



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Monday, February 02, 2026
5:00 PM

MINUTES

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 pm by President Spriggs

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Members present: Connie Buesgens (5:17 pm); Laurel Deneen; Rachel James; Amáda Márquez-Simula; Justice Spriggs; Lamin Dibba

Members absent: Marlaine Szurek

Staff present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant; Emilie Voight, Community Development Coordinator

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approve the minutes of the regular EDA Meeting of January 05, 2026.
2. Approve the minutes of the special EDA Meeting of January 12, 2026.
3. Approve financial reports and payment of bills for December 2025 – Resolution No. 2026-06.
4. Approve the NOAH Loan Program Servicing Agreement – Resolution No. 2026-07.

Motion by Deneen, seconded by Dibba, to approve the Consent Agenda as presented. All eyes of present. MOTION PASSED.

RESOLUTION NO. 2026-06

A RESOLUTION OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF COLUMBIA HEIGHTS, MINNESOTA, APPROVING THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE MONTH OF DECEMBER 2025 AND THE PAYMENT OF THE BILLS FOR THE MONTH OF DECEMBER 2025.

WHEREAS, the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority (the “EDA”) is required by Minnesota Statutes Section 469.096, Subd. 9, to prepare a detailed financial statement which shows all receipts and disbursements, their nature, the money on hand, the purposes to which the money on hand is to be applied, the EDA's credits and assets, and its outstanding liabilities; and

WHEREAS, said Statute also requires the EDA to examine the statement and treasurer's vouchers or bills and if correct, to approve them by resolution and enter the resolution in its records; and

WHEREAS, the financial statements for the month of December 2025 have been reviewed by the EDA Commission; and

WHEREAS, the EDA has examined the financial statements and finds them to be acceptable as to both form and accuracy; and

WHEREAS, the EDA Commission has other means to verify the intent of Section 469.096, Subd. 9, including but not limited to Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, Annual City approved Budgets, Audits and similar documentation; and

WHEREAS, financial statements are held by the City's Finance Department in a method outlined by the State of Minnesota's Records Retention Schedule,

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Commissioners of the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority that it has examined the referenced financial statements including the check history, and they are found to be correct, as to form and content; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED the financial statements are acknowledged and received and the check history as presented in writing is approved for payment out of proper funds; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED this resolution is made as part of the permanent records of the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority.

ORDER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Passed this February 2, 2026

Offered by: Laurel Deneen

Seconded by: Lamin Dibba

Roll Call: All ayes of present. MOTION PASSED.

President Justice Spriggs

Attest:

Secretary

RESOLUTION NO. 2026-07

A RESOLUTION OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF COLUMBIA HEIGHTS, MINNESOTA, APPROVING THE SERVICING AGREEMENT FOR THE COLUMBIA HEIGHTS NATURALLY OCCURRING AFFORDABLE HOUSING (NOAH) LOAN PROGRAM.

WHEREAS, in 2024, the City of Columbia Heights established a Local Housing Trust Fund supported by

State allocated Local Affordable Housing Aid (LAHA) funds, and designated the Economic Development Authority (EDA) as the administrator of this Fund to support affordable housing initiatives within the City; and

WHEREAS, in 2025, the EDA approved the creation of the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Loan Program (the “Program”); and

WHEREAS, due to limited staff capacity, the EDA is partnering with the Minnesota Center for Energy and Environment (CEE), a qualified program administrator, to support the successful implementation of the NOAH Loan Program, with CEE aiding in program design, underwriting, compliance, and ongoing administration.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that, after appropriate examination and due consideration, the Authority hereby:

1. Approves the form and substance of the Columbia Heights Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Loan Program Servicing Agreement (the “Agreement”), the Duties of the Servicer (Exhibit A), and the Servicing Fee Schedule (Exhibit B); and
2. Authorizes the officers, employees, and other agents of the Authority to take all actions necessary to perform the Authority’s obligations under the Servicing Agreement and Exhibits A and B as a whole, including, without limitation, all acts and things required of them by or in connection with this resolution, for the full, punctual, and complete performance of all the terms, covenants, and agreements contained herein.

ORDER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Passed this February 2, 2026

Offered by: Laurel Deneen
Seconded by: Lamin Dibba
Roll Call: All ayes of present. MOTION PASSED.

President Justice Spriggs

Attest:

Secretary

BUSINESS ITEMS

5. 2026 EDA Goal Setting.

Voight reported that at the beginning of each year, Community Development staff meet with the Economic Development Authority (EDA) to discuss goals and priorities for the coming year. Establishing a clear set of goals annually helps staff develop work plans and timelines for major initiatives and provides the EDA with a framework to track progress on key programs and projects

throughout the year.

Voight stated that during the 2025 goal-setting session the EDA established a set of annual goals that have guided staff work over the past year. While many of those goals have been actively advanced or even completed, there are several areas where work can be expanded or further prioritized in 2026. Rather than conducting a full reset, staff are proposing a structured activity focused on identifying replacement goals for those that have been completed, refining existing goals carried forward from 2025, and then prioritizing goals for the upcoming year.

Voight noted that the proposed activity will mirror the goal-setting exercise used in 2025. EDA members will begin by identifying specific initiatives, strategies, or topics for 2026. Those ideas will then be categorized within the existing framework, followed by discussion to clarify intent, rationale, and key implementation steps. Once proposals have been fully identified and discussed, the EDA will prioritize strategies, goals, or focus areas to help guide staff focus and resource allocation in 2026.

Voight explained that the EDA's 2025 goals and priorities are listed in the Agenda Packet. Also included as an attachment is a summary of the results from the 2025 goal-setting activity to provide context as the EDA considers updates and refinements for the coming year. As part of this exercise, staff will also introduce proposed staff-led ideas and work items to ensure alignment with City Council priorities and relevant initiatives from other commissions. This will help ensure the EDA's goals for 2026 are coordinated across departments and advisory bodies and are realistic given available resources.

Voight explained the activity that the EDA would do for goal setting. The four major themes that staff carried forward from 2025's framework are Central Avenue, Neighborhood/Housing, Business, and "Big Sites". She noted that there were blue Post-it notes that included the goals that were not completed in 2025. She explained that the first portion of the exercise would focus on the EDA members thinking through what they would want to add or change to the current goals and focus areas. She gave each EDA member four Post-it notes to write down new ideas or refine a current goal. She reminded the EDA that the ideas should have a one-year focus as opposed to a long-range focus.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Voight invited each member to share their ideas. She added that staff would share ideas as well. James shared her idea for a support plan to help local businesses along Central Avenue during reconstruction. She noted that she would like to hear what the plan is for lots that are not suitable for business development. It would be helpful to bring the lots before the EDA and decide what the plan is for each one. Voight asked James if she was referring to lots the City owns, or vacant sites around the City. James replied that she was referring to City-owned lots, but would be open to expanding them. For the business support theme, she suggested that the City work with the Business Council to host industry-specific meetings. She noted that for the "Big Sites" theme, she had a suggestion for updated signage and website details.

Dibba stated that in 2026, he would like to see engagement with the business community and suggested an annual community business forum. He added that there was a partnership and training program with St. Thomas University that he would like to see continue in 2026. He stated he would like to see something done with the Medtronic and Rainbow sites.

Deneen stated she had the same idea as James to have a plan for businesses on Central Avenue when the redevelopment happens. She suggested incorporating student art into the public art initiatives. She added that she would like to see small businesses featured each month on the City website or in the newsletter. She noted that she would like to find an ADU project to work on and/or a resident who is interested in doing that, and feature them throughout the process.

Spriggs explained that he would like to see big placemaking/art objects that could feature local artists and be noticeable around the City. He gave examples of St. Paul having the peanut characters around the City and the Roseville roses. He noted that the items could be moved, and it could start on Central Avenue. He mentioned that he would like to see an improvement to the chamber meetings so that the same people do not attend each one. He explained that there are many local businesses and restaurants that the City does not hear from, and he would like to see the City engage with them more. He explained that after the Medtronic and Rainbow sites are completed, the City will be fully developed. He noted that Saint Louis Park recently reviewed their residential zoning code and lot sizes to upzone and would like to see the City start discussing the idea this year. He stated that his suggestion for the "Big Sites" category is the Medtronic site. He mentioned that he would like to get the input from the community and discuss what the site should be.

Márquez-Simula suggested having public art benches and flowers along Central Avenue. She added that she would like to see the extremely bright lights dimmed at businesses along Central Avenue because the bright lights can make it seem like the neighborhood has crime, and are environmentally harmful to animals. She stated that she would like to see the site at Benjamin Street sold or developed. She added that she would like more housing assistance or to invest more in Habitat for Humanity. She suggested a municipal grocery store for the "Big Sites" category.

Buesgens suggested taking advantage of the timeout with the Medtronic site to clean up the water and figure out what is going on. She mentioned that within the Parks Master Plan, there could be a section where businesses could choose to sponsor different amenities or sports. She noted that she would like to see the NOAH program continued to be promoted, to keep track of the progress and how many people are calling in, and to get feedback once the landlords see what the program is. She stated that her suggestion would be for the EDA to get grant money to put ADA doors in the businesses along Central Avenue. She added that she would like to start discussing revitalizing businesses along Central Avenue, so when the roads are completed, there is a plan in place. She stated she would like to see more benches along Central Avenue.

Voight added the ideas from the Community Development Department staff. She noted under the "Big Sites" category that the department would like to carry forward one of last year's goals of advancing redevelopment of EDA-owned properties in the corner of 40th Avenue and University (the ROOT properties). She added a suggestion for Business of business retention and expansion by

supporting the Central Ave businesses through communication and other initiatives during the street redesign. She expressed staff support for the public art goals. She explained an idea of assistance to local businesses or the community with the EDA, such as some sort of assistance program in relation to the economic challenges that businesses are facing.

Voight reviewed the proposed ideas. Under the “Big Sites” category are:

- Advance redevelopment on EDA-owned properties
- Promote and champion opportunities for major redevelopment sites
 - ROOT Properties
 - Medtronic and Rainbow sites
 - Opportunity on one of the big sites to do a municipal grocery store
 - Update signage
 - Update website related to the big sites
 - Taking advantage of some of the slower projects to do things like environmental cleanup

Voight asked the EDA if they had proposed changes to the ideas under “Big Sites”. Márquez-Simula explained that benches were mentioned a few times and clarified that she would like to see the benches sponsored, that included a plaque from the business that sponsors it. She acknowledged that some businesses may need more support from the City this year and was fine waiting until next year to make it a priority.

Voight read the proposed ideas under the Business category:

- Initiatives to increase the City’s interaction with and promotion of the local business community
- Financial assistance to local businesses
- Partnering with the Business Council for industry-specific business meetings, such as restaurants, etc.
- Community business forum: see more business support and program opportunities
- Improve participation at chamber meetings
- Gateway signage featuring local businesses, either through art or some kind of City feature, with some kind of partnership with the website and newsletter to increase awareness of small businesses

Voight asked the EDA if they wanted to make any changes to the proposed ideas. James explained that there were a number of comments regarding the Business Council and suggested that the ideas be grouped with partnership and separated from the ideas around financial support.

Spriggs asked if there was a business equivalent to Code Red, where there was a list of businesses that could easily be contacted or emailed. Voight replied that the City does not have a list currently. The previous intern made a business directory, and there is limited information included, but the City has not created something like a business newsletter that businesses could opt in to to communicate with the City.

Voight reviewed the Neighborhood/Housing category proposed ideas:

- NOAH program: provide updates, and keep track of getting feedback
- Make a plan for City-owned residential properties that are not suitable for business development
- Find a possible place for ADU projects in a residential building to feature
- Upzoning with an example of Saint Louis Park
- More housing assistance or Habitat for Humanity

Voight asked the EDA if they wanted to move any of the ideas. Buesgens mentioned that she forgot one and suggested highlighting the businesses in the newsletter or in some way so that the community can know about them.

Voight reviewed the Central Avenue category's proposed ideas:

- Placemaking along and near Central Avenue, taking into consideration existing program-based opportunities and upcoming MnDOT-led street redevelopment
- Develop and launch a Central Business District public art program
- Have Columbia Heights-specific placemaking
- Central BRE that is communications-focused or some other kind of engagement with businesses
- Reduce the super-bright lights at businesses
- Business outreach regarding creative planning, looking ahead to the 2028 Central Avenue construction
 - Begin to create a plan to support local businesses along Central Avenue during reconstruction
- Student public art
- Central Avenue benches
- Finances for ADA doors to prepare businesses for revitalization

Voight organized the ideas in each category. She led the EDA in an activity where the members prioritized the proposed suggestions. The EDA members voted for which ideas or focus areas they each wanted to prioritize. Voight emphasized that none of the suggestions would be removed and that they would all be put into a recap document that would be reviewed at the next meeting. She added that she would take photos of the Post-it notes and record all of the prioritization tallies.

6. 2026 Community/Economic Financial Relief Discussion.

Voight reported that the EDA currently administers three ongoing programs that provide direct financial support to local business owners, commercial property owners, and residential multifamily rental property owners. On the business side, the Fire Suppression Grant Program and Façade Improvement Grant Program are targeted toward structural and aesthetic improvements to commercial and industrial buildings. On the housing side, the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) Loan Program is designed to help preserve affordable housing in Columbia Heights through building renovations and upgrades.

Voight noted that in previous years, the EDA has also administered temporary programs like the

2020 Columbia Heights Business Relief Grant Program. This program was a one-off initiative that delivered financial relief to local businesses in the form of grants up to \$20,000, funded by the City's federal CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds. These grants were awarded to offset the financial hardships caused to local businesses by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Voight explained that, as demonstrated by these programs, the City's EDA has a history of designing and implementing efforts to support Columbia Heights' economy and community. Today, Columbia Heights businesses and residents are facing new financial challenges due to the wide-ranging impacts of ongoing federal immigration enforcement. The EDA directed staff to bring this item to tonight's meeting for discussion.

Voight stated the goal of tonight's discussion is for the EDA to come to a consensus and, as applicable, to provide direction to staff on next steps concerning any direct financial relief initiatives it would like to implement in 2026. Staff have no specific recommendations at this time, but are prepared to provide additional financial, logistic, and administrative details in response to Commissioners' suggestions and questions.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Márquez-Simula stated that it would make more sense to focus on business support. She added that the community is doing a lot to support residents and families.

Buesgens asked how much money was available, and if staff were aware of how many businesses in the City were struggling. Chirpich replied that staff do not have a list of businesses that are struggling, but several restaurants are closed or severely reduced in hours. The Coalition of Cities is reporting similar outcomes below COVID-level losses over the last month. Staff's first proposal is to divert the Commercial Revitalization earmarked funds that are typically used to purchase a house on Central Avenue. He noted that there are about \$300,000 in funds budgeted for 2026. Staff will need to dig into the State statutes on how to use the funds.

Buesgens asked if staff have talked with businesses to identify what their needs are. She wondered if they would want to have a focus on where the money would be designated, or let the businesses decide for themselves. Chirpich replied that the COVID relief grant is a good road map because it was needs-based and businesses had to prove that there was a reduction in revenue to qualify for the funds. He noted that staff could use the guidelines for the COVID relief grant and navigate the statutes to ensure that the funds are being used correctly. Voight added that the EDA's legal counsel was cautious about the language that might be necessary for framing something as a deferred loan instead of a grant. She mentioned that there could be conditions for businesses to continue operating in the City for 12 months, or some other set timeline, in order to have it completely deferred. The EDA's counsel suggested keeping the program as broad as possible for potential candidates. The program could be expressed in terms of economic development, like reduction of potential blight like empty storefronts.

James expressed her support for reducing potential blight. She asked how the City allowed people to apply for a certain amount during the COVID relief time. She stated the program needs to roll

out as quickly as possible because the impacts are happening right now. She stated she is in favor of doing a business program and keeping it as broad as possible.

Spriggs asked if the EDA's counsel addressed the legality of restricting the program to non-chain restaurants. He asked if the language could differentiate between a local business and a chain restaurant. Voight replied that she did not discuss that with counsel, but could have a conversation with the counsel and the City Attorney.

Buesgens mentioned that some of the chain restaurants are franchised. She wondered how that would be assessed in the program and wondered if the owners were treated as individual owners. Deneen explained that franchised owners are basically subcontracting for the overall work. She provided an example of the McDonald's at the airport, which is owned by a local resident and is a franchise owner. He is still beholden to all the things that McDonald's requires him to do. She explained that many large businesses have relief programs available. She explained that the process could take more time with legal if the program is more specific, and the goal is to get the program going as soon as possible. She mentioned that she liked the requirement of staying in business for 12 months to ensure that local businesses thrive after this ordeal.

Dibba suggested looking at the sizes of the businesses and explained that smaller businesses are struggling with overhead and staff shortages, and having some criteria for the program.

Márquez-Simula expressed support for allowing franchises to be qualified for instances like the façade improvement program because the rules of the franchise might not give them money to make the outside of the building look better. She added that she would want the language to be simple so that the process can be as easy as possible.

Chirpich asked Voight if the program would be administered internally or through a community development organization. Voight replied that the Community Development staff have discussed it but have not reached out to any organizations. If there are more requirements for assessing applications or administering funds, it is easier to use an outside organization. James stated she would be in favor of the City administering the program internally and developing the policies. She added that the requirements would be for businesses to verify that they have lost revenue. She asked what the requirements were during COVID to verify that there was revenue lost. Chirpich replied that it was capped at \$20,000, and it was first come first served.

James suggested keeping half of the funds for small businesses because they will often take longer to apply for the program. After a certain amount of time, the funds can be allocated to small businesses. Spriggs wondered if the fire suppression and façade improvement grant programs could be paused for a year and designate the funds to this effort. Chirpich agreed that it could be done. Voight mentioned that the EDA could agree to dip into the façade improvement grant program funds for administrative costs. James and Márquez-Simula agreed. Buesgens added that many businesses are trying to survive and are not looking to make improvements right now.

Spriggs asked how the program would be marketed to businesses. Voight explained that the Community Development Department discussed marketing and is hesitant to go to businesses in

person because it could worry and stress business owners if they are coming unannounced. She stated that the department has a list of businesses and could utilize social media. Buesgens expressed her support for staff to go door to door to businesses and encouraged staff to wear City-branded clothes so business owners know it is a City employee and not someone from the federal government. Spriggs wondered if staff could call ahead so business owners knew a City staff member was going to show up.

Deneen asked if the outreach would occur before the program was open. Chirpich suggested that staff discuss the item further with EDA's legal counsel. Voight explained that she would work with legal and draft something up, and mentioned that there may need to be an eventual special EDA meeting so the EDA could review the language. Spriggs noted that the EDA would be open to meet for a special EDA meeting so that they do not need to wait a month to get the program going. Voight stated that staff would prioritize the item.

Márquez-Simula wondered if volunteers could hand out flyers to businesses to bring awareness to the program. She added that it could reduce the stress of having government workers from the City come into the businesses.

BUSINESS UPDATES


a. MnDOT Total Health Building Central Avenue Meeting

Voight updated the EDA that the MnDOT Central Avenue team will host a meeting at City Hall. City staff members will be present at the meeting to answer questions about how municipal consent works. She added that the Council and commissioners do not need to attend the meeting. It is an initiative led by the MnDOT team, specifically focused on Total Health Building.

ADJOURNMENT

*Motion by Márquez-Simula, seconded by Buesgens, to adjourn the meeting at 6:12 pm. All ayes.
MOTION PASSED.*

Respectfully submitted,



Sarah LaVoie, Recording Secretary