



CITY COUNCIL MEETING
City Hall—Council Chambers, 3989 Central Ave NE
Monday, January 26, 2026
6:00 PM

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

MINUTES

The following are the minutes for the Meeting of the City Council held at 6:00 pm on Monday, January 26, 2026, in the City Council Chambers, City Hall, 3989 Central Avenue NE, Columbia Heights, Minnesota

WELCOME/CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Mayor Márquez Simula called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

Present: Mayor Márquez Simula; Councilmember Buesgens; Councilmember Deneen; Councilmember James

Absent: Councilmember Spriggs

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; David Cullen, Public Works Director; Sara Ion, City Clerk; Travis Lutz, Assistant City Attorney; Anisa Hagi-Mohamed, City resident; Tom Letness, Business Owner; Keon Lewis, 2nd Grade Teacher; Devon Minke, 3rd Grade teacher / Black Men Teach Fellow; Rabbi Jessica Rosenburg, Jewish Voice for Peace; Michelle Spangler, Mississippi Watershed Management Organization

MISSION STATEMENT

Columbia Heights is a vibrant, healthy, and connected City. We are here to actively support the community, deliver equitable services, build and strengthen connections, improve upon our past, and uphold our successes. We strive to be better and ensure Columbia Heights is a great place for everyone, today and in the future.

A. 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.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that Councilmember Spriggs was absent from the meeting because he was on parental leave.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Motion by Councilmember James, seconded by Councilmember Deneen, to approve the Agenda as presented. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

PROCLAMATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, RECOGNITION, ANNOUNCEMENTS, GUESTS

A. Salt Awareness Proclamation.

Accepting Proclamation: Michelle Spangler, Mississippi Watershed Management Organization

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed January 25-31, 2026, as Winter Salt Week, and Councilmember Buesgens read the City's proclamation.

Mississippi Watershed Management Organization (MWMO), Michelle Spangler, accepted the proclamation. She thanked the Council for their efforts to help MWMO meet their mission of protecting and improving the water quality and habitat of the Mississippi River. Salt and other de-icers are the most challenging pollutants the river is facing today. One teaspoon of salt permanently damages five gallons of freshwater. The City has taken many steps to reduce chloride use, while keeping community members safe from slippery winter sidewalks. 10 years ago, the library installed heated sidewalks to reduce ice buildup. In 2022, the City applied for grants to install heated pavers at City Hall. She thanked the Council for raising awareness on the issue. MWMO is recognizing Winter Salt Week through their social media and their newsletter, which includes tips about how to use salt safely and effectively. On Saturday, January 31st, from 11:00 am until 1:00 pm, MWMO will host a gathering called Salts and Sweets. Experts will be available to answer questions.

She invited Public Works Director Cullen to share practices that the City is doing. Public Works Director Cullen mentioned that staff attend a smart salting class through MWMO. Since 2016, Public Works has been working on installing pre-wedding systems onto all larger route dump trucks. He added that they are pre-wedding at the spinner, so the salt sticks better to the road instead of bouncing off. The salt also works right away when it hits the road, so there is a reduction in overall salt use. The City sources all of its brine from Fridley. He noted that in the future, they are looking to equip all of their trucks with tracking technology so that they can track how much salt is applied.

B. Proclamation Honoring Tom Letness for His Stewardship of the Heights Theater.

Accepting Proclamation: Tom Letness

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed this day to honor Tom Letness for his stewardship of the Heights Theater, and Councilmember Deneen read the City's proclamation.

Tom Letness, City resident, explained that he was touched by the City's proclamation. He explained that stewarding the Heights Theater has been a passion of his, and he wanted it to be a place that people would want to go to. He thanked the City for being accommodating and for working with him.

C. World Holocaust Day Proclamation.

Accepting Proclamation: Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg, Jewish Voice for Peace

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed January 27, 2026, as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Councilmember James read the City's proclamation.

Rabbi and Jewish Voice for Peace representative Jessica Rosenberg accepted the proclamation. She explained that International Holocaust Remembrance Day feels more urgent than ever due to the level of racist violence and disregard for people's constitutional rights, which is a reminder that many of the lessons from the Holocaust have not been learned. It serves as a call to action to not just remember our histories but to allow them to shape the action that is taken in the present. She explained that the Holocaust was more of a process than a singular event. While the Holocaust ended in genocide, it began with oppression, chipping away at rights, racism, violence, and impunity for the destruction of life that is being seen in the State. She noted that Minnesota is on the front lines of a battle against fascism. She expressed her pride in the way that people have been resisting and learning all the big and small ways that resisting fascism can look like. It looks like the important work is being done by elected officials, and by refusing to normalize and collaborate with the violence. It looks like bringing neighbors groceries, making sure kids can enter and leave schools safely, and continuing to show up even when people are scared by blowing whistles, honking horns, and standing out in the cold. Commemoration is not just remembering, but it is a call to action. She explained that she is proud to be a part of the City and noted that the City was one of the first cities in the State to pass a Resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. She stated that as a Jew, she knows that her safety is inextricably intertwined with the safety of all people. Anti-Semitism will not be defeated unless anti-black racism and Islamophobia are defeated. She honored all of the survivors of genocide by fighting fascism in our time and articulating and embodying the legacy of the Holocaust to be never again for anyone.

D. Black History Month Proclamation.

Accepting Proclamation: Devon Minke, 3rd Grade teacher / Black Men Teach Fellow, and Keon Lewis, 2nd Grade Teacher.

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed February 2026 as Black History Month and read the City's proclamation.

Black Men Teach Fellow and 3rd Grade teacher Devon Minke noted that it was an honor to receive the proclamation and be able to speak about black educators. He explained that Black Men Teach has helped him become a teacher in the City. He noted that the community exemplifies what Black History Month is for and what Black Men Teach stands for in terms of diversifying the community and standing up for every single person in the community. Only .5% elementary teachers are black men.

2nd Grade Teacher Keon Lewis noted that he grew up in the community and noted that it was a blessing to be before the Council and to be pouring into the City and the schools. He stated Black Men Teach has had a huge impact on the school buildings and students in the way that they are represented, seen, and heard. He added that it has been wonderful to

see how diverse North Park has become and how the children are receiving it. He urged people to find ways to pour into Black Men Teach and the schools.

E. World Hijab Day Proclamation.

Accepting Proclamation: Anisa Hagi-Mohamed

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed February 01, 2026, as World Hijab Day and read the City's proclamation.

CITY COUNCIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS

Report of the City Council

Councilmember James acknowledged the impact of recent federal immigration enforcement in the City. She stated that she personally witnessed the detention of Liam Ramos, who is a five-year-old resident of the City. She added that she witnessed the detention of another youth in the City on the same day. She disputed the statement from Homeland Security's claim that the child was abandoned, and she explained that there were several adults in the household who said they were family and would take care of Liam. She requested that the government bring Liam home. She explained that the incident has caused significant distrust in the community. There are serious concerns about child safety, trauma, and the impact of the federal enforcement actions on trust within the community and in the businesses. She noted that she participated in the emergency City Council meeting this week to address immediate safety concerns and has been coordinating with school leadership and other leaders. She noted that the Police Department has done an amazing job. They do not enforce immigration laws, and continue to serve the community with integrity, and are focused on safety. She expressed her appreciation for their efforts while also understanding their limits to local authority. She recognized the death of Alex Pretti and noted that she participated in a candlelight vigil. She added that she has participated in mutual aid and community response trainings. She noted that the consequences of immigration enforcement are felt locally. The City affirms the dignity and safety of everyone. She added that the City cares for children, immigrant neighbors who are valued members of the community.

Councilmember Buesgens agreed with Councilmember James's comments. She explained that she is sad to hear about the deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti and the kidnapping of Liam Ramos. She expressed her condolences to the family and friends of all three individuals. She stated that she attended the MWMO Board meeting, the HeightsNext planning meeting, a puzzle exchange, Recreation Director Windschitl's retirement, the emergency City Council meeting, and the police awards. She mentioned that she met with all of her immigrant neighbors to check in on them and see if they needed any help. She encouraged the community to hang in there and that the people would win. She thanked those who are volunteering, patrolling, and helping the community.

Councilmember Deneen stated she attended the emergency City Council meeting and the school board meeting, where they discussed how to keep children safe to and from school. She explained that there are many helpers and they have been impacting the community. She reminded the community that

the City would be hosting a listening session at Murzyn Hall at 6:00 pm. She noted that it has not been an easy time, and things feel uncertain and terrifying. She stated that it has been a privilege to see the community step up and have its voices heard. She expressed her pride in being a part of the community because it is strong. She thanked everyone who was out there doing the right thing.

Mayor Márquez Simula read a statement from the Council. The statement highlighted that the City has received many calls and emails from concerned community members about the presence of federal immigration agents in the City. The Council has heard from seniors, students, and families, and has met with business owners, school board members, and neighbors who have experienced these harms firsthand. The Council has listened and believes the community. Neighbors have reported agents near schools, parks, streets, businesses, and public buildings, which are meant to be safe for children and families. People feel watched, targeted, and afraid. There are reports of agents refusing to show warrants, ignoring due process, and harassing residents and business owners. No one should be afraid. Immigrant neighbors are not strangers; they are friends, coworkers, classmates, and loved ones who belong in the City. The Columbia Heights Police Department does not enforce immigration laws and does not ask about immigration status. Its role is to protect the safety of all residents. The Council is asking federal immigration agents to remove themselves from public spaces and to stop actions that are harming the community. The City chooses care over fear and division. The City stands with the neighbors.

Mayor Márquez Simula explained that the Council has been working great together. Everyone is going above and beyond to help the community. She emphasized that people are showing strength during this time. She expressed her gratitude for the relationship between the City and the School Board. She added that she has been meeting with other mayors and elected leaders. She thanked community members who have boots on the ground. She noted that there was an amazing vigil with over 100 people attending. She encouraged community members to reach out to get resources.

Councilmember Buesgens noted that there was a resident who started a GoFundMe page to help families buy groceries or get gas cards. The fund has raised \$131,960. She thanked those who had donated.

Report of the City Manager

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that the City had a scheduled winter parking town hall that was going to take place on January 27th, but it will be postponed until further notice. Instead, the City will host a listening session regarding the current federal agent activity. It will be an opportunity for the community to share their concerns and learn more about the role of local government.

City Manager Chirpich stated the City's SnowBLAST event has been cancelled. The City will put the resources into a different event that can be held when the entire community feels safe to participate.

City Manager Chirpich noted that the boards and commissions application window is scheduled for February 1st through February 28th. Applications can be submitted online through the City's website, or paper copies can be requested by contacting the City Clerk. He noted that the City's Rollcall Police Department podcast is available to listen to. In episode 23, the rollcall team recaps 2025, discusses

new hires, and looks ahead to 2026. The podcast episode is available on the City's website or can be found by searching CHPD Podcast on Spotify.

City Manager Chirpich explained that Mayor Márquez Simula asked him to gather comments, feedback, and stories from departments across the City to share with residents and community members how the current operations are impacting City operations and staff. Community Development Director Forney is a part of the Minnesota National Guard, and his unit was activated over the weekend. He has been sent to Minneapolis. The Community Development Department is working on presenting some ideas to the Economic Development Authority for business assistance and relief programs. The Engineering Department is feeling unsafe coming into work, and there is an increased desire to work from home, which is being met by division heads. Staff are worried about community members and are unsure about working in the field with the possibility of being taken themselves. They are avoiding areas that have confirmed ICE sightings while commuting to and from work. Staff are wearing City attire to avoid added attention while being around the City.

City Manager Chirpich noted that the library has been receiving calls from patrons with overdue books because they are too afraid to leave their homes to return them and are worried about owing fines. Patrons requesting assistance in Spanish are significantly down. Attendance at weekly conversation circles is half of what it was a couple of months ago, with the majority of the people opting out being primarily Spanish speakers. Seven of the 15 library staff are people of color, and all are US citizens. All staff are concerned about what happens when ICE enters the library. The library has been cancelling field trips for CHPS kindergarten and a Saturday youth program that celebrates the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. At least two groups have cancelled community room reservations due to concerns about ICE activity.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that the Fire Chief has spoken with five paid-on-call firefighter EMT staff who believe they may be directly affected by the operations and have expressed concern and fear related to their safety. Fire Chief O'Brien has offered creative ways to provide modified work schedules to keep staff safer. Two members of the group have accepted the offer. The department is encountering ICE daily while conducting inspections and emergency firefighting duties, which has led the department to change the way they complete various activities to keep more people safe in the community. As a result of the activity, additional responders experience delayed access to incident scenes, and patient care and emergency outcomes may be negatively affected due to the slower reinforcement and transport times. The department is working through it.

City Manager Chirpich noted that the Top Liquor operation team has been significantly impacted by actions from federal agents. Several employees of color are fearful of coming to work due to concerns for their safety in public spaces that ICE can access. The business has been significantly impacted due to fewer customers, and ICE has staged vehicles in the parking lot and has entered Top Valued 3, which has heightened anxiety in staff. The Liquor Operations Director expressed that it has been extremely difficult to come to work because the City feels like it is under attack and worries about the safety of employees.

City Manager Chirpich explained that there is an increased awareness of Columbia Heights due to the national news and ICE activity in the City. The exposure leads to a greater threat to cyber security and

threats. In response, the IT Department is increasing cybersecurity across all staff and ensuring emergency preparedness is at the highest level. The IT Director is working with staff to provide flexible work options. He noted that the Interim Director of Recreation explained that staff feel uncomfortable with ICE agents parking their vehicles behind Murzyn Hall. Staff at the Highlander Gym are worried about how to handle a situation if ICE were to enter the facility. Renters of Murzyn Hall have been negatively impacted because people are afraid to attend large gatherings or travel to Minnesota. Many renters are postponing or cancelling their reservations. The City's youth basketball teams have many members not show up due to being afraid to show up.

COMMUNITY FORUM

There were no comments for the Community Forum.

CONSENT AGENDA

Motion by Councilmember Buesgens, seconded by Councilmember James, to approve the Consent Agenda as presented. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

- 1. Approve January 5, 2026, City Council Work Session Meeting Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to approve the January 5, 2026, City Council Work Session meeting minutes.
- 2. Approve January 12, 2026, City Council Meeting Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to approve the January 12, 2026, City Council meeting minutes.
- 3. Approve January 20, 2026, Emergency City Council Meeting Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to approve the January 20, 2026, Emergency City Council meeting minutes.
- 4. Accept October 16, 2025, Charter Commission Meeting Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to accept the October 16, 2025, Charter Commission meeting minutes.
- 5. Adopt Resolution 2026-006 to Amend the 437 and 720 Budget for Purchase of Host Server Hardware and Licensing.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-006, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Motion to adopt Resolution 2026-006, amending the Fund 437 and 720 budget to authorize the purchase of host hardware and related software from Paragon Data Systems in the amount of \$196,000.
- 6. Adopt Resolution 2026-010, Appointing Kyannah McKinney to the Planning Commission as a Youth Commissioner.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-010, there being ample copies

available to the public.

MOTION: Move to adopt Resolution 2026-010, appointing Kyannah McKinney to the City of Columbia Heights Youth Commission as a non-voting member of the Planning Commission.

7. License Agenda.

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

MOTION: Move to approve the items listed on the business license agenda for January 26, 2026, as presented.

8. Rental Occupancy Licenses for Approval.

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich

MOTION: Move to approve the items listed for rental housing license applications for January 26, 2026, in that they have met the requirements of the Property Maintenance Code.

9. Review of Bills.

MOTION: Move that in accordance with Minnesota Statute 412.271, subd. 8 the City Council has reviewed the enclosed list of claims paid by check and by electronic funds transfer in the amount of \$1,287,356.92.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Councilmember Deneen, seconded by Councilmember James, to adjourn. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Meeting adjourned at 7:04 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Ion, City Clerk/Council Secretary