



# **SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION**

**City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE**  
**Wednesday, November 20, 2024**  
**6:00 PM**

---

## **DRAFT MINUTES**

### **CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL**

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

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

Staff present: Sulmaan Khan, Assistant City Engineer  
Andrew Boucher, City Planner  
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist

Council Liaison: Connie Buesgens

### **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Motion by Commissioner Jensen Christen, seconded by Johnson, to approve the minutes of October 8, 2024, as presented. Motion passed unanimously.

### **OLD BUSINESS**

#### **1. Sustainable Purchasing Policy Update**

Planner Boucher stated that he sent the meeting presentation template to Commissioner LaPlante for review before upcoming meetings with various city departments. Local and regional products will be prioritized in purchases, tools will be used from vendors like Amazon to filter products, and lifetime product assessments will be considered in purchases as well.

Commissioner LaPlante stated that meetings will be held with various staff members in December to go over the policy, why it is important, and how to best implement it into broader City policies.

#### **2. Complete Streets Policy Update**

Engineer Khan stated that a final draft of the policy is in the shared folder, and that the policy is on the agenda for the City Council work session in the first week of December. Feedback will be given by the Council to staff at the work session, and then a revised final draft will likely be presented to the Council at a January meeting for approval. Khan stated that staff revisions were minor and mainly language related, not significant changes to the policy in terms of content. Commissioner LaPlante asked what happens after the policy is eventually passed by the Council. Khan stated that the policy comes with a worksheet that will be implemented and used for every project, which will include documentation of the process and any exceptions or variances from the policy granted for a project. Planner Boucher stated that the policy will be taken to the Planning Commission to integrate the policy into development policy and City Code as necessary.

Khan stated that in addition to the worksheet, implementation of the Complete Streets policy will be included in the Engineering Department annual report. Khan clarified that the policy will be presented to the City Council at the December 2, 2024, work session which is public and open for attendance by commissioners. Planner Boucher asked if another open house was planned for the Safe Streets for All plan. Engineer Khan said that no open house was currently planned as the project is still in the analysis and planning stage. Khan stated that future community engagement on the project would happen as the policy develops.

**3. Sustainable Collaborations Sub-Committee Update**

Commissioners Jensen Christen and LaPlante did not have an update. Commissioner LaPlante stated that she will be working on the next City Newsletter story soon. LaPlante further stated that topic ideas for the newsletter story will be solicited at the next commission meeting.

**4. Invasive Species Sub-Committee Update**

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka provided an update about some personal activities, including a buckthorn pull event at Kordiak Park. Leoni-Helbacka stated that Forester Genter completed the grant application for the mobile invasive species removal kit with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and that the award decisions would be made in January 2025. Commissioner Jensen Christen asked if now would be a good time to document the presence of invasive plant species at City parks because they are the only plants that still have leaves. Forester Genter agreed that now is a good time for amateurs to identify buckthorn, which maintains green leaves longer than native plants in MN.

**5. Sustainable Partnerships With Local Businesses/Restaurants**

Commissioner LaPlante suggested that the commission brainstorm about ways to engage local businesses in partnerships. Commissioner Evenson suggested that we partner with local businesses that already have sustainable practices and highlight them with free advertising for the business. Commissioner Johnson said that Railworks was a no waste business and suggested highlighting that practice. Engineer Khan asked how the publicity/advertising would be provided, and whether the city would be responsible for the publicity. Evenson suggested a more central place for the Sustainability Commission on the City website as a means of advertising. LaPlante suggested window clings or another visible means of recognizing sustainable local business. Commissioner Groseth suggested that we could have businesses apply to us for the program to avoid the appearance of favoritism. Planner Boucher stated that business outreach will be easier to implement once the new Economic Development Coordinator staff is fully onboarded. Boucher further stated that the Partners in Energy draft action plan will be completed in April 2025 and that will allow for greater engagement with local business. Commissioner Evenson suggested a coordinated outreach effort to all local businesses and the creation of an award for the sustainable business of the year for a local business. Planner Boucher said that he would inquire with other staff about creating an award. Engineer Khan provided an update on the City-wide water meter replacement project, a two-year project with the start date of December 2, 2024. Commissioner LaPlante asked about the possibility of contacting businesses about conserving water and including information into the mailers that properties will be receiving before the

water meters are replaced. Khan said that he would inquire with the staff leading the project about the possibility of including water conservation information with mailers. Commissioner Kurek said that the project was starting in the eastern third of the city as the first phase. Kurek asked about the presence of lead water service lines in Columbia heights and how that would relate to the project. Khan stated that testing for lead service lines will be included in the water meter replacement project. Staff had previously created a GIS map based upon the age of properties to identify where lead service lines would be likely. Commissioner Kurek asked if the GIS map of lead service lines would be made public. Khan stated that he was not sure of the plan for making the map public, but that it was not required as part of the federal mandate. Commissioner Groseth asked if homeowners would be informed of the results after the test for lead service lines was completed. Khan affirmed that they would be informed of the test results. LaPlante stated that the action item for the commissioners would be to come up with a short list of the most important business engagement ideas related to sustainability for the next meeting. Commissioner Kurek suggested exploring available grants to assist small businesses in making sustainable upgrades and energy efficiency. Commissioner Johnson asked if a complete list of businesses in Columbia Heights exists anywhere. Planner Boucher stated that he was not aware of a comprehensive list of businesses, but that it would be worthwhile to create one. Boucher stated that the commissioners could reach out to the Economic Development Coordinator for more information. Commissioner Evenson asked if it would be possible for the Sustainability Commission to have a budget to give awards or buy recognition products like a window cling. Engineer Khan clarified that the commission does not have a budget and would not be able to make purchases currently. Councilmember Buesgens clarified that any funding would have to come through the normal budgetary process, and that under the current rules commissions are not allowed to raise their own funds. Councilmember Buesgens stated that the council would be having a goal-setting session in February, and that the commissioners should think about how much funding they would need before then if they want budgets to be considered in the future. Commissioner LaPlante asked if the commission would be allowed to accept in-kind donations from businesses and gave printed materials as an example. Councilmember Buesgens said that she was not sure but would make further inquiries.

## **6. SolSmart Program Statement**

Planner Boucher said that the program had been discussed at previous meetings and that the authorization letter was now ready to be brought to Council. Boucher said that the community already had significant solar resources, and that more efforts needed to be made to communicate and show them. Boucher said that the program provides free technical support but requires input to get good results. The solar statement is required for entrance to the program and will trigger a technical review of the City Code and development standards for compatibility with solar expansion. Barriers to adopting solar will be identified and suggestions for improving and streamlining the process will be provided. Any suggested changes will eventually have to be brought in front of the Planning Commission for approval. Commissioner Finkleson asked if Boucher had knowledge of any hindrances to solar uptake that currently existed in city regulations. Boucher replied that language relating to renewable energy was completely lacking in current regulations. The SolSmart Program will allow the City of Columbia Heights to make any necessary changes to development standards to reflect best practices and bring them in line with other local communities. Commissioner Jensen Christen pointed out a typo in the statement, but

no other objections were raised. Boucher asked for a motion to approve the statement as written and recommend bringing it forward to the Council. Motion by Commissioner Johnson to approve the statement, seconded by Commissioner LaPlante. Motion passed unanimously.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### **7. Round Robin**

Commissioner Evenson asked for an update on a new commission member. Engineer Khan stated that the plan was to appoint a new commissioner in the next round of commission appointments in 2025. Councilmember Buesgens said that announcements would be made through the city website and social media accounts and that residents could apply at that point. Councilmember Buesgens said that she attended a conference workshop on closed loop economies for cities, and that Columbia Heights should look for ways to close loops on business waste products. Buesgens stated that this is an idea for the commission to think about long-term, and a potential angle for outreach to businesses. Buesgens also stated that the MN legislature appropriated \$41.7 million to help naturally occurring affordable housing (NOAH) with improvement projects. She stated that there is great need for this money in Columbia Heights, which has 146 NOAH rental properties that would qualify with between 4-10 units. Councilmember Buesgens would like the City of Columbia Heights to apply for this money and disburse it to landlords as grant funding that is tied to keeping rents affordable. Commissioner Johnson asked if the city would have to apply for the funding. Buesgens said that the funding would be available to local government units on a competitive basis and would require an application. Buesgens also related her recent visit to the Cole apartment building; the developer is looking at another affordable housing project at another site in Columbia Heights. Buesgens stated that she pushed the developers to look for energy efficiency options in the new project to help renters save on their utility bills.

Commissioner LaPlante asked whether the SolSmart program would allow for residents to buy into larger off-site solar farms if their property was not compatible with on-site solar. Planner Boucher stated that between SolSmart and Partners in Energy the City would be able to help residents make informed decisions about what route to solar would work best for them. Boucher stated that the University of MN has an online GIS tool that allows for individual properties to be checked for on-site solar compatibility. LaPlante stated that sustainability is about nuanced solutions and not a blanket approach. Commissioner Evenson asked if the SolSmart program offered a list of solar farms in the area. Planner Boucher said that he did not know but would check with staff at Met Council for the answer. Evenson stated that it would be helpful to have a vetted list of reliable, trusted solar farms to partner with. Commissioner Johnson thanked Councilmember Buesgens for inviting the commissioners to the MNDOT meeting about Central Avenue and asked when the next community engagement event related to the project would be. Councilmember Buesgens stated that the next engagement event had not been scheduled yet, and that work was still ongoing for the preliminary plans. Commissioner Kurek related concerns MNDOT staff had raised about green infrastructure related to the Central project, specifically maintenance issues that have been encountered in other locations. Kurek asked about the maintenance of existing green infrastructure in the city and responsibility for the maintenance. Forester Genter related that the city has several larger sized green infrastructure installations related to stormwater management located at Huset Park, Prestemon Park, Silver Lake Boat Landing, Ramsdell Park, and smaller ones at multiple sites. Genter said that these sites were installed by Prairie Restorations and Landbridge Ecological Services and are contracted out for

maintenance every two years. Genter stated that maintenance consists of 3-4 integrated plant management visits each year, controlled burns every 4 years, and dormant mows every 4 years offset from the controlled burns. Kurek asked what the source of the funding was for the maintenance of these sites; Genter replied that the funds came from the stormwater budget. Kurek asked if any roadside green infrastructure sites existed as well in the city. Genter replied that the city did have multiple roadside installations, including many new ones along 37<sup>th</sup> Ave and some raingardens scattered throughout the city. Engineer Khan stated that a new raingarden was scheduled to be installed at the library next year in conjunction with the parking lot expansion. Commissioner Kurek asked if we had noticed any recurring or difficult problems with maintenance of these sites and said that MNDOT has serious concerns about maintenance issues associated with green infrastructure in the median of Central Ave. Kurek asked if trees and other green infrastructure would be better located along the side of Central Avenue in new development rather than in a median. Forester Genter said that in his opinion green infrastructure will always struggle in the middle of the road and present various serious maintenance issues. Genter stated that he would prefer that all green infrastructure associated with the Central Avenue project be located at the side of the road. Commissioner LaPlante said that she would prefer that the median be focused on pedestrian refuge and safety and that green infrastructure should be located at the side of the road. Commissioner Kurek asked if the City of Columbia Heights had the capacity to maintain roadside green infrastructure if it was extensively added to Central Avenue. Kurek re-iterated that MNDOT has serious concerns about any local government's long-term maintenance capacity for any newly installed green infrastructure. Commissioner Evenson said that roadside installations could take multiple forms and could be lower maintenance depending on the design details. Kurek asked if trees along the side of the road would have a better chance of success and incur less maintenance than other green infrastructure options. Genter said that the trees would be much more successful on the side of the road, and that trees represented the lowest overall maintenance of any green infrastructure options. Councilmember Buesgens said that she would agree and that the median should focus on art and texture as a means of calming and slowing traffic. Buesgens said that the medians can provide safe harbor for pedestrians looking to cross the street. Commissioner Finkleson asked if there was any specific information showing that we have needs for green infrastructure on Central. Finkleson said that in his mind a better long-term sustainable vision for Central Avenue is maximizing pedestrian and bicycle usage. Finkleson stated that he has concerns about green infrastructure taking away from space for pedestrian usage. Finkleson said that he absolutely wants large mature trees to provide shade and improve the experience on Central Avenue for pedestrians and bicycles. Considering the lack of maintenance provided by MNDOT and the other issues raised, he believes that the focus of green infrastructure on Central should be large shade trees and as much permeable surface as possible. Commissioner Evenson said that given the lack of space available open pit style planters would be unlikely, and that tree trenches and underground water storage would be more likely solutions. Forester Genter stated that large mature trees would provide the greatest value of any green infrastructure options, incurring minimal maintenance while providing maximum ecosystem services. Commissioner Kurek said that planting the maximum number of trees should be the goal with this project given the rare opportunity this project presents. Commissioner LaPlante asked if businesses along Central could be required to clear any future bike trails. Engineer Khan stated that the city currently is responsible for snow removal on all bike paths or mixed-use trails, but not sidewalks. Councilmember Buesgens stated that the city has engaged a contractor to clear snow from

sidewalks along Central Avenue currently where businesses/occupants are not removing snow in a timely fashion. The City pays the contractor and then bills the property owners for the services provided. Commissioner LaPlante asked for clarification about what counts as a mixed-use path. Engineer Khan stated that shared use trails are generally 10 ft wide bituminous paths; the city has the ability to clear snow from shared use trails and will be able to provide that in future trail expansions. Commissioner Evenson asked if the City had any regulations about e-bikes on shared use paths. Planner Boucher said that there were not any regulations in development standards related to speed limits on shared use paths. Planner Boucher stated that the Planning Commission would be examining auto use properties and potential changes to the current standards at the next meeting. Boucher said that he is working with a MN Greencorps member from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture on farm to institution food systems including local food systems to include urban farming and edible landscapes. Forester Genter stated that the city had recently completed tree planting for the year with about 195 new trees planted in 2024. Engineer Khan said that the scheduled December meeting (Dec. 10, 2024) will be overlapping with the Partners in Energy workshop being held on the same date from 4:30-7, and that all commissioners are welcome. An abbreviated commission meeting will be held just after the workshop. Commissioner Jensen Christen stated that the next MNDOT meeting related to Central Avenue will be taking place the next day, on December 11. Planner Boucher asked commissioners to review the GreenSteps Cities plan and decide on what to prioritize before the February City Council goal-setting session.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Commissioner Groseth made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Evenson. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter  
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist