



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION
City Hall—Council Chambers, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, September 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
Andrew Boucher, City Planner
Liam Genter, Urban Forestry Specialist
Sue Chapman, Administrative Assistant

Council Liaison: Connie Buesgens

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion by Johnson seconded by Groseth, to approve the minutes of August 8, 2023 as presented.
Motion passed unanimously.

OLD BUSINESS

1. Further Introductions and Background Information of Commissioners

2. GreenStep Cities Profile Follow-up

Khan asked commissioners if there is any interest in taking this to the next step and/or if there are any other ideas that they would like to include in the profile. Staff feels the GreenStep Cities Profile would be a good start for the Sustainability Commission. Boucher advised that currently the City of Columbia Heights is on Step 2 of the program and there are some specific actions that we must take to get to Step 3. One requirement for Step 3 is a sustainable purchasing policy. This sets standards for energy star compliant technology for appliances, paper with a certain percentage of recycled contents, WaterSense which is an EPA program; there's other things that can also be added such as local purchasing preferences. The best practices portion of the profile has examples of what other cities have done to achieve the 1, 2 and 3 start levels.

Evenson advised she went through and highlighted the items that she thought would be the best fit. She will blind copy the list to everyone for review. There may already be items that qualify for Step 3 that the City has achieved, especially with the new energy efficient buildings. Boucher is reviewing what we've done in the last five years to provide a status update. The yearly assessment is one of the items that we put into the bylaws and the commissioners need to review this on a year-by-year basis.

The Alatus development was brought up as an opportunity for the Sustainability Committee to bring recommendations and ideas to the table, especially since the plans are still in the development stage.

Ahmadvand asked if the City has any information about EV charging and how effective it would be in the community. Boucher advised he had a meeting with Xcel Energy and one of their partners, Energy Group, and this is one of the things they do. They will provide EV ready toolkits to local governments to get them going. The Partners in Energy Group is very valuable because they take on a lot of the work and can administer a wide range of actions.

NEW BUSINESS

3. Draft Bylaws

Boucher stated the Youth Commission completed their bylaws last year so he's looking at those for a comparison. He's going through the GreenStep actions to see what requires us to provide an update with how things are functioning, identifying trends and giving recommendations on those trends. He should have the draft bylaws available by the next meeting.

4. Introduction/Overview of Partners in Energy with Xcel Energy

This item was touched upon during the GreenStep Cities Profile discussion. Ahmadvand asked what the target date is for them to come in. Boucher advised they accept rolling applications from communities quarterly. He is thinking November or December is most likely for them to come in. They are very easy to work with and willing to attend meetings, it depends on what we would like from them. He will obtain contact information for the commissioners. There is also a lot of information on their website.

Xcel Energy provides a lot of funding for this program for costs that cities otherwise would have to incur. Finkelson stated it doesn't seem right that the industry group that built all the coal plants should create the Sustainability Commission framework. Boucher advised Xcel Energy does work with several environmental nonprofits, including the Center for Energy and the Environment and is supported by a lot of environmental and nonprofit groups as well. This program would cover much of the leg work that the commission would have to do or hiring a consultant to create these plans. Having seen them work in the past, the community feedback they receive is very important to them. He will collect more information so the commission can see what resources they provide and then have a further conversation. There is no commitment to use this program.

Solar energy on city buildings was briefly discussed.

5. Sustainable Purchasing Policy

This item was also discussed during the GreenStep Cities Profile discussion. Boucher will get the commissioners a draft copy of the sustainable purchasing policy.

6. Adopt a Boulevard Tree Program

Genter updated the commission on urban forestry activities, which are an important part of the sustainability goals. One impact item is local action to deal with the effects of climate change, improve air quality, etc. with trees. He explained how we plant trees in the city and that we plant bare root trees which are very good for sustainability. Urban Forestry plants park and boulevard trees every year. Genter started the Adopt a Tree boulevard tree program in 2021, where every boulevard tree is paired with a volunteer. This has improved watering compliance and produced very good survival rates and growth

for the boulevard trees. There were 100 volunteers in the first two years, which was our target number. He will be planting 200 trees in October and currently has 60 volunteers. Urban Forestry can only plant trees on city-owned property.

LaPlante stated there are no bus shelters at a lot of the stops on Central Avenue and no trees for shade which makes it very hot while waiting for the bus in the summer.

Khan advised MnDOT is supposed to wrap up the study that's being done for Central and University Avenues by the end of this year. Metro Transit has just begun design of the F Line (BRT) that will run along Central Avenue. To ensure the design of the F Line lines up with the vision for Central Avenue, MnDOT and Metro Transit have been working to include some pre-design work as part of the F Line Design contract that is in place right now. The design of that project will most likely be extending through the end of next year. There are plans to provide more public engagements in the future to share the results of the study, next steps, and gather feedback. Staff will definitely share via social media, etc. once there are opportunities for public engagement. Once we get into the details for the reconstruction of Central Avenue there will be a lot of opportunities for the Sustainability Commission to bring forward and make recommendations to MnDOT. MnDOT is the owner of Central Avenue, but they have included the local government agencies such as Columbia Heights, as well as other cities that Central Avenue runs through. There is no timeline yet for the reconstruction. The City Council has agreed to hire a lobbyist to help us gather monies for this once the plans are set up. We received a grant from MnDOT for 43rd and 47th Avenues for sidewalks and lighting but this is on hold because of the F Line and MnDOT's planning, so we need to wait on that too.

Evenson asked if staff has talked to any of the business owners about trees on Central Avenue. Khan advised the study that's been done so far has been more of a high-level study regarding impacts to businesses such as taking away parking, widening the road for bike traffic, etc. There has not been any dedicated one-on-one contact or meetings with business owners. Finkelson asked what the commission could do to communicate with MnDOT. Can we submit letters regarding trees and greenspace and if so, when should we start? It was also brought up that we may need to get funding for greenspace, MnDOT may not cover the cost. Kurek asked if Columbia Heights could adopt specific language for storm water stating that a certain amount of stormwater needs to be diverted into rain gardens on our side streets. Boucher thinks there is language in the Comp Plan stating we would like to aspire to a complete streets policy that addresses landscaping and stormwater. He feels this incorporates a lot of items that have been discussed.

Commissioner Buesgens stated that Anoka County is planning to redo 40th Avenue and we may have more control over that project. They are planning to come to the community next year to begin discussions. Khan advised Anoka County is currently leading a study and has hired a consultant to look at improving safety along 40th Avenue. Once the study is completed, in March or April, they will bring a more formal proposal as far as the turnback to the City. There are improvements that need to be made on 40th Avenue and the study should really help us understand which ones will benefit 40th Avenue. As far as the turnback, Anoka County could reconstruct 40th Avenue and say Columbia Heights this is now your roadway, or they could say this is the study that was done, this is an estimate of the work, and then provide a check for that amount. There are plans for public engagement, but the study just started so they're currently in the process of looking at the crash data and collecting statistics.

As there seems to be a lot of interest in the complete streets policy, Boucher suggested everyone look at Best Practice 11 in the GreenStep Best Practices Profile.

7. HeightsNEXT Central Avenue Cleanup

HeightsNext is organizing the Central Avenue cleanup on October 7. It begins at 9 a.m. and they're looking for volunteers for sign-in tables, a welcome speaker, someone to pick up bulky items at the end of the cleanup and take them to the dumpster behind the Public Works building, and a photographer. If anyone is interested please get in touch with Councilmember Buesgens. LaPlante volunteered to set up a table for the Sustainability Commission and the trees at the cleanup.

Also, Councilmember Buesgens stated the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization has a citizen advisory committee. Currently we do not have anyone from Columbia Heights on that committee. The committee meets two or three times a year. They advise on small projects that people have applied for such as feasibility studies for water drainage for business, habitat, etc. If anyone is interested, please see her after the meeting. We really should have someone from Columbia Heights on that committee.

8. Other

Posting a general email on the website was brought up and if there is a way for an email to come in so the entire commission can see it. Khan will check into this. Currently only his contact info is on the website.

Johnson asked for an update on the comp plan for the next meeting. Khan and Boucher will get that information.

Commissioners agreed to draft a letter to MnDOT regarding the plans for Central Avenue for review at the next meeting. Boucher advised that Best Practice 11 would help with writing this letter. Khan suggested commission members email him with their priorities as bullet points and he will compile them into one document.

Khan advised members that they can email him with any agenda items for the next meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Evenson, seconded by Ahmadvand to adjourn the meeting at 7:34 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Sue Chapman
Administrative Assistant