



Park & Recreation Commission Meeting
City Hall, 3989 Central Ave NE
June 24, 2026

MINUTES

Call to Order/Roll Call

Macko called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm

Members present: Donia Abu Ammo, Michael Deneed, Teresa Eisenbise, Lisa Levitt, Matt Lupkes, Andrew Macko

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Director; Deanna Saefke, Recreation Administrative Assistant; John Stutzman, Parks & Recreation Director; Jon Perkins, Park Foreperson; Amada Marquez-Simula, Council Liaison

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

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

None at this time.

New Business

Mend Collaborative

Stutzman introduced Sandy Meulners from Mend Collaborative who is the contractor helping to create the Parks & Recreation System Master Plan. Meulners reported they are about one third of the way through the project process. She gave a brief history of the company. They are excited to work with Columbia Heights and have a Commission that is willing to be a part of the process. Mend is working closely with the team who is conducting the 2050 Comprehensive Plan update. There will be some shared public engagement events and regular meetings are being held. The recommendations for the Parks & Recreation System Master Plan will also live in a summarized version in the comprehensive plan and that is a met council requirement, so it is important that the two companies work closely together.

Meulners gave an introduction of the team working on the project; Olivia Halsne, and C Terrance Anderson. Stutzman added that the group has done great so far and Anderson has brought some really awesome perspective to how we get the underserved populations or the quieter voices in our

populations. He has brought some really cool ideas and thoughts as far as how we make sure they are heard in this plan. It is not just the loudest voice that gets to influence this plan.

Meulners went through the overall schedule for the project. In general, it is broken down into four phases. They like to use action words to help unpack what they mean by each project phase. We are just coming out of the Understand phase where a comprehensive park assessment was conducted in each park, looking at all of the assets and recording the condition of each element, looking at system wide considerations, and early research to understand the state of the parks and recreation system here. Phase 2: Engage is the bulk of where community engagement happens. Phase 3: Envision is where all of the things merge and early ideas and recommendations come together. Validation happens with the community to check in and make sure the ideas are being represented properly. The Act phase is where the system plan is finalized. Plans are confirmed with the Commission and City Council as to what plan will move forward and set the city up for successful implementation. The final plan is scheduled in the March timeframe of 2027.

Meulners reported the Art & Info Fair was canceled and the team is now planning to be at the Jamboree on Friday and the Monarch Festival on July 23rd. This is one of the items that is a dual advertisement for the comprehensive plan and the parks & recreation system plan. She showed examples of advertisements that are specific just to the park system plan with a lawn sign and poster. For the next engagement they will have a table outside of the ticket entrance to the Jamboree carnival. HKGI will also be there for the comprehensive plan. Macko offered his assistance if anything is needed at the entrance gate. Meulners added that on Sunday the 28th staff are looking for help from the commission to engage with the attendees of the pancake breakfast at Murzyn Hall. Saefke indicated the breakfast begins at 9am and would love to have members volunteering to be at a table with the posterboards and talk to the public about the project and visiting the website to give their input. Once bingo starts at 12 there won't be any need for engagement. Stutzman reported the contract with Mend is that they will be at three public engagement events and if we want to continue to gather public feedback, which we do, then we need to have volunteer help. He and Saefke will be at the breakfast event and would like members to volunteer for an hour or two. Macko indicated the time frame on Friday will be the prime time of people going to the carnival after the parade. Meulners stated they use counters to keep track of how many people they engage with. Part of their goals is to reach a certain percentage of the population. Marquez Simula volunteered and asked if staff would like other council members or other commissions. Stutzman replied just having this commission and any council members would be enough help along with him & Saefke. Deneen volunteered. Eisenbise asked about the Art & Info Fair being rescheduled in August and if that is out of the timeframe for engagement. Meulners replied that has not been discussed yet. Stutzman replied Mend was not slated to be at the Jamboree and replaced the Art & Info Fair event for that initial engagement. We may as a commission and staff take advantage of the rescheduled event depending on where feedback is coming in and what is needed per Mend's recommendation. Saefke replied that she will get information out this week to the previous art vendors for the rescheduled Art & Info Fair on August 19th that will coincide with the final music in the park for the season at Huset Park East. Meulners indicated the idea of pivoting to the Jamboree event right away is to get initial public feedback and not wait until July or August. If members can't attend the pancake breakfast there will be other engagement opportunities this summer like the CH Athletic Booster wagon at the city liquor stores. Saefke reported that the Booster wagon is at the Top Valu Liquor store on 49th Avenue and Central Avenue pretty much every Friday from 4:30-8:30pm, almost all of July and August. Then on Saturdays from 11:30am-6:30pm. The idea would be if a member wanted to volunteer for an hour or two they could stand by the wagon and tell people who are purchasing hot dogs to visit our

website and give their feedback on the park system. Meulners and Saefke agreed to revisit if volunteers are needed based on the amount of public feedback within the next month or so. Meulners reported the project team will attend the Monarch Festival on July 23rd along with the comprehensive plan team. One new event they are working on is an Imagine-a-Park Day that would involve city staff, city council, commission members and other stakeholders in the city who come together to look at all the parks and think about what they want to have in the future. This would be held in August or September after they have received good input from the community. Lastly the High School Back to School Night is a possible engagement opportunity.

Meulners presented the first deliverable for this project. The Case for Action documents the existing conditions in all of the parks. The team really dives into the profile of Columbia Heights from a community perspective. They want to understand who is being served by the parks and recreation system, where gaps and opportunities may exist. The case for action provides the groundwork towards focused conversations. The team looks at the existing 16 parks, 2 facilities, and almost 130 acres of parks, what type of parks, who has access to the parks, and the walkability for citizens. One specific item is having access to sidewalks versus using the street to get to a park. There are definite areas lacking sidewalk access to a park and that gap could be looked at for better service in the future. They also look at critical assets such as access to walking spaces and playgrounds. Lupkes asked if there is a way to overlay the housing density with the access to playground map to see how many people are served. Meulners replied that he is on the same track as her. She presented the community results in demographics, population of residents who speak a language other than English. These demographics help the team to deeply understand the Columbia Heights community so there are culturally responsive design and recommendations as an outcome for this process. Mend layers information on maps so that you do not need to flip through multiple pages to get information and tell the story of the data. They use census tract results. She explained that overlaying two maps with data from population density and age demographics can tell you that one area might have a higher need for playground access than other areas in the city. They compare the data with the national average, Anoka and Hennepin County population data. Looking at population and housing projections can tell that the population stays relatively stable, but the number of households increases. This indicates smaller family sizes but more density in housing being built. Other data they consider is CDC community health, environmental justice which is publicly available spaces, Justice 40 metrics for disadvantaged communities, and median household income. The goal is to determine how we can really leverage these public assets and begin to improve equity and environmental justice in the built environment, and what can we do in our parks system and through recreation programming to start reversing these trends.

Meulners reported the next section for Case for Action is an in depth assessment of every park. She presented the example for McKenna Park. They look at the amenities and condition of each one. They mention any formal programming and notes that make that area unique. Once the park system plan is complete the opposite side of the page will show what the park can look like in the future with strategic improvements that help us address some of the items discussed from the data. Meulners pointed out three key takeaways in the case for action. Health & Equity, Strategic Investment, and Improve Access.

Stutzman indicated that although he was not part of the selection process for choosing Mend, he hopes members see why they were selected with this kind of information they are compiling for the project. They have done a fantastic job so far. He recently was part of a master plan process in his last position this is a different perspective that they are bringing and well suited for what Columbia Heights needs. Staff have been impressed with the process so far.

Meulners provided a group visioning activity for the commission members. Members used their phones to answer questions regarding the park and what they feel are important components.

Abu Ammo stated that all the maps were very interesting and asked if they would have access to review them further. Meulners replied this was a sneak peek and staff are working through the first draft with city staff to make any adjustments or corrections. It will be released as a draft after those revisions are made. Stutzman added that the big picture is that the presented map pages will be incorporated into the final plan for the public. Meulners stated they can think of the case for action as the front end of the full plan. Stutzman thanked Abu Ammo for asking; he hasn't seen this as part of many plans that he has been a part of. Eisenbise asked what the next step is in the timeline. Meulners replied there are bi-weekly project team meetings with city staff. Friday is the first engagement event. The online survey is open. They are just entering this engagement period. They used the spring to understand the system and the community. Now, over the next few months they are talking to the community members, learning their priorities and bringing ideas to them to validate or if something else is preferred. Then they will draft the plan. After that the second half of the report is put together with the recommendations, what they look like, how do we implement them, and how do we fund things. She indicated phases 3 & 4 will start happening in the fall and winter. Stutzman indicated the target adoption for this plan is spring of 2027. Marquez Simula asked if the feedback just received from the commission with the activity would be taken into consideration or if it was just a test. Meulners replied it will be taken into consideration. Marquez Simula liked that Deneen asked what the word opportunities means in this context and could see that question gets nuanced, or the public could see what the responses were from the commission and better understand that context. Stutzman asked Meulners if he could get an overview of the group visioning activity so it can be shared with the Commission. Deneen asked if the final system plan will indicate what type of amenities should be placed in each park or is for staff and the commission to figure out in the future. Meulners replied yes that is exactly what they do. Part of the plan is to look at the input provided and determine what is the best placement within the system, how it is going to be implemented, how it is going to be funded, are there grant opportunities, is there a reserve somewhere, is it built into the CIP. The project team can be really specific or give broader recommendations. For example, benches within the city do not have a standard style or design and it is probably most cost effective for there to be a standardized style set so you can have a contract with a vendor that can offer a discount or something similar. They also discuss timelines for implementation; what happens immediately, what happens in the next five to ten years, and so on. The project team will look at grant opportunities and funding sources for things that do not require raising taxes. Stutzman indicated the costs estimates they provide will be a huge help in prioritizing. Lupkes asked if the platform used in the survey has any way of stopping people from pushing their own agenda, like saying they visit the website every day and saying they want a petting zoo. Does that show the top result for the system plan. Meulners showed the engagement website. If people want to add a pin to the map every day, staff can download the data, and they can see the IP addresses.

Sullivan Lake Park Playground Design Concepts Review and Discussion

Stutzman stated he is excited to get feedback from the commission on these concepts. It has been apparent since his arrival that this project is a priority and rightfully so. It is a big deal not to have a playground for two summers. He has been working to move the process forward, looking over the previous plans, working with public works and recreation teams to accelerate this process. It is his goal to try and get something installed before the end of 2026. The public engagement process will still be there but knowing that some of that has already happened staff can accelerate some of the process. He

wanted to start reviewing the concepts with the commission as a representation of the community. Staff have reviewed the two designs. He will take any feedback from members and take it back to the playground manufacturer who designed the concepts and have the company modify them. After that giving an update to the city council at the July 6 meeting and a public forum in mid-July. Staff would like to hear what the members like about option 1 and option 2 and if they want any modifications. Flagship Recreation a Minnesota company that represents Landscape Structures who is also a Minnesota company, will make the recommended changes and prepare a final design. Previous comments on the initial designs are reflected in these options such as a more natural color pallet.

Concept 1 comments. Macko loves the merry go round, a bigger kid play area, a defined younger kid play area, a large amount of swings, the diverse structures with various climbing items, different styles of slides. Levitt likes the amount of shade, the merry go round, the accessibility of the swing styles. Eisenbise likes the shade, and would want more, her kids love spinning things, the roller slide. Stutzman added at his previous city they installed a merry go round that is awesome. It is wheelchair accessible with a lever in the center that you can spin it from or push from the outside, and they also installed a roller slide. Abu Ammo asked what the communication board was. Stutzman replied it is inclusive play and a method for children to communicate. He instructed LSI to stay away from the noise type of features for inclusive sensory play. There are other tactile boards along the structure that are touch related or game types. Levitt likes having options for kids who are multilingual. Stutzman replied that is good to make sure the communication board is multilingual. Lupkes suggests reducing some of the flat surfaces for graffiti control. He likes the larger kid area. Zip lines are always busy at every park he goes to. Stutzman replied zip lines have come up a few times and due to the area of this park it would be challenging to install one here, but he does like them even though they are a maintenance challenge. It could be a feature in another park in the future. Marquez Simula asked when the tennis court was still at the park she had asked about getting the court repaired and was told that the ground was too unstable to fix it. She wants to make sure the area will be able to withstand the new construction. Cullen replied this area is an original swamp that was filled in. The engineering department did core samples. This is a good point to bring up because that area does have a lot of ground water close to the surface. He saw plans with drain tile and other types of material. Stutzman replied that is a good item to bring up and will make sure LSI is aware of the history. Their crew has been onsite as well. He asked the Commission if anything is missing from Concept 1. Marquez Simula would like to see more shade. Eisenbise asked what the surface would be. Stutzman replied the green is the rubberized poured in place, the brown is the engineered fiber wood chips, the concrete path is to indicate the two areas of play but rather than have a path to no where we would look at having it poured in place with a different color. Eisenbise referred to a previous concept that had a small sand area and a bridge, she asked if that is scrapped now because of the timeline. Stutzman replied partially because of the timeline but more so because of the costs. Eisenbise verified that the poured in place surface can be done prior to the work on the lift station. Stutzman replied yes. He just had a meeting today with engineering and public works staff. Abu Ammo asked if benches could be added around the park. Stutzman replied that staff noticed that as well, and yes we want to incorporate seating into this. Marquez Simula indicated it has been discussed within the city to have a bench and tree program where community members could purchase in memory or celebration of someone. She believes people would love to purchase a bench at this park. There is a program to receive a bench through the plastic recycling program but that only happens after collecting a lot of plastic. Stutzman added that we may want to have a few benches installed in the play area at the beginning to get the project going and then look at the remainder of the park with a different approach. Marquez Simula indicated the benches could be installed and then after donations a plaque can be added later. Eisenbise asked if the parking lot is staying the same with both options.

Stutzman replied yes. The only change in that area would be removal of the retaining wall. The lift station will provide some other opportunities for improvements within the park like the pathways after construction. Staff are looking at adding a drinking fountain and how a line can be brought in during the lift station project. Staff are planning how to keep moving the playground project forward without affecting the lift station.

Concept 2 comments. Eisenbise likes the circular shape and centralized tower. It is nice for a parent with little kids that you know they are in one centralized area even if you cannot see them directly. It has opportunities for climbing higher, cargo climbs are always popular. She likes the cave and the house but would choose one of those and add the merry go round from concept 1. Macko likes that this design reminds him of the old castle heights. Deneen asked what the accessibility is for the concepts. Stutzman asked in what manner does he mean for accessibility. Deneen replied a comparison between the two concepts. Stutzman indicated he will ask that of the playground company but from his perspective there is the ramp system in option 2 has only one entrance with other transfer areas. Staff commented on this as well and even though it has one entrance ramp it doesn't have multiple interactive features that would promote continued play. In concept 1 there is the accessible merry go round, the swing, and a ramp. Deneen indicated concept 2 feels more limited. Stutzman agreed it is more climbing centered. Marquez Simula likes the extended swing area with the hammock style swing from concept 1. Saefke indicated the boat looking feature does move so anyone can walk or wheel onto it. From a cost standpoint having two larger accessible features and multiple ramps my propose a challenge. Abu Ammo asked if concept 2 is more expensive. Stutzman replied they are very similar and option 2 might have a slightly higher expense but still within ten to fifteen thousand dollars of each other. Deneen asked if there has been any feedback about the small house type structure at other parks. He sees that it could easily be vandalized or used improperly. Members agreed. Eisenbise indicated this option needs more shade. She asked if there were the same number of slides. Stutzman replied yes they both have the roller slide and two similar styles. Marquez Simula likes the little kid play structure in concept 1 better than 2 because it is more accessible.

Stutzman asked if the members have a preference to option 1 or 2 based on what is currently presented. Five people like concept 1 but the designs were equally liked. He reported staff felt the same way in that there are features from each concept that they like. Shade and swings were recognized and the accessibility looked at in depth by staff. He takes great passion throughout his career to learn the difference between accessibility and inclusion. For example, if the merry go round is over in the corner it is accessible, but it does not offer inclusion being so far away from other play areas. There will be an updated design to present to the city council on July 6 with a more updated design for public presentation by mid-July. A final design and quote by the end of July would go for city council approval July 27th, ordering product in August allows a target installation towards the end of September. As soon as there is an open house date he will share that with the commission and asks them to tell other community members about the opportunity for feedback. Marquez Simula appreciates the concept designs show children in wheelchairs and different skin colors. She would like to see different body sizes. It is hard to tell in the photo if a woman is wearing a hijab but wants to make sure that is represented in future renderings as a true representation of our community. Stutzman replied LSI has been very good with representation and appreciates her other suggestions. He thanked the commission for their feedback.

Park and Recreation Month 2026 Recognition

Stutzman is excited to bring this to Columbia Heights. The city council proclaimed July as Parks and

Recreation Month. July is national parks and recreation month as supported by the National Recreation and Parks Association. The fact that the city council was able to recognize that and say wonderful things about the parks and rec system meant a lot to him. The plans for this year with him being new do not have any major activities but he challenged staff to come up with small things or ideas to celebrate. If commission members have ideas for the future please share them. Marquez Simula shared that she has been walking with new people in her neighborhood and they just gush over the parks and recreation programs. They are so excited for summer. She indicated the proclamation that Stutzman brought forward she pointed out that the city changed the wording to state the narration but not the "Whereas," because it is so difficult to translate. It isn't very accessible to try to explain the meaning of whereas. Stutzman shared the proclamation with the recreation staff this morning and they appreciated it as well.

Reports

B. Public Works Director

Cullen reported staff have been very busy getting ready for Jamboree. People have probably noticed there is a lot of work happening within the city by other contractors, there is fiber optics, Center Point Energy, work along 40th, and he has been working along with them to avoid the Jamboree area or other traffic control issues. Normal seasonal work is still being done.

Deneen asked if public works put up the new street signs in his neighborhood. Cullen replied yes they are taking the city by zones and updated old street name signage.

Marquez Simula asked about the sidewalk along Central Avenue in front of the old Rainbow site for the timeline of repair. Cullen replied staff and MNDOT have looked at it and how they understand it, now it is the responsibility of the people who own that site. Staff did get the owners to put up a type of temporary ramp so that people could walk through. It is in the hands of the Community Development Department, and he will check in with them.

C. Commission Members

Macko asked if Recreation had a report. Stutzman replied that he removed it for this meeting being that so much of the old business was for parks and recreation that he figured another report wasn't needed. Macko thanked him. Stutzman is hoping to bring the recreation coordinators in at future meetings to give updates throughout the year under new business, as well as the parks foreperson. Eisenbise asked if we are no longer seeing the expense reports. Stutzman replied he updated because those are already approved by the city council, it wasn't anything official and from his perspective seemed like a filler place. When projects occur, he will bring forward the budgets and go over details. Staff are not trying to hide anything but that was a blanket approval of everything that city council has already done and he didn't feel that is the best use of the time for the meetings. Those items are also available in the council packets if anyone ever wants to review them.

Deneen met with the individuals using Huset Park for cricket this past weekend. They spoke about what their needs are to have a small cricket field or space. In other communities a small cricket area has been basically plopped in the middle of a field. This might be something to consider in the future, especially with the soccer field update. Stutzman reported he had a gentleman reach out to him as well as one of the council members connecting him with a second cricket player. He is going to suggest for them to participate in the system plan update. We certainly want to proceed with something like this but want to be purposeful on where it is placed. Mend has been very aware of Ecuadorian volleyball on the hard

surfaces and other cultural uses within the parks. He is making sure there is a sign for the system plan project in Huset Park where cricket players go, at McKenna Park by the hockey rink, and he received permission from Silverwood to place a sign on their trail. Deneen asked if one could be put at Kordiak. Stutzman replied that Mend has already asked Anoka County for permission.

Eisenbise noted on the presentation from Mend that McKenna Park was listed that it is no longer rented. Saefke indicated that is just a preliminary example, she noticed it as well and would be correcting the information with Mend.

Marquez Simula thanked the Commission for letting her ask questions, participate, and be in attendance on Buesgens behalf. Members thanked her for attending.

Stutzman appreciates everyone's feedback and questions on both parts of these projects. He is excited to get the commission members involved in both processes as it is valuable feedback.

Motion by Eisenbise, second by Abu Ammo, to adjourn the meeting. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Macko adjourned the meeting at 7:40 pm.
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary