



CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Monday, July 06, 2026
6:00 PM

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

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Márquez Simula at 6:00 pm.

Present: Mayor Márquez Simula, Councilmember Buesgens, Councilmember Deneen, Councilmember Spriggs

Absent: Councilmember James

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Mitchell Forney, Community Development Director; David Cullen, Public Works Director; Jesse Hauf, IT Director; John Stutzman, Parks and Recreation Director; Rochelle Widmer, Facilities Director/City Engineer; Robb Lubenow, Co-Founder & Development Lead at Yellow Tree; Matthew Tilbert, Project Manager; MnDOT Staff; Tom Kaiser, City resident

1. 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.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

2. Group Ice Breaker: What would you put in a time capsule?

Presenting Item: Amáda Márquez Simula, Mayor

Mayor Márquez Simula led the group in an icebreaker discussion, asking participants, "What would you put in a time capsule"?

3. Yellow Tree Introduction and Development Update. (30 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Mitchell Forney, Community Development Director

Community Development Director Forney introduced Yellow Tree and their staff and noted that the staff is looking for feedback from the Council.

Co-Founder & Development Lead Robb Lubenow introduced himself. He explained Yellow Tree's fully integrated development model, focusing on multifamily housing, mixed-use projects, property management, and their approach to public-private partnerships, emphasizing long-term ownership and community engagement. He explained the project vision and site plan for the Medtronic site.

Councilmember Spriggs inquired about other mixed-use projects Yellow Tree has conducted. Mr. Lubenow replied that they have done a variety of businesses, such as hair care, restaurants, boutiques, and small office spaces. He noted that they do not currently have a plan for mixed-use for the site.

Councilmember Buesgens stated she would like to see a Crisp & Green or a daycare at the site because the City needs more healthy options in the area. She asked what amenities would be in the apartments. Mr. Lubenow replied that there will be a water venue, a full kitchen, game rooms, a fitness center, a community garden, and bike repair. Pets will be allowed in the apartment buildings, and a dog park will be included.

Councilmember Buesgens inquired about the building having sound control. Mr. Lubenow replied that there will be sound control. Councilmember Buesgens asked if there would be solar or any energy-efficient units. Mr. Lubenow replied that they have not done solar, but they do have residents pay a commercial rate for electricity instead of a residential rate.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if there would be underground parking. Mr. Lubenow replied that they would like to have more enclosed parking.

Councilmember Buesgens asked what kind of units would be included in the apartment building. Mr. Lubenow replied that there would be a broad range.

Councilmember Deneen noted that she likes that the apartments are close to a lake and that it will be important to figure out how to tie the apartment building in with the existing park and area. She added that pollution control and water treatment of the lake are important. She asked what kind of enclosed parking they were proposing. Mr. Lubenow replied that it will likely be underground and enclosed ground-level parking.

Councilmember Deneen stated she would like to see that the building does not block the view of the lake.

Councilmember Spriggs asked how much of the townhouse would be affordable housing. Mr. Lubenow replied that he did not know, but it would likely be market-rate.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there would be a playground installed on the site. Mr. Lubenow replied that since the park is nearby, they would likely utilize those amenities. Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that there is an apartment building in the City that has an indoor playground that is often utilized in the winter.

Mayor Márquez Simula stated she would like to see more three- and four-bedroom units. She added that she would like to see brownstone on the building.

Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that there is a building that has a loud fan and would like to ensure that there are no loud fans around the building. Chirpich confirmed that the system would be different than the building with the large fans.

Mayor Márquez Simula noted that it would be nice to have townhomes that do not have stairs. Mr. Lubenow explained the challenges of having townhomes without stairs and noted that they would not be able to accommodate patio-style townhomes.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if there would be a generator in case the power went out or if there was a fire and the elevator was not accessible for people in wheelchairs. Mr. Lubenow replied that a four-story building is not required to have a backup generator. Councilmember Buesgens stated she is fine with a five- or six-story building.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there were incentives for those who did not need a parking space. Mr. Lubenow replied that they did not have an incentive. Parking is not included in the rent.

Councilmember Buesgens asked Mr. Lubenow if he was open to allowing tenants to hang solar panels off their balconies to save on electricity. Mr. Lubenow replied that they would possibly be open to the option.

Councilmember Buesgens encouraged Mr. Lubenow to be mindful of preserving the lake and making sure the façade of the building blends in with the surrounding area and lake. She asked that there would be communication in other languages for the tenants. She added that the Parks Master Plan is underway, and there is a community survey being conducted. She expressed concern regarding parking not being included in the rent because another apartment building did not include parking in the rent, and the surrounding streets filled up with cars.

Councilmember Buesgens asked what the average increase in rent was each year. Mr. Lubenow replied that there is no increase for five years.

Community Development Director Forney and City Manager Chirpich provided an update on stormwater management and the 4300 Central Avenue Redevelopment.

Councilmember Deneen emphasized the need to care for the surrounding homes that have experienced flooding.

4. Recap of Municipal Consent Public Hearing on MnDOT's Central Avenue Improvements Project. (30 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Rochelle Widmer, Director of Engineering and Facilities

Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer introduced MnDOT staff and explained that staff are requesting that the Council have a brief discussion regarding the questions and comments brought forward by the public and whether they were captured correctly. MnDOT representatives reviewed the Columbia Heights Municipal Consent Hearing follow-up questions and public hearing comments.

Councilmember Buesgens expressed concern regarding the proposal for the traffic lights at 50th Avenue and 52nd Avenue and noted that she does not agree with having two lights there. Mayor Márquez Simula agreed.

Councilmember Deneen stated that the majority of the Council is confused by the traffic light configuration because it negates the smooth flow of traffic in the area. MnDOT staff clarified that the signals are intended for both pedestrian and vehicle safety, with actuated timing and conditions possible in the consent process.

The Council and MnDOT staff discussed having conditions included in the project to address the traffic light concerns.

Councilmember Buesgens stated she supported an ADA pedestrian light, but does not support a vehicle traffic light system at the intersection. Councilmember Deneen added that if the school had to pay for the traffic study, then the private property nearby should have to pay for a traffic study at the intersection as well. MnDOT staff explained that they would come back with additional information about the justification for putting a traffic signal at the intersection.

Councilmember Spriggs asked if there would be metered parking during construction. MnDOT staff replied that MnDOT would not provide metered parking.

Councilmember Spriggs inquired about stormwater retention on developable parcels and requested clarity on the locations and potential impacts. MnDOT staff explained the design process, soil testing, and maintenance considerations for swales and rain gardens.

City Manager Chirpich expressed concern regarding managing consent boundaries with imperfect information. MnDOT staff explained that they would explore the use of MOUs to allow future adjustments as more data becomes available and provide draft bullet points for flexibility.

Mayor Márquez Simula suggested that MnDOT provide information to the Council as soon as possible to expedite the process. Councilmember Buesgens added that she is open to special Council meetings in order to discuss items further.

The Council discussed potential areas for soil treatment and plantings. Councilmember Buesgens pointed out that one of the challenges for stormwater is the utilities in the area.

Director of Engineering and Facilities Widmer stated during a future Council meeting that MnDOT could return in order to review the locations where stormwater features are proposed on privately owned properties.

5. Discussion of One-Year Extension of Walters Recycling and Refuse Contracts. (15 Minutes)

Presenting Item: David Cullen, Public Works Director

Public Works Director Cullen presented the option to extend the Walters recycling and refuse contract for one year.

Councilmember Spriggs asked if there were surrounding bulk agreements that would be cheaper. Public Works Director Cullen replied that he has looked into it and explained Refuge's annual adjustment rate and the CPI. He noted that it is based on inflation and economic data instead of being negotiated. The benefit of extending the contract is that it locks in rates and avoids higher costs in future RFPs.

Councilmember Deneen asked if the CIP being used was national or local. Public Works Director Cullen replied that he believed it was national but would follow up. Councilmember Deneen stated that a one-year extension is common and standard practice.

Mayor Márquez Simula expressed support for extending the contract and for having one service provider for the entire City.

Councilmember Buesgens highlighted the idea of promoting less waste.

6. Sullivan Lake Park Playground Design Concepts. (20 Minutes)

Presenting Item: John W. Stutzman, Parks and Recreation Director

Parks and Recreation Director Stutzman updated the Council on Sullivan Lake Park playground design, presenting revised concepts, accessibility features, color schemes, and plans for public feedback.

Councilmember Buesgens expressed support for the concept of a climbing wall. She inquired about the color of the playground design. Parks and Recreation Director Stutzman replied that the overall feedback was for more neutral tones. There are no climbing features in the newer design concepts. Multiple languages will be included on the playground.

Councilmember Deneen mentioned that she liked the bright green color for the playground. Councilmember Buesgens stated she would like more muted and natural colors for the playground.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if there was a plan to plant trees to provide shade for the benches. Parks and Recreation Director Stutzman replied that there would be.

Parks and Recreation Director Stutzman noted that there is still time for the public to provide feedback. Councilmember Buesgens suggested putting something in the newsletter to remind the public to provide feedback.

Mayor Márquez Simula inquired about the leftover playground equipment. Parks and Recreation Director Stutzman replied that they are working on it and the leftover playground equipment would be put at Hilltop Park next year, with capital improvement funds allocated for necessary upgrades.

7. Municipal Service Center Project Update

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Chirpich provided an update on the Municipal Service Center Project. He reviewed the various options for potential early acquisitions of the SACA building.

Councilmember Deneen asked if the building could be used for a different purpose in the interim. City Manager Chirpich replied that staff has not identified an immediate need.

Councilmember Buesgens inquired about the negative effect there could be on the City's future plans. City Manager Chirpich stated that staff has verbally agreed to one payment this year. After that, it will need to be determined who holds the title.

The consensus of the Council was that they were not interested in pursuing acquiring the building, and to pay as committed until funding comes through, and to reconsider the building later in 2026. Councilmember Deneen agreed with Councilmember Buesgens' comments about asking the Finance Department about what negative impacts there would be from making payments.

City Manager Chirpich noted that the City needs to determine a date for the demolition of the old City Hall building. He mentioned it would make sense to time the demolition with the demolition of the Public Works building.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that he spoke with SACA about possibly relocating the firehouse building to their building. SACA is open to the idea, but there would be some accessibility challenges.

8. City Manager Follow-Up on Previous Work Session Topics. (15 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Chirpich followed up from the EDA meeting and asked the Council what questions they would want included in the EDA interview questions. Councilmember Buesgens stated she would like a question regarding how connected the individual is to the surrounding businesses.

Mayor Márquez Simula requested that the language on the application be more accessible and not include so many big words. Councilmember Deneen agreed and mentioned that it could be intimidating for people to apply. Mayor Márquez Simula pointed out that there could be people applying where English is their second language.

Councilmember Buesgens requested that each commissioner be required to attend at least two City events that host tables so that there is representation. City Manager Chirpich mentioned that there would need to be bylaw changes.

City Manager Chirpich noted the City is hosting the next Joint Council and School Board meeting.

The Council discussed times and dates to host the meeting.

Councilmember Spriggs asked if there could be topics chosen ahead of time to discuss. He mentioned that some School Board members have asked about how development would impact school enrollment in the future. Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that staff could provide a presentation to the School Board when they acquire more information about future developments.

City Manager Chirpich stated the EDA interviews would occur on August 3rd.

9. Council Corner.

Presenting Item: Amáda Márquez Simula, Mayor

The Council reviewed the July calendar, notified each other of upcoming events, and discussed proclamations for upcoming meetings.

Mayor Márquez Simula led a discussion regarding an Ordinance prohibiting the feeding of wildlife and noted that a sign was installed to indicate no bow fishing and not to feed the wildlife. She proposed having an Ordinance to prohibit wildlife feeding. Councilmember Buesgens suggested having QR codes posted that explain why people should not feed wildlife.

Mayor Márquez Simula initiated a discussion on prevailing wage requirements and TIF for City projects. Councilmember Deneen noted that there needs to be staff time to audit the people in the field and gather wage information. She added that she would be interested in exploring prevailing wage requirements for City projects.

Mayor Márquez Simula noted the first step is education and explained that by the Council being educated on labor standards, they can tell developers what they are watching for and set high expectations.

Mayor Márquez Simula stated that the County mentioned that they would be interested in the City taking Kordiak Park. She noted that she asked City Manager Chirpich how much it would cost for the City to maintain the park. Councilmember Buesgens explained that there is a current lawsuit because a House Representative took \$6 million from Anoka County's assigned legislative funds for a different park program in Anoka County. The money was going to be used to upgrade trails at Kordiak Park. She noted that she would be fine with the City taking over Kordiak Park, but would want to ensure that the City has the funds to be able to maintain it.

Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that the County does not want to host the Monarch Festival at Kordiak Park anymore because they believe the event is too big for the park. She explained it is an incentive for the City to take over the park.

Councilmember Spriggs asked if the County wants to transfer the park to the City or have the City purchase the park. Mayor Márquez Simula replied that the County would give the park to the City for free.

Mayor Márquez Simula led a discussion regarding a check-in on media protocol norms. She suggested that the City Council and staff go through media training again. Councilmember Buesgens recommended council participation in the police academy and Citizens Academy to enhance understanding of department operations and community safety plans.

Councilmember Buesgens raised the issue of insufficient benches in city parks, proposing a budgeted annual purchase plan and improved donation mechanisms to increase seating availability over time. She suggested starting with three new benches in a year.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Márquez Simula adjourned the meeting at approximately 9:52 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Ion, City Clerk/Council Secretary