



**Park & Recreation Commission Meeting**  
**City Hall, 3989 Central Ave NE**  
**July 22, 2026**

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## **MINUTES**

### **Call to Order/Roll Call**

Macko called the meeting to order at 6:03 pm

Members present: Michael Deneen, Teresa Eisenbise, Lisa Levitt, Matt Lupkes, Andrew Macko

Staff present: Deanna Saefke, Recreation Administrative Assistant; John Stutzman, Parks & Recreation Director; Connie Buesgens, 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 Lukes, to approve the modified agenda by removing item #5 and #7 due to staff being unable to attend the meeting. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

**Motion** by Lupkes, second by Deneen, to correct a spelling error of Deneen's name and approve the amended meeting minutes from June 24, 2026. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

### **Letters and Requests**

None at this time.

### **Old Business**

#### **Parks and Recreation System Plan Update**

Stutzman recapped that at last month's meeting MEND provided an update. Where we are now is they have provided a lot of maps and details in the Case for Action. This will be the first part of the final report. They do want to make this portion public before the final report is brought forward. Staff is reviewing the draft and staff are looking for comments from the commission as well. Levitt asked at the Silver Lake Boat Launch it should be noted that there is an installation of native plants at that site. Prestemon Park and any other areas that the city pays to maintain native plantings should be noted in the detail report for each location. Stutzman will give that feedback to MEND. Levitt added this is an asset that should be called out for our efforts.

#### **Sullivan Lake Park Playground Public Engagement Recap**

Stutzman reminded the commission that staff are trying to move through this process rather quickly to get something in the ground this year. The public engagement meeting was held on the 14<sup>th</sup>. It was a really good turn out with 35 to 40 people there that evening. From people that live right by the park to some families that use the park. One of the owners from Flagship Recreation was there to talk about the

playground equipment in more detail and provide information for questions. He and Stutzman agreed that people left the meeting feeling positive, there were good questions and constructive feedback. He indicated many of the responses of the 53 online surveys were items that were discussed at the meeting. Overall people are pleased that we are moving forward with the playground. He thanked the commission for all the ways they have helped guide this process.

Stutzman shared the summary of the feedback. The piece he would like to highlight is that out of the 60+ written responses, 76% said the design we are moving forward with is either good or excellent. That is highly positive as we continue to move forward. There were some common themes; some we can address and others we cannot. One theme he was pleased to hear Flagship address was the opinion that this structure might not be that appealing to older kids. The renderings are tough to see what the details are, and Flagship could point out that certain features are eight feet high or six feet high. People in person felt a lot more comfortable with the design after hearing about the details. Shade is a continued theme or desire. We will continue to educate people in that this is unofficially phase one of the Sullivan Lake Park improvements. Remaining portions will be coming in with the lift station project in 2027. Details are still being worked on but adding more seating in shade spots and adding some trees at some point, adding a drinking fountain, utilities to add lighting in the future, and other items may be added. At the open house someone pointed out that there was only one infant swing and Flagship immediately responded that an additional swing could be added. Several comments were received about the color scheme and that one of the accent pieces had a turquoise color, Flagship has adjusted that to be a blue color to match the more natural setting and colors within the park. Staff are preparing to move this design forward, bringing it to the city council for approval. We will continue to educate the public on what processes are happening, and when things are happening. The major work is anticipated to begin in September. There are little things beginning to happen, the parks team has already removed the retaining wall from the parking lot to the park. Stutzman again thanked the commission for all their work on this project.

Macko asked if MEND was able to get a good turnout of engagement during the Jamboree. Stutzman hadn't officially seen any numbers on that but being there that evening he stated there were a lot of good interactions and ideas shared. MEND will be attending the Monarch Festival tomorrow evening. The next phase is to look at what audiences we haven't reached yet and how they will reach them. Deneen mentioned that having translated items will be needed. Stutzman replied they have a staff member who is bilingual and planning to be at the Monarch Festival. Buesgens reported she informed a formal councilmember who was commissioning for ADA accessible playgrounds that this project is happening. Deneen indicated that it was brought up at a previous meeting the concern with where the playground is located to the parking lot that it could be an accessibility issue. Stutzman asked in what manner. Deneen replied that where the playground is located will be a jaunt from parking. Stutzman replied no it is going to be next to the parking lot where the tennis courts were. He believes that he spoke with the same person and in regards to the paved walking paths he sees his point, but with this being a smaller park the design concept looks further away that what it really is. Staff have noted that and if it becomes an issue they will address it.

### **New Business**

Soccer Field Project: Defining Project Goals and Desired Outcomes

Stutzman indicated he is excited to bring this item to the commission. The city council has identified this project as a priority. Upon his arrival he has been working on this as well. Huset Park west was identified as a preferred location for said facility as we move forward. He has been working to advance this project

looking at potential options for what type of amenities, what type of field, staff have talked with a couple private engineering firms, as well as a turf vendor who could be the general contractor for this project. They have looked at site evaluation work to determine the soil conditions. As staff have gone through this process so far, he has heard a lot of different feedback as to what amenities are the priorities, what this field should look like and how it will be used.

Stutzman would like to run an exercise with the commission to start to work through questions. Included in the packet are some of the preliminary design estimates. These were done for free as prework by two companies that have worked with the city in the past. They looked at different types of natural turf fields, and various amenities. The estimated fees range anywhere from \$700,000 up to \$1.6 million. Looking at that price range staff are trying to find a better way to do this project. When the city council approved this project and the Sullivan Lake Park project the amount was \$720,000 for both projects. The Sullivan Lake Park project after the grant fund is expected to be around \$350,000. Approximately two years ago the early cost estimate for this project was \$590,000, which is admittedly low then and now, especially when you consider lighting for the field. Things have considerably changed since that estimate. Stutzman feels this project can still move forward and look at various options.

Lupkes asked for a brief history of the project being a new member of the commission. Has there been a lot of time and money invested to date. Where are we in the planning or approval process. Stutzman replied that for the planning process there has been a commitment by the city council to proceed with this project and put priority to make sure we are proceeding with it. Staff are in the evaluation phase as to what the final result will look like, what the budget is, how it is funded, and what are the needs that we are trying to resolve. To proceed with this location, we know that Huset is a former site where things were buried and soil borings are being conducted to find out what condition the soil is in. With any field construction moving the earth and properly preparing the area is the hardest part. He spoke with a few consultants and as part of their recruitment process, they have given some estimates based on other projects they have done in the area this year. Looking at those price tags that is far different than what is currently budgeted. That doesn't mean that the budget can't be amended. His goal is to figure out if this is a natural grass field, a turf field, who are the users we are building this facility for, it is a drop in facility, a rented facility, should it have lights or not, and start answering this broad level questions so he can start to think about an RFP process. He was informed there were public meetings in the past. The information shared with him has been very broad scope. This is why he wants to start with the commission to see if we can hon in on these items. He would then like to prepare a concept from appointed officials and staff discussions and take a design to the public. Deneen asked if there are any current concepts in a visual form. Stutzman replied since they were done for free or very inexpensively they looked like someone took clip art and placed a box with lines on the field. To answer Lupkes other question, other than staff time the only money that has been invested is the soil borings next week and the assessment done two years ago, which was approximately \$30,000. Eisenbise clarified the assessment was \$30,000. Stutzman replied yes. Eisenbise replied from her experience on the commission there were public hearings, the public was very vocal about wanting a soccer field in Heights. To their point we have a lot of ballfields in the city that are not being used. There was a consultant that provided pictures during that open house. To hear now that we do not have the funds for what was discussed is disappointing. The questions are valid as to what we want to use this field for. Stutzman amended his statement that there are funds available in the park funds that we can increase this budget. He wants to be responsible with those funds knowing that we have master plan in process, so emptying that park fund and then having nothing to work with to implement the master plan wouldn't be good either. He wants to make sure we are intentional. Buesgens indicated that she was

informed there is more money in that park fund than she anticipated. It builds up fast and there are two other development projects coming up that will contribute to that fund. Lupkes asked when talking about increasing the budget that is only for the planning part and not the overall project. Stutzman replied that everything is on the table. Lupkes asked how much money is available to spend on this project or how much it will cost. Stutzman replied he is trying to figure out what type of amenities the public is looking for so that we can get the cost of the project. The cost estimates shared today were done for free but have changed since that time. Items like synthetic turf are going to be over 1 million dollars. Deneen asked why we would put synthetic turf in. Stutzman replied it comes down to the use that we are looking for. If this is a natural turf field that anyone and everyone can use the inhouse maintenance fees will be enormous because a high-end soccer field is expensive to maintain. Lupkes stated the goal is to put together the framework for the project so a budget can be made. Stutzman replied yes, and there is a budget that has been allocated that is not sufficient, but there are funds available, should we get to a design that we say we are moving forward with. Lupkes indicated his son loves playing at the small artificial turf field at the catholic school. If we could find a way to install artificial turf it would be used more, and as was stated the natural turf would cost a lot of maintenance issues that we don't want to fund long-term.

Stutzman indicated his first question, who are the primary users of this facility. If it is going to be a game field only the maintenance costs would go down a little because it wouldn't be used all day, but if we want something to be open to the public that has a lot more usage. For him, just coming into Columbia Heights in the last few months he would say that yes we want more people to have access to this. Do we want smaller turf fields at kind of pop-up locations or are we looking for a full size game field. These are parameters he is trying to identify. Stutzman has seen comments from people wanting a full size game field, to a small place where families can play together. If we do want to provide both, then how do we do that. Deneen asked if there was already a design idea for a smaller field instead of a larger one. Stutzman replied that one thing with a bigger field is that you can break it down to smaller fields, especially with synthetic turf. Deneen asked if there is an option to do a hybrid field like what the MN United have. Stutzman replied that no one has given a quote for that. He would guess that is the most expensive option. The price tag of turf is not the materials, it is the prep, storm water management and all of that process that becomes expensive. With a grass field it is the maintenance that is the expensive cost. Eisenbise asked, with a large natural grass field would additional staff be needed to hire for the maintenance. Stutzman replied that an internal discussion on that would be needed. Lupkes added that it can be a struggle to find help as it is and doesn't know if we should rely on that option. Deneen stated that in professional games they are maintaining the field at halftime because the field gets beat up so quickly.

Stutzman asked the commission what role should a soccer facility play within the city and what issues are we trying to solve. Deneen answered, expanding the offerings of recreation to people and especially a changing population. Macko agreed. Eisenbise added a larger field would bring more games, and more people coming into the community which also enhances the economy by spending money in the city. Deneen added it brings more usage of the park system. The ballfield on the far side gets more use from music in the park than it does for baseball. Stutzman asked what recreation needs are we hoping this project will address. What is the need we are trying to solve. Is it providing a game field that is rented or is it for friends and family to play on, is it a desire to bring tournaments here, are there other priorities within these goals. Eisenbise asked what clubs were in attendance for the open house meeting that was held at city hall. Saefke replied the Strikers Club. Stutzman replied he had talked with Gaid from that group. Eisenbise stated there are soccer organizations beyond just our park and rec programs. Macko

indicated it would be difficult to govern whether or not there would be a fee associated with usage of the facility. Deneen agreed. Macko indicated the same type of issue happened with the park shelters when they were being rented out and that person would show up to the shelter already being used by other people who didn't clean up after themselves. With the field there could be other people playing on it prior to a rental and then the field is in poor condition for what they paid for. Deneen indicated there could be a reservation system but it is also for use when it is not reserved. Eisenbise added a first come first serve policy would not be appropriate for a soccer field.

Stutzman asked who are the intended primary users that this field should be built for. Deneen replied it sounds like it would be for adults, older teenagers, and clubs with older players. Macko replied, older youth, going forward in age that would technically get more use out of it in the future. You should consider in the warmer months when it is light out later in the evening, who will be out using the field. Lupkes asked what kind of competition we have in the area for that type of field. Are there other communities that have a full size field and or would ours be a standalone or stand out and be able to bring in other users. Deneen feels that it is a proximity issue and the bigger fields are in Blaine. People from northeast Minneapolis, here and Fridley that don't want to drive all the way to Blaine. Eisenbise indicated she had heard the same response from people. Deneen indicated the answer to what the recreation needs to address, is keeping people in their community and giving them the option to have something here versus going elsewhere. Stutzman clarified is it Heights residents who are saying they want to stay here for activities or Minneapolis and surrounding areas not wanting to go further. Deneen, Eisenbise and Macko replied both. Stutzman asked who are we trying to serve. Buesgens replied Heights residents. Levitt agreed. Stutzman indicated he is hearing that this would be catered towards adults. Deneen replied in depends because the design is going to impact the users. Stutzman is trying to figure out how we design the facility for who we are intending to use it, instead of saying we'll design it and then figure out who will use it. Lupkes asked if two smaller fields can fit inside a large one. Stutzman said generally, yes. The challenge from an administrative standpoint is looking at adult use. Deneen knows there is a field in Roseville but unsure if it is open to the public. Buesgens indicated that for years people have voiced their concerns trying to find activities for teenagers. Parents don't want their kids to go to Minneapolis because they get in trouble with other teens. They want to keep them closer to home playing here. Teens often do not have a lot to do in this community and if you can make this a multiuse field there are other things they can do here. Buesgens asked if the fencing around the ballfields need to stay there. Stutzman replied that is one thing he has been looking into and there is a facility in Maple Grove that has two facilities that are all turf for ballfields and rectangle fields. He stated that when considering drawing people from outside communities to use the facility, having only one full size field would not be a draw for organized tournaments. Just having one field will get league games but not tournaments. Deneen was thinking about Rosebrook Park in Roseville that has at least two fields.

Stutzman asked what the facility should primarily support. Are we looking at organized soccer, informal soccer, are we looking at soccer only options, or do we include other rec sports or a multiuse facility. From an administrative standpoint if it is organized soccer it would be managed very differently. If it is organized soccer we could look at natural turf instead of artificial. With that informal usage piece, maintenance would be a huge concern based on natural turf. Deneen asked if this is something we need to go back to the community on for input. Stutzman replied yes but with a direction and not just a blank slate. Similar to the recent meeting regarding Sullivan Lake Park one of the things that went well was presenting the concept design and asking what are the good points, what is missing, and where we are going. Deneen asked if we still had the designs from the open house. Stutzman replied what he read through from that discussion was very vague. Deneen stated that unfortunately currently we are not the

best representative of the soccer needs within the city. Levitt asked what the feedback is from the park master planning process with MEND and are people commenting that we need more soccer fields. Stutzman replied he is interested in seeing those results as well. Based on general community feedback we need soccer options and there is no disagreement with that. Buesgens replied that during the open house meeting there was a lot of tension because the community has been asking for soccer fields for years. Levitt indicated looking at the estimated prices this is an expensive need, not that we shouldn't meet this need, but we need to make sure we are being specific about what this community needs and ensuring that. Macko stated there is always the problem that with community meetings there will always be people that cannot make it to that and have opinions on both sides. Eisenbise stated the people in attendance are often the loudest voices. Levitt agreed and wanted to make sure the people without the loudest voice are still heard. Lupkes asked how many kids are enrolled in soccer. Saefke reported in the past there have been two teams at each level. Last year there may have been one team at each grade level with two teams in one as well. Stutzman indicated outside of our fall league we see a lot more recreational use of the soccer fields. When he drove past Huset Park this evening he could see a group on the soccer field and knew that they were with Gaid. During a recent discussion with him, Gaid stated he would prefer smaller fields. He believes a soccer facility will be a valued amenity, and he wants to make sure we are looking at this through a lense five years from now to say that we are successful. Buesgens indicated the recreation department deals with younger kids and for the last few years the high school has had waiting lists for kids wanting to join soccer. Levitt asked if we could get estimates for annual maintenance costs with different options. Knowing that we have park buildings that are unused or dilapidated she doesn't want to see the city build a soccer facility and then not have enough funds budgeted to maintain it in future years. Stutzman stated that is a wonderful question but also hard to determine without knowing what type of facility we are trying to build. He reported that while synthetic turf will have a higher up front cost the annual maintenance will be lower. It does not require irrigation, water, or as much repair after each use. Another part of the conversation is continuing to expand what soccer fields park maintenance currently services until some of these other questions are answered, so that the community has places to play. He knows this project is a priority with the city council.

Stutzman indicated this item can certainly be brought to the next meeting, so people have time to reflect on it and discuss it with the community. As a staff member he believes that he has done what he can with the information given to him regarding previous meetings and continues to work with public works and engineering staff to determine what this looks like. It is a good idea to go back to the community and ask if we are on track, but a clearer picture is needed to have the public react to what they like or what might be missing. Macko indicated having some time to digest what was presented tonight and discussing it as a future item will be best and then engaging with the public at a future time. Deneen stated that advertising a future meeting so community members could attend. Eisenbise indicated going back to the leaders of the soccer organizations will give a better understanding of who we are serving. Stutzman replied this is one component that is unique to Heights in that there isn't just one group to go to. Deneen asked what field the high school soccer teams use. Stutzman replied the football stadium and the practice field. Saefke replied there are goals behind Columbia Academy. There is also the Fridley Heights Soccer Association. Stutzman indicated he has reached out to contacts in Fridley. He stated the parks team is more than happy to continue to set up soccer fields around the city. There is money added to the budget to purchase new soccer goals. He indicated that Levitt said it very well, that what is it that we are trying to do with the dollars we have available and have it be in a responsible manner. Buesgens stated historically Columbia Heights has always done the cheapest route, and it is important to think about the investment twenty years down the road. Levitt replied, what is the

most that we can do in the correct manner to serve the soccer community. Eisenbise indicated there is also the viewpoint of if you build it they will come and use it. She would rather stay in this community to have her kids play soccer and not go elsewhere. Stutzman added he has already been working with the Recreation Coordinator to change the youth soccer program, improve the experience and looking into other communities to build partnerships. Stutzman asked when the commission would like to continue this discussion. Members replied at the next meeting.

## **Reports**

### **Commission Members**

Macko asked councilmember Buesgens if she has anything to share. Buesgens shared that she received a video from the man that documented the baby birds and wildlife in Sullivan Lake. There are otters in the lake. She will share the video with Stutzman.

Eisenbise indicated she has had the book How to Turn A Place Around for a few months and has really enjoyed it. Levitt has it and Macko read it as well. Eisenbise stated there are really good ideas of what a community could look like. Buesgens liked the part where they implement mini trial concepts within parks to see what features work better than others.

Saefke reported the Monarch Festival is tomorrow. There is more Music in the Park events happening in August. Stutzman stated we are looking for volunteers to attend events where we can gain a more diverse public opinion on the parks system master plan. Staff will have a table at the August 5<sup>th</sup> Music in the Park and would welcome a volunteer or two. Tomorrow city staff and MEND will be at the Monarch Festival so they will cover that event. Lupkes volunteered to be at the August 5<sup>th</sup> event. Saefke indicated the Arts & Info Fair has been rescheduled to coincide with the final music in the park on August 19<sup>th</sup>. Please attend and tell other people. Stutzman indicated MEND will not be attending that as they have done other public engagement. Buesgens asked how many engagements MEND has planned. Stutzman replied Jamboree was one, the Monarch Festival, and then Truck or Treat. The hope with that final one is to bring more details to the public and see if we are going in the right direction. These are very strategic planned events. He stated that MEND is doing a great job on this project.

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

Macko adjourned the meeting at 7:08 pm.  
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary