



Park & Recreation Commission Meeting
City Hall, 3989 Central Ave NE
May 27, 2026

MINUTES

Call to Order/Roll Call

Macko called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm

Members present: Donia Abu Ammo, Lisa Levitt, Matt Lupkes, Andrew Macko

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Director; Deanna Saefke, Recreation Administrative Assistant; John Stutzman, Parks & Recreation Director; Connie Buesgens, Council Liaison

Introduction of Parks & Recreation Director John Stutzman.

Stutzman indicated it is nice to meet everyone. Today is his one month date of being with Columbia Heights. He is excited to be here and work on the upcoming projects while continuing the successful programs already in place. Stutzman has worked in the parks and recreation field his entire career. For three years he was a ski instructor in Colorado and for the past nineteen years has worked in a few different communities in Minnesota. He is excited to work with the fantastic team currently in place. Stutzman has been very active in the Minnesota Recreation & Park Association and the National Recreation & Park Association, speaking at conferences and various committees. Macko thanked him for joining the team.

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

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

Sullivan Lake Park Improvements & Huset Park Soccer Field Project Update

Stutzman indicated that he understands the priority of these projects, he is getting up to speed as quickly as he can and figuring out how to keep moving forward. One of his biggest challenges has been understanding what the goals have been for these two projects. The overlying goal at Sullivan is the loss of playground which was a big misstep and needs to be rectified as soon as possible. This will also take time especially when working with state and federal grants from the DNR. His first step has been to familiarize himself with the grant; what the funding can and cannot be spent on, getting to know the design firm ISG and where they were at in the process. Staff recently posted a statement to the public on the process of development at Sullivan Lake Park. Feedback from the community is that they want to be in the loop about what is happening at a park near their home. Stutzman will be meeting with the DNR next week to better understand the grant funding. He is confident that some designs can be developed after this meeting. After a design concept or two has been prepared he would like to get feedback from the Commission and the public. Stutzman has met with a playground company to get some potential designs and comparisons. While he is waiting for information he is getting the ball rolling to move forward. The first question for the playground company was regarding timeline of

installation, and the idea of usability of playground equipment in 2026 has a lot to do with mother nature, but we could possibly see construction beginning in 2026 or a first priority in 2027. He feels awful for the neighborhood not to have a playground for two summers. After speaking with playground companies, many of them were booked out this spring so a fall timeline would be the best opportunity regardless. The other side of this project is coordinating with the public works staff on the lift station. Staff are hopeful that work will be occurring this fall as well.

Lupkes asked if Sullivan Lake is considered a natural wetland per the DNR. Stutzman replied that since it is a lake he assumes yes. Buesgens added it is classified as an impeded waterway. Stutzman indicated that the grant from the DNR is one of their outdoor recreation grants, so it is not specifically tied to a wetland but certainly helps. Levitt asked if there is a listing of outstanding grants that have been applied for by the city or a list of what future grant funding might be coming. Stutzman is unaware of any at this moment but in the future there are opportunities. This DNR grant is an annual opportunity for funding, and you can get funded multiple times depending on the project. He also knows that the county is interested in continuing to support our projects. The Parks System Master Plan will provide opportunities to have a project plan in place and then receive grant funding which will expedite the process. Stutzman applauds the work of the city council as they have dedicated funding each year to be set aside for park projects. This funding will be very helpful with the master plan. He is being conscientious regarding spending between the Sullivan Lake Park project and the soccer field projects. Moving forward the funding set aside by the city council will go a long way in the small parks where playground equipment has outlived its lifespan. It is a testament to the Public Works staff who have kept up the maintenance in our park system. Some playground equipment is 25-30 years old. By balancing these current projects with the funding, we have will allow us to continue to pursue grants and other sources of funding to implement the master plan.

Stutzman added the commission members have a big impact with civic engagement and are our biggest advocates for sharing information and getting feedback. Messages can be posted but having a face to face conversation telling people that we are working on Sullivan Lake Park and it isn't forgotten about makes a huge difference. Staff empathize with the neighborhood on not having a playground. If members can share information with the community and if they have questions please direct them to speak with him. Staff are trying to get the best outcome possible in the most efficient manner. Levitt noted on the Facebook post she saw public comments and was unsure if she should reply to it. Stutzman replied there was one comment that the communications team reached out to him to contact so he did leave a message. He doesn't always advise replying on social media but if they know the person they can have a discussion or send people to him with comments and concerns. The goal is to get the residents a beautiful park and add to what is already a really cool park. Having commission members share information with the community is greatly appreciated. The next round of engagement will be done when there is something more tangible to show the residents.

Huset Park Soccer Field Project Update

Stutzman indicated this process is taking a little longer but is making progress. He appreciated the comments from the city council regarding the urgency of getting this completed and not wanting to wait until 2028. Stutzman responded that a 2028 completion has never entered his mind and does not want to wait that long to have it open to the public. The goal is to have it open in 2027. There are a lot of things happening behind the scenes. Staff recently met with a potential engineering firm to discuss project details. They are exploring a potential design build process following the purchasing policy to use the state contract to expedite the process a little bit. He has had a conversation with a manufacturer who would go on the state contract process. There are a lot of things happening with this project but not a lot of answers yet. The thought process is when there is a tangible design to then get public feedback. Staff are working to save time and determine the feasibility of the budget to get exactly what is needed in this location. Soil samples are going to be taken soon to determine the type of surface being used.

Lupkes asked if the size of the field will be a full size field. Stutzman replied yes that is the project scope at the moment. One thing that is being explored, to make sure the field is more available to the community and not just games, is to

look at an artificial turf surface. This would allow the community to drop in and play when it is empty and not increase the maintenance. The grass fields take a lot of maintenance and a lot of time to upkeep. The other thing this would allow is a multipurpose facility with soccer being the primary piece. More will be known in the next few weeks as to the affordability of artificial turf. This will serve the community very well as an open facility that also provides game options. Lupkes asked if we have an adult program that uses soccer fields now. Stutzman replied that the city does not but there are other groups. Buesgens replied that many adults in her neighborhood who play soccer have to go outside of the city to play. During her twenty house neighborhood watch group there were nineteen adults that played soccer and had to go elsewhere. Stutzman thanked Buesgens for the background information. He knows that we do have seasonal soccer fields in the city and there can be a better job of promoting those fields. The master park plan process will help to determine where those various fields can be placed.

Parks System Master Plan Community Engagement

Stutzman indicated we are entering the phase to seek public feedback. He stated that a master plan is only as successful as the feedback received. The more residents that share how they want to see our park system over the next ten years, we will be able to provide the best results. MEND Collaborative is doing an incredible job so far and wants to do what is best for the community. An example was shown for the lawn signs and postcards indicating the project, what events are coming up, and a QR code to view the project and provide feedback. The lawn signs will be displayed at events and local parks. Postcards will be mailed out to residents. There are in-person events that will have representatives from MEND with interactive maps. Stutzman added this is also an opportunity where we would like to engage the commission and have them volunteer at some of these events. These are the three we know for sure and the first two events will be staffed by MEND, but could use additional support. Truck or Treat will be volunteer and city staff led. Saefke added that there will be a few dates during the summer for the Booster hotdog wagon in the parking lot of the city liquor store. She indicated that MEND is planning to attend the next commission meeting and will be able to give more details on what it means for a volunteer to provide the engagement. She mentioned all of the signs, marketing materials, and the website will be translated into other languages. Stutzman added on the website they do use Google translate so there could be some mistakes but are doing everything possible to make it successful. By the June meeting the website will be live. Another event that MEND has discussed is an Imagine A Park Day, they are still figuring out what this will look like, but it centers around the idea of "if you could build your ideal park, what would it look like?" Even though we might not have that true park come to Columbia Heights, it is a great way to get imaginary juices flowing. The staff at MEND were really excited about this idea so it will be interesting to see what they come up with. Buesgens added that she read a similar process called placemaking where a temporary setting was created with moveable features to see how people used the area or what fit best in various locations. She had a similar idea to set up outdoor chessboards outside of Murzyn Hall in the shade and move it to another location if it wasn't used or to gain interest elsewhere. Stutzman replied that is an interesting concept and some will depend on the scope of MEND's contract. As he leads projects in the future his goal is to really involve the Commission with what things are going to look like, bringing ideas to them as a sounding board, and bring tangible items to the community prior to implementation.

Lastly, Stutzman indicated MEND staff are planning to attend the next Park & Recreation Commission Meeting in June. They will have a draft of the plan by the end of 2026. Staff will go through that draft with the Commission in detail. Adoption of the final plan in the spring of 2027. Projects can then be prioritized and implementation after that point. He asked the Commission to help spread the word on this project. Having the members involved is the best way to make this successful with community involvement.

Abu Ammo asked when the flyer and posters would launch to the public. Stutzman replied the lawn signs are going to print early next week and the postcards and flyers shortly after that. The big kickoff will be the Art & Info Fair. Saefke indicated as the members are attending other community or school events that are not by the city, to feel free to bring the flyers and ask that event to post them. The website will continue to evolve as the project continues and feedback is received. People will be encouraged to go back to the website during the process. Lupkes asked if the police department

could send this information out with National Night Out materials. Saefke replied that is a good idea. Stutzman replied that we have already asked the fire and police departments to display the signage as well during their events. Buesgens asked if we are connecting with the school district on promoting this project. Stutzman replied yes we have. He asked the members to provide feedback if they notice any typos or problems. Saefke added that this project coincides with the 2050 Comp Plan. This company, HKGI, is working on that plan and will be at some of the same city events to gain public feedback. At the Art & Info Fair, for example, they will have a table next to MEND. There is a QR code to the city website talking about both projects, but then our park piece will be separated out. Stutzman indicated they are working together to tailor the messages of being two separate projects but working for the benefit of Columbia Heights.

New Business

None at this time.

Reports

A. Parks and Recreation Director

Stutzman reported that heading into summer Murzyn Hall is getting busy and programs are starting to fill up. Summer staff will be hired in the next few weeks. The Active Agers programs continue to run very well. In future meetings he plans to bring the coordinators in to discuss their programs. It has been a busy time transitioning into the position and learning from Saefke, who has been a great leader the past few months. He feels that he is joining a great team. The summer brochure is out, and staff are getting ready for summer.

Lupkes requested an additional port a potty at Huset Park closer to field 3. Stutzman replied he was already discussing that with Perkins. Lupkes appreciates it.

B. Public Works Director

Cullen reported the response for seasonal employment has been great and they even needed to close the applications window. There are a few returning employees from last year. There are fourteen total hired. In the past there has been as few as two to four people. The seasonal employees are shared between all departments; parks, streets, and utilities. We will get a really good amount of work done this season. Not all of the seasonal staff are able to start at the same time so there are new faces each week.

Buesgens shared from a resident that was trying to clean up around the sister city garden at Lomianki but it has gotten to be too much and would like additional staff help. Cullen asked where exactly. Buesgens replied not by the sign but where the circle is by the tree as you walk towards the building.

C. Commission Members

Buesgens is excited to have a new Parks & Recreation Director and thanked Saefke for filling out during the interim.

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

Macko adjourned the meeting at 6:45 pm.
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary