online, at recreation, and the library, but it was just a one page document.

Deneen replied since there is no financial burden for us to continue it, than keep it going. Secondly, do we think there will be less people going outside this summer given everything that is going on in our community right now. Eisenbise likes the passport and those are good points. An idea would be to have less requirements. Maybe there could be a stamp or whole punch at each park so people can just visit the park and then punch it themselves. She completes the history tour at the MN State Fair each year and they have the hole punch at various locations. Buesgens asked what the prizes were. Eisenbise replied that they change every year. Saefke stated that the passport didn't require people to physically go to each park because some of the questions could be answered if they had seen the park in the past. Buesgens stated years ago a discussion between her and a previous city manager, they talked about having a little statue of a Columbia Heights theme hidden at parks for people to find. Macko said like a geocache idea. Saefke indicated the recreation department did that with a Yeti for a winter themed activity, and then another character in the spring on laminated cards that were hidden throughout the city. Deneen asked if there is a medallion hunt. Saefke replied that it is during Jamboree. She stated the playground passport program can be paused for this year. Once a new amenity is introduced at a park the group can start that passport again. Macko asked when the deadline would be for this year. Saefke replied last year they were handed out at the Art and Info Fair in June and asked to be turned in by Truck or Treat in October. Herzallah replied a good time to do this would be at the relaunch of Sullivan Lake Park and the new soccer field at Huset Park. Saefke replied we have a few months to think about this and come back to the idea in March. Eisenbise indicated now is not a good time to launch an outdoor program. She does think an ongoing activity in the parks is a good idea. Then there can be bigger prizes when there is an introduction of a new amenity in the parks.

Cullen asked if it would be helpful to establish tasks that members could take on to research and bring back for discussion at a future meeting. Eisenbise asked what kind of tasks. Cullen replied similar to a project plan. Do members want to take one specific park and create a list of things to look for on the passport. Deneen indicated that he does this type of thing for his job and would be happy to put together a Google Doc to share. Eisenbise remembered discussing this in the past and we need to share documents in the correct manner. Saefke replied that Deneen could share the document with her and she could send it to the Commission in the correct manner. Eisenbise asked if the group wants to have specific tasks to bring back at the next meeting or have a general consideration of the topic to discuss at a future meeting. Macko feels a general consideration would be best based on the current situation in the city.

New Business

None at this time.

Reports

A. Interim Recreation Director

Saefke reported staff are working on programs for the Spring City Newsletter and all the city departments are submitting items this week. That will be out to the public mid-February. One exciting thing that is coming up will be two separate evenings at Sullivan Lake Park, she would love if the Commission Members would attend or help, and the dates are Thursday, April 30th and Wednesday, May 6th from 6-7:30pm for a demo of the new fitness court. If someone else wanted to go there during the day for this that could be advertised as well. The idea is to have a staff person there for questions, or instructions on how to utilize the fitness court. We are also looking for instructors to host Zumba or Yoga type of classes on the studio side, if anyone knows of someone please reach out to them. These classes would be run through the recreation department and could begin in May or June. Eisenbise suggested Alicia's Gym on 40th and maybe they would want to run outdoor classes. Saefke indicated we do not want to take away from a local business but if they want to offer an outdoor class and then encourage people to join their gym in the winter that would be good too. Saefke encouraged anyone that would like to go to the fitness court during the day to help grow the usage that would be welcome. She might even promote a 3pm time and ask Public Works staff to use the court as part of their fitness routines.

Saefke reported there were 16 youth on the ski trip this past Monday. It was cold but they all did great and had a wonderful time. The kids are required to take a lesson and get checked out by the instructors at Wild Mountain before they can go on the rest of the hill. Eisenbise stated there is a second date for that activity. Saefke replied yes it is a family ski trip on a Saturday. She doesn't know the date right now but it is in the current city newsletter. Eisenbise tried to sign her kids up for this past trip and it was full, which is great. Saefke indicated the trips that occur during the year on the off-school days can be tricky for staffing so will have a lower maximum for participants than during the summer. There is a shorter list of seasonal or part-time staff available. In the past there have been parents who have volunteered to help chaperone.

Saefke reported there are four boys' basketball teams; two 5th, one 4th, and one 3rd grade team. This league plays in Coon Rapids and Blaine. They are having some kids not show up for practices or games due to the current situation regarding ICE. Herzallah asked if any of the games had to be forfeited. Saefke replied yes due to low attendance, but that could be because of the cold weather or the current situation. She indicated it is difficult when families are choosing to attend just the games and not practice, or vice versa but expect the kids to be playing at a higher level. The Program Coordinator is meeting with the families to discuss commitment level and appropriate behavior from players, parents and coach expectations.

Saefke indicated that the Active Agers program hosts the AARP tax assistance that will be starting next week on Thursday. This free service from AARP volunteers is open to anyone, not just senior citizens. AARP runs this program, takes the appointments, and just uses the Senior Center and M/M Room at Murzyn Hall. People have been expressing their gratitude for this program and the community center. The Active Agers Coordinator is hosting a discussion on February 13th with a person from Keller Williams on home values, when you are reselling your home what are some things that you should be thinking about, and if it pays to use the we buy houses in any condition companies. There is also Bingo twice a week, various card groups three days a week, and all of these programs are for people 50+. If anyone wants to see their monthly calendar of activities it is available online.

B. Public Works Director

Cullen reported there have been a lot of watermain breaks this year. Deneen added one is on his street and is a skating rink right now. Cullen replied that the crew had to go back to that area twice for two separate breaks. It is a difficult area because it is so flat that the water just sits and freezes. These can be an all staff event because the calls come in at all times of the day, night, and weekends.

Cullen reached out to WSB, and they indicated being in the middle or just finishing up developments for the future soccer field at Huset Park. WSB indicated they might have more information this week or next week. Cullen indicated they have moved the location of the soccer field from the east side of Huset Park to the west side. Herzallah asked where exactly. Cullen replied closer to Murzyn Hall, running north and south. Saefke indicated the area on the map and explained that T-Ball and youth baseball would move to the northeast field and keep the fenced field. Cullen will bring those plans to a future meeting. Herzallah asked if the soccer field plans have seating for spectators. Cullen replied no. That was discussed and the planners at WSB indicated soccer is not the type of sport where people sit in bleachers and watch the game. The natural hill on the west and north side of the park will offer good viewing. Herzallah asked if the field would be located close to the side or further away. Cullen replied that is what he is waiting for and those observations will be reviewed when the plans are presented. Herzallah said this is promising and asked when the assessment from WSB will be completed. Cullen replied he was hoping to bring something today but had not received anything yet. Herzallah asked if there would be field lighting. Cullen replied that he believes there will be lighting but does not know at what stage. Costs still need to be obtained for various scenarios. He indicated that so much money was saved by moving the field from the east side of the park to the west side. As soon as he has the details he will bring the information to the commission. Herzallah asked if the current building is used to put goals away. Cullen reported no it is a block garage. Saefke replied it is sectioned off into three smaller areas. Cullen stated the police use one of the

garages, public works, and recreation. Herzallah said permanent goals would be placed into the ground. Cullen stated the reason why current goals used are not permanent was to rotate the goals in order to not wear the grass out. With this field there is the possibility of irrigation to keep the turf healthier. Herzallah stated the whole field looks healthier. Cullen replied that staff have been putting down a ton of biochar and compost at Huset over the years. Saefke replied that there hasn't been as much field usage in the past as well. When football and soccer used Huset Park at the same time the field got really worn down. WSB is also going to give a cost estimate for artificial turf.

Cullen reported the shop maintenance supervisor, Jeff Hook, retired after 28 years. The new fleet maintenance supervisor will hopefully be starting in mid-February. He has been working on the replacement for that position since August due to the change in the position title and working with unions. There are over 300 pieces of equipment in the fleet which could be anything from a plow truck down to a weed whip.

C. Commission Members

Buesgens stated she had an unused sled and brought it to the Keyes Park sliding hill. There used to be a small crate that held donated sleds and she was told that it had been gone for a number of years. She left the sled at the top of the hill and it was gone the next day. Much like the police department does with giving away free bikes maybe we could have a free sled program. It could be considered for next year. She even went to the store to buy sleds and put out for free and the stores didn't have any. Eisenbise replied the free sled box was only out for one season and thinks it was the Lions Club. Macko said yes. The sleds were out for people to use or take if needed and they found a number of them smashed and broken at the bottom of the hill. It was a good idea but may need to be reevaluated. Buesgens stated there could be a sled drive and then a promoted event. Eisenbise stated that plastic sleds break so easily. Macko indicated the sleds made it through half a winter before they were all gone.

Deneen reported the annual CoHi Con is a gaming convention being held at Murzyn Hall on Saturday, March 14th, 10am-12am. There will be D & D gaming during the day, potentially a Pokemon and Magic the Gathering tournament. The cost is \$20 in advance 21+, \$10 ages 13-20, \$5 ages 6-12, anyone 5 and under get in for free, then \$25 day of for adults. He asked Macko to make sure the ATM machine is full.

Eisenbise asked what the status is for the Adopt A Park Program. Will it be in the upcoming newsletter if needed. Herzallah asked if this program was in existence before. Cullen replied yes. Saefke replied the dentist office on 40th has Huset East, St. Timothy's has Sullivan Lake Park and clean twice a year. Buesgens stated there was a group for Lomianki Park and they have not seen them in the past seven years so she requested for the adopt a park sign with the groups name on it be changed to HeightsNEXT. Cullen will follow up on that. Saefke reported the city website is being updated and when that rolls out next month she will make sure the correct information is on there.

Motion by Herzallah, second by Deneen, to adjourn the meeting. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Macko adjourned the meeting at 7:06 pm.
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary