



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Central Place Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, December 12, 2023
6:00 PM

DRAFT/UNAPPROVED MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

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

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

Staff present: Sulmaan Khan, Interim City Engineer
Liam Genter, Urban Forestry Specialist
David Cullen, Interim Public Works Director
Sue Chapman, Administrative Assistant

Staff absent: Andrew Boucher, City Planner

Council Liaison: Connie Buesgens

Residents Present: Grant Carlson, 3987 Polk Street

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion by Johnson, seconded by Ahmadvand to approve the minutes of November 14, 2023 as presented. Motion passed unanimously.

OLD BUSINESS

1. Complete Streets Policy Brief Update

Khan advised there is a draft proposal in progress. The next step will be to take it to a City Council work session. Many of the items in the policy impact the engineering group as far as projects and developing those projects, so he would like to take more time for review as we may need to change our processes. He wants to be sure when the policy goes into effect that we are implementing the policy and how we do business to make it successful. His goal is to have it put together for the February work session.

Motion by Johnson, seconded by Ahmadvand to take the Complete Streets Policy ordinance to a City Council work session for review. Motion passed unanimously.

2. Sustainable Purchasing Policy.

Khan distributed a rough draft copy of the City of Columbia Heights Environmentally Preferable Purchasing Policy for commissioners to review. The intent of the policy is for the City of Columbia Heights to purchase more environmentally preferable goods and services in several different areas where this type of policy would apply. Staff looked at several cities that are currently on Step 3 of the GreenStep program to see what's included in their policies to get an idea for the City of Columbia Heights policy. Commissioners should review, provide comments/feedback, and ask questions.

Evenson questioned the City Sustainability Coordinator listed under B. Responsible Parties. Is this part of the City Planner's position or will the city be hiring someone. Khan advised that currently city staff; himself, Boucher, Genter, are all considered Sustainability Coordinators.

The Sustainability Commission can add, edit, change, etc. anything they want in the policy and bring it to the next meeting. The City does have a purchasing policy but nothing sustainability related.

Khan will send a digital version of the policy to commissioners for markup to bring to the next meeting for review. The next step will be to take the policy to a work session and then to the City Council for approval.

NEW BUSINESS

3. Meet and Greet with Public Works Director, David Cullen

At the last meeting commissioners were interested in meeting the Public Works Director. David Cullen, Interim Public Works Director, was introduced and gave a brief overview of his job history and years with the city. He touched upon operations as well as several items the Public Works department has accomplished to improve efficiency and sustainability and answered questions from commissioners.

4. Potential Grant Opportunities Discussion (LEAP, HUD Green Retrofit Programs, Climate Pollution Reduction, etc.)

Ahmadvand feels potential grant opportunities is something the commission could look at and report to the city. They could look through grant opportunities as a group and then pick one or two to focus on. Evenson suggested compiling a list of all grant opportunities in one report by category.

Khan passed out an article about Warren, MN. The city used drones with thermal sensors to map its heat-leaking homes and local buildings. This is something that is fiscally feasible with a grant.

LaPlante advised that the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment has an extension program for students, especially undergrads, to work in sustainability locally. The University pays a stipend and there's no cost to the city. A lot of local cities such as Roseville and Vadnais Heights are involved. An intern could be assigned to a project. There are currently more interns than they have places to send them.

Khan advised the commission can make recommendations and decide on grants that they feel would benefit the city, based on needs they see within the city. City staff can help with submitting the grants. There's many ways to apply for grants but in the end, it will need to come from the city. However, the Sustainability Commission plays a big role in recommending and helping with grants.

Commissioners would like to keep their own master grant list but currently do not have a place with shared access. In the interim, they will send grant opportunities to Khan who will keep a master spreadsheet and include it in the monthly agenda. He will check with the IT Department about setting up some type of shared access so commissioners can collaborate and review and edit documents.

5. Partners in Energy.

Councilmember Buesgens stated commissioners should discuss this and then ask for a motion for her to introduce it at the January 2nd work session. However, if we go ahead with this, there is a deadline.

Khan advised the City can probably take care of the application, but if Columbia Heights is accepted into this program it will require champions to help develop and implement the energy action plan, and members of the Sustainability Commission could be champions as well. This is probably the biggest question for this group. A champion's time involvement is estimated to be 100 hours. Once accepted into the program, Xcel Energy will organize preliminary meetings to build the framework to launch energy action planning workshops. Anticipate 6-8 weeks for preparation, 20-26 weeks for development of the plan, and then there is an 18-month collaboration period to implement strategies. Kurek asked if the champion could be a team. Khan feels this is a possibility. Ideally, a member from the community will be identified and a group of local participants will need to be identified and be involved with developing the plan.

Applications are accepted on a rolling basis and reviewed quarterly. Councilmember Buesgens stated she is here to support this group. Taking this item to the work session on January 2nd would mainly be to introduce the plan and make the council aware of what it is all about. Once we obtain their support, commissioners can move forward with completing the application and submitting it.

Motion by Johnson, seconded by Kurek, to move forward with having Council Liaison, Connie Buesgens, introduce the Partners in Energy plan at the January 2, 2024 City Council Work Session. Motion passed unanimously.

6. GreenCorps Host Site.

The Minnesota GreenCorps is a program coordinated by the MN Pollution Control Agency. This does relate to the Institute on the Environment and there is no cost to the city. Each year the program places AmeriCorps members with host site organizations around the state to help communities increase resilience to climate change. Members serve full-time at their host sites for 11 months, from mid-September through mid-August, to help with sustainability-related projects. Each member serves on a project in one of four focus areas: air pollutant reduction; community readiness and outreach; green infrastructure improvements; and waste reduction, recycling, and organics management.

This is a great way to get additional help at no cost to the city. Community Development would most likely be managing that person. The commission needs to figure out their priorities and stay within the focus areas before moving forward with this. Would need to apply no later than mid-March for someone to be onboard by mid-September. Will keep this as a standing item for discussion at the next meeting.

Motion by Evenson, seconded by Jensen Christen to move forward with selecting one of the four focus areas to move forward with the Minnesota GreenCorps program. Motion passed unanimously.

7. Other Business

Councilmember Buesgens stated the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization has a citizen advisory board that only meets two or three times a year. They advise on small private projects such as rain gardens or landscaping and water drainage issues, etc. The group consists of some very interesting

people. We have not had a representative from Columbia Heights on the board for over a year. If anyone is interested or knows anyone in the community that might be interested, please let her know.

Sustainability members had previously expressed interest in a joint meeting with the Park & Recreation Commission. They meet the third Wednesday of every month. Khan advised they will figure out a future meeting date.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Kurek, seconded by Evenson to adjourn the meeting at 7:31 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Sue Chapman, Administrative Assistant