



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

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## MINUTES

### Call to Order/Roll Call

Teresa Eisenbise called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm

Members present: Donia Abu Ammo, Michael Deneen, Teresa Eisenbise, Lisa Levitt, Matt Lupkes

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Director; Deanna Saefke, Interim Recreation Director; Connie Buesgens, Council Liaison

Orientation of new commission members was completed prior to the start of the meeting. Ion is present for any additional questions. Saefke asked Ion to go over one item. She informed the members that we will be going through a one year process of a park master plan system for all the parks within the city. We are using the company Mend Collaborative. They will be doing a lot of outreach at public gatherings, city events, and attending some commission meetings. One thing they will be asking for is additional help from the commission members along the way. At the Art & Info Fair for example they will be at a table but may want a representative from this group to be there as well to help with public engagement. They may want the commission to attend events so that their staff do not need to be there. Or if any member knows of a local event like a school function where a member could be gathering feedback on how the community wants to see the park system develop. As these things are occurring Saefke asked Ion what the rules are on how members could meet outside of a regular Park & Recreation Commission Meeting. Ion recommends three members or less because our quorum is four. If there is a subcommittee or group that is passionate about community outreach, that subcommittee should report back to the commission as a whole, the direction should be from the commission as a whole to the subcommittee and the subcommittee then says what they've decided on and there is consensus with the entire group moving forward. This is all noted and documented in the meeting minutes. Eisenbise clarified if there was a group chat or a group email there could only be three commission members. Ion replied yes, unless you are discussing something that you are never going to vote on for city policy. Deneen stated the city council has a similar policy. Ion replied yes. When there are going to be four or more Commission Members attending an event, a quorum notice will be posted to indicate there could be members in attendance with no official city business will be conducted.

Eisenbise asked for an explanation of serial meetings. Ion replied when a series of meetings are set up to skirt around the open meeting law. So, you call one member and say something like we don't like this, so you tell two other members and then the information is being spread around. Another way can be created is on social media. One member can create a post for an idea or project that is upcoming, other members can give it a thumbs up, and you are then articulating support for something that hasn't happened in an open meeting yet. Ion expressed that she is always available for help.

Eisenbise asked the Commission Members to introduce themselves. She began Teresa Eisenbise and has lived in Columbia Heights for about twelve years. She and her husband have three kids. Prior to these three years on the Park & Recreation Commission she was on the Library Board. Mike Deneen has been on this commission for about a year. His wife is a City Council Member. They have lived here for six years. Sara Ion has lived here for over eleven years with her husband. It is a great honor to help the people in her community vote. Anyone is welcome to be an election judge as well. Connie Buesgens is on the City Council and is the current liaison to this commission. She has lived here for twenty-seven years. Donia Abu Ammo has lived here her whole life. All of her siblings have gone through the Columbia Heights school district and love it here. Lisa Levitt lived here sixteen years. She and her husband have an eight year old daughter so they are in the park almost daily. Matt Lupkes has been eighteen years. His son attends Valley View. He coached baseball Tuesdays and Thursdays. Deanna Saefke has worked in the city for twenty years in the Recreation Department. She grew up in Fridley, so she is a hometown kind of girl and knows a lot of history in the area. David Cullen started

working here in 2017 and has had various roles during that time. Working at the city is his first kind of experience with the local city government industry. He has grown very fond of the city, its residents, the workers, the council members, and very happy to be working here for the residents.

### **Election of Officers**

Saefke indicated the current Chair is Andrew Macko and he was unable to attend the meeting tonight. He is willing to still be the Chair unless someone else would like to take on that role. The Vice Chair was held by a member whose term ended.

**Motion** by Deneen, second by Levitt, to nominate Andrew Macko as Chair. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

**Motion** by Deneen, second by Levitt, to nominate Teresa Eisenbise as Vice Chair. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried**

### **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**

Eisenbise asked what biochar is. Cullen explained it is a product of wood scraps that have been burned in the absence of oxygen, a process called pyrolysis. It is used at Public Works on the athletic fields, and it is a form of carbon capture into the ground. It meets goals of sustainability and one small section of it has capabilities as large as a tennis court to maintain and hold onto nutrients passing through the soil. The biochar is mixed with compost and spread onto the fields. It holds nutrients into the soil, and we are using it to improve the athletic fields and other areas around the city. The city forester also uses it when planting new trees. This process is usually done in the fall. One order can last one or two years depending on how much is put down per year. One site that has been treated was Keyes Park and if you stand at the top of the hill you can tell the difference with the ballfield and the other areas that biochar was not used. Buesgens added that once you add biochar to the soil it lasts forever. It can be used in your gardens and yards. It retains water as well. Mother Earth Garden sells it for about \$20, so it is an upfront investment but saves money long term with fertilizer and water. Eisenbise stated she is happy to hear how it is being used in the parks.

Eisenbise asked about the solar charge on the Murzyn Hall report. Ion reported that Director of Engineering Widmer included information regarding solar panels in the recent work session packet. Saefke reported there has been energy audits conducted throughout the city facilities. Cullen added the goal is to determine ways to be more sustainable and reduce costs. He would encourage Eisenbise to check out the information in the work session.

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

### **Letters and Requests**

None at this time.

### **Old Business**

City Park System Review. Saefke handed out copies of recent park plans to show the newest members what the current park projects are. Cullen reported Sullivan Lake Park has the most recent version of the master plan from the consultant based on interactions with residents on the layout of a new play structure. There is a larger project in conjunction with this project, and that is the lift station. What a lift station is, based on elevation as sewage leaves people's homes it has

to make its way down to where it is processed. This is a lift station that moves it through elevation changes. It is a very old station and needs to be replaced in conjunction with the Medtronic site development. One of issues that we ran into in this process is that there are special pumps needed and they are on back order for 17-20 weeks out. Staff are looking at other pumps that can be sourced and staff know how to operate. The consultants are trying to help solve the situation. Now staff are working more closely with the consultants on the two components within the park project to find a way to continue with the park playground. Where the lift station is and the future play structures, they are overlapping. In working with the consultants, staff are trying to ensure the construction can begin in 2026. More details will be determined when the decision of the pumps can be made. The work coming along with that project will be the purchase of playground equipment. Eisenbise has a hypothetical question, if a certain piece of equipment that we want is also backordered, how does that process work? Cullen replied that we want to be careful about the playground manufacturer that is chosen. It is important to choose a manufacturer that carries replacement parts over a long period of time. In the case in question, Cullen has not heard of extreme backlogs in playground equipment. Staff would want to continue the process in this project. Construction would begin in 2026 and with everything going on in that park, the playground might not be open until 2027 with turf establishment, the water treatment pipes in that area, and some other things. If that is the case where something was backordered you could potentially put in footings and finish when the piece becomes available. That being the worst case scenario.

Saefke added that with a lot of the play structures you can easily interchange pieces. The play structures from the previous packet were general examples of theme types and not a complete list to pick from. It was mentioned at prior meetings for members to think about the playgrounds they see at other parks and what features they like or don't like. This is an exciting time where we get to choose what we see next at our city parks. Saefke reminded the commission that we haven't had a playground or park project happen for years. Sullivan Lake Park is unique because it also has water treatment and the lake is controlled by the DNR, so they have input, and then the MWMO watershed is involved, plus the project on Central Avenue with MNDOT and how the stormwater flows into the lake is a contributing piece. This has many entities involved and it isn't like we are just tasked with installing a new playground. If that was the only project we would be quicker in the process. So as commission members hear comments regarding the delays, they can point out some of the background.

Deneen asked if there was a transformer or additional power at Sullivan Lake Park. Cullen replied the small building for the existing lift station. This is also the power source for all the pathway lighting. Deneen asked because he has often thought about installing charging stations for EVs to promote green energy. That source is probably nowhere near the parking lot. He has thought about it at Huset Park with the new soccer field because that has better potential based on proximity to the parking lot. Saefke replied that is something to keep in mind for future discussions on park developments.

Cullen stated the next park project is the soccer field at Huset Park. In 2025 the city hired a consultant to look at our various parks and determine what park would be the best location for a soccer field. They looked at how athletic fields are currently used and what the current demands are. Through different meetings and community outreach the decision was made to install a soccer field at Huset Park West. This will eliminate two of the baseball fields on the west side of the park closest to the parking lot behind Murzyn Hall. Fields 4 and 3 will be retained and eliminate the two lower used fields. Initial plans for the soccer field indicate irrigation and lighting. Currently the engineering department is writing an RFP for this project, and we will go out to bid for an engineering firm to manage this project. From there we will bid out the actual construction. Saefke added the RFP is a request for proposal that is different companies to bid on what their costs would be to design and install the soccer field. Cullen replied that direction will be set by the dollar amount for this project. Staff are hoping for construction to start in September and obtain attractive bids. After the grass is established it would open in spring to summer of 2027.

Lupkes asked if any bleachers were being planned along the field. Cullen replied that question has been raised and per

our consultants' recommendations and consensus of the Commission bleachers are not typically at a soccer field. There is a natural hill on the north side and grade change next to the parking lot.

Saefke indicated that staff wanted to introduce the new members to the current projects for this group. She asked if there were any other questions. Eisenbise asked if the construction will be in 2027. Cullen replied the soccer field should begin in fall of 2026. Opening in spring to summer of 2027 to make sure the playing surface is established. Eisenbise asked about the cost of lighting. Cullen replied that the initial proposal was just a preliminary estimate. When the RFP's are sent out we will dial in the specifications for lighting and get a better estimate of the cost. Buesgens asked what the conditions are for the adult softball field and youth field at Huset. Is it possible to see what the extra cost would be to upgrade those lights at the same time and if there would be a discount for two projects. Cullen replied that is a good question. He would work with the engineering department to see how that would fit in with the Master Plan. Everything on the west side of the park would be easier and potentially cheaper but any work done across the street might be more expensive. He indicated a lot of the issues with that lighting is with the units themselves and they can be quite expensive to replace.

### **New Business**

None at this time.

### **Reports**

#### **A. Interim Recreation Director**

Saefke informed the new members that the previous Recreation Director retired in January. Being the longest employee on staff and his administrative assistant she stepped in as interim recreation director since that time. The new Parks & Recreation Director, John Stutzman, will start on Monday. He brings a lot of recreation and park development experience in his career, and we are excited to have hm join the team.

Saefke stated for those who have not heard, one of our city firefighters, Tony Cuzuppe passed away unexpectedly on Friday. He has been with the city since 2002. He is very involved in the honor guard and involved in many groups, not just in Columbia Heights. There will be a wake on Wednesday evening in Coon Rapids and the funeral on Thursday with a procession to the fire station so you may see that around 3pm. The neighboring city fire departments have been covering shifts all last weekend and for the funeral. Cuzuppe was a big presence in our community and will be an immense loss. He has a wife and two children in high school. Buesgens added the procession will go past the old city hall and fire department because that is where he started his career here. He was a really great guy.

Saefke indicated the recreation department is gearing up for summer activities. There is already a lot of kids enrolled in the summer park programs like Glitter Bugs and Dyno Hites. We feel the participation in SPARKS and TNT might be lower this year because many of the kids have aged out of those programs. We are planning the Wild Wednesday trip days. The company SAHR will be running various sports camps. People are already signing up for some of those and many of the camps will be offered for younger ages. There will be a field and track class. Commission members thought that would be interesting. Saefke reported that the recreation staff will be hosting two open house evenings at the Sullivan Lake Park fitness court on Thursday next week and the following Wednesday. The goal was to offer a time when someone would be at the court because when there is a new item and people are unfamiliar with it they like to be able to talk to a person and feel more comfortable using it on their own. Commission members are welcome to stop by. Saefke spoke with one of the police offers to plan a fitness time with the cops. The department already offers basketball, coffee, or food with the cops and thought this would be a great idea to get people to use the fitness court and meet the officers. They are having one for now on Sunday June 7<sup>th</sup> and might add more.

Abu Ammo asked if the evenings at the fitness court are random appearances or if the community knows about it. Saefke replied it has been advertised in the city newsletter and will be pushed on social media within the next week.

Buesgens asked if there are fitness classes scheduled there yet. Saefke replied no, we are still looking for instructors if anyone knows of any please send them our way. It could be yoga or a Zumba type of program. Half of the fitness court is the equipment used for pushing, pulling, or jumping type of activities and the other side is a flat surface intended for group classes. Anyone can go and use the area for free, but we would be willing to offer a class through the recreation department and take registrations for any class. Abu Ammo might know of an instructor. Saefke said to talk to that person, and they could have a class at any time of the day or evening; run it on their own or ask the recreation department for assistance with registrations and advertisement. Eisenbise stated it might be a good idea to have a display case for flyers and advertisements for upcoming events. Saefke replied that is a good idea and has talked about it in the past. She will message Perkins to discuss a good product to use.

Saefke reported that the annual Jamboree festival is coming up the last full weekend in June. There will be a few new things this year, Sunday there will be Bingo with the CH Athletic Boosters after the firefighter's pancake breakfast. There will be free admission to the carnival that day with additional music entertainment. The Lions Club is also working on adding live music over the four day event.

Saefke indicated the Peace Tree Wreath kits will be available next week to pick up. There are forty some people already signed up. Those wreaths will be hung from the tree outside of the recreation office in the tree by the bird bath overlooking Huset Park.

#### **B. Public Works Director**

Cullen reported the parks staff will be working with Mend Collaborative to tour all of the parks within the city next week. They will log assets and the condition of amenities. Central Avenue GSI discussion is occurring with our engineering department and MNDOT. They are looking at various areas to install the GSI locations. Public Works had an open position in the streets department and have made an offer. Engineering completed interviews on Friday for the assistant city engineer position that has been vacant for quite some time. Public Works typically hires 10-12 seasonal staff to help in the summer with garbage, mowing, trimming, cleaning pavilions, ballfield maintenance and more. Over the years this has been hard to find help and this year we have received a good number of applications and returning members.

#### **C. Commission Members**

Eisenbise asked about the park passport. She informed the new members that there was a pamphlet listing all the city parks with a separate activity to visit each park and turn in for a prize. She would like to see this type of thing as an ongoing source of information and not just a one time activity. Saefke replied that was a project worked on by the Commission and a previous member had seen that type of park passport at another city. We designed one and through that created a park information guide that is given to new residents and available all year to the public. The park passport was available at the Art & Info Fair and asked to be completed by Truck or Treat. Two families turned the passports in so they both received a voucher for a discount on a recreation program. Eisenbise didn't know the park guide was continued and that is what she was looking for. Levitt replied the brochure looks amazing and her daughter has told her they are not going to a park without a playground, so they have used it.

Eisenbise would love to hear why each member joined the commission. Levitt indicated many people on her block talked about volunteering somewhere and she wanted to get involved. She and her daughter go to the parks almost every day and she cares about the parks being in good condition and cool to visit. Levitt grew up in a low income family, so the recreation activities were things that they participated in. Her daughter will do recreation programs here. Abu Ammo goes on a lot of walks and sees that a lot of people are missing inside the parks. She asked herself how she can get her community to use the park system. Her family will have picnics in the park and is wondering how the park system can be used better. Abu Ammo grew up attending the recreation programs and her siblings still use them. She feels the participation can be higher. With her experience and knowledge of the community she will be able to help execute some of her inspirations. Lupkes sons have participated in the recreation basketball program. Every time they go to

surrounding communities to play he perceived a prejudice against Columbia Heights; mostly financial but he felt there was more behind that. If there is something that he can do to change that he will volunteer to do that. He has gotten to know the rec coordinator pretty well over the past five years and felt this was the time to get involved. Abu Ammo has experienced that since she was a young kid telling people where she lived and what school she attended. Buesgens thanked them for sharing. Eisenbise agrees with those reasons, loves the city parks, and her kids participate in programs as well. She also wants to see more public art and murals. Those things make the city feel like a destination. She lives close to Silver Lake Beach Park and feels that old building could have a mural. She loves the artwork on the drain. Deneen wants to have an emphasis on modernizing what amenities are in the parks. Seeing a soccer field and he would like to see volleyball courts. Using the hockey rinks that never get used and people are using them for volleyball. He wants to see ways to get people out in the parks and change what is unused. Buesgens added that she has been on the city council for ten years and there has been a huge change in the mindset and the paradigm of our city. She has seen a positive shift thanks to the community, and the staff. She is very much aware of the old stereotypes of our city, and she always demands respect and pushes for that every time. Our city is a hidden gem with an eclectic mix of people in our town. We have community involvement that neighboring cities are jealous of. We have a really good community, and it is exciting to see the involvement and desire to create new amenities and activities but that takes time.

Eisenbise invited members to attend the Saturday cleanup meeting at the Library at 9am. Groups clean along Central Avenue or get assigned a park which gives kids and families a sense of ownership to the area. Buesgens added this volunteer group has grown each year. She notices a difference every time this cleanup is done. There will be treats and drinks from Fixx Coffee. Saefke added that city staff cleaned up at LaBelle Park for Earth Day.

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

Eisenbise adjourned the meeting at 7:05 pm.  
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary