



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, August 12, 2025
6:00 PM

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jensen Christen at 6:00 p.m.

Members present: Commissioners Carlson, Evenson, Groseth, Jensen Christen, Johnson, Kurek, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka, Small

Staff present: Rochelle Widmer, Director of Engineering and Facilities
Mitchell Forney, Director of Community Development

Members absent: None.

Council Liaison: Rachel James

COMMUNITY FORUM

No community members present.

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approve the May 13th, 2025, Regular Sustainability Commission Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Johnson asked if the date of the minutes presented for approval was correct. Director Forney explained that the meeting minutes presented for approval would have normally been approved at an earlier meeting, but staff turnover had delayed the minutes being finished. Forney further explained that the minutes from the previous meeting in July were not finished yet and would be presented for approval at a future meeting. Chairperson Jensen Christen made the following motion, seconded by commissioner Leoni-Helbacka:

MOTION: Move to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

The motion was approved unanimously.

BUSINESS ITEMS

2. Sustainability Commission Bylaws

Director Forney stated that the Sustainability Commission had yet to approve official bylaws that would govern the activities of the commission and its operations. Forney explained that staff had reviewed the bylaws of other city commissions including the Youth Commission, the Economic Development Authority, and the Charter Commission and put together a draft of the bylaws for discussion and approval by the commission. Forney explained that the bylaws would establish a baseline of expectations and understanding that the commission holds its members to and defines the relationship between the commission, staff, and the City Council. Forney elaborated that the bylaws would set the framework for meetings and included a new agenda format that is similar to other commissions. Forney described the new agenda format which

includes a consent agenda for items that do not require extensive discussion, business items, and business updates. Forney explained that the draft bylaws included officers and their roles, including chairperson and vice-chairperson, secretary, and executive director. Forney described the roles of chairperson and vice-chairperson as defined in city code, and explained that the secretary could be a staff member and did not have to be a member of the commission. Forney also explained that the executive director position was defined by city code and would be Director of Engineering Widmer or her designee. Forney described the subcommittee process as defined in the bylaws and explained that the commission was expected to follow general Robert's Rules of Order to maintain orderly meetings and processes. Commissioner LaPlante asked if the existing subcommittees of the commission needed to be re-established under the new bylaws. Forney answered that the existing commissions did not need to be re-established, but that they would need to follow the reporting guidelines as described in the bylaws. Commissioner Evenson asked if the subcommittee reports needed to follow a particular format. Forney replied that no special format was required, but reports needed to be received 7 days prior to the next meeting by city staff as described in the bylaws. Councilmember James clarified that subcommittees are not required to report at every meeting. Commissioner Johnson asked if the bylaws would be reviewed or changed on a schedule. Director Forney answered that the bylaws could be amended by the commission with a simple majority vote, and that they could be reviewed and amended by the commission at their discretion. Commissioner LaPlante asked what the process would be for developing meeting agendas. Forney replied that the chairperson and the executive director would work together to develop the meeting agendas. LaPlante asked how commissioners should request the addition of items to meeting agendas. Forney replied that they could contact the executive director or the chairperson to add items to meeting agendas. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked if any commissioners had amendments they would like to propose for the bylaws. Commissioner Kurek asked if Forney could clarify the quorum rules as presented in the bylaws. Kurek further asked if the number of commissioners required for a quorum would change based upon the number of active commissioners, or if it had to be 5. Forney replied that quorum could be defined by half of the number of active commissioners plus one, representing a simple majority. Commissioner LaPlante made a motion to amend the bylaws to include the definition of quorum as described by Forney, seconded by commissioner Evenson. The motion passed unanimously. Commissioner Evenson asked for clarification on quorum rules in general as applies to commissioners outside of meetings. Forney explained that quorum rules are defined by state law and designed to keep the business of the commission public. Forney elaborated that commissioners should refrain from discussing commission business when a quorum is present outside of meetings or provide public notice of the quorum through city staff. Commissioner Kurek asked if the quorum rules applied to subcommittees conducting business if they submitted reports of their activity. Forney replied that he would clarify that point and get back to the commission, but that to the best of his knowledge subcommittees can meet and discuss business as long as it is in their written reports to the commission. Chairperson Jensen Christen made the following motion, seconded by LaPlante:

MOTION: Move to approve the Sustainability Commission Bylaws as amended.

The motion was passed unanimously.

3. Partners in Energy Grand Opening Discussion

Director Forney explained that the next agenda item was an open discussion about a grand opening event for the Partners in Energy launch. Forney explained that the event would be held in October or November to showcase the partnership for residents, brings forth items currently being worked on, and engage the community to participate in the program. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked the commission who the intended audience should be for the launch. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka stated that members of the Energy Action Team should be invited because of their critical role in developing the plan. Leoni-Helbacka said that board and commission members, business owners, and landlords would also be important stakeholders to include in the meeting. Leoni-Helbacka also suggested inviting other community leaders including faith leaders, HeightsNEXT members, and school board members. Commissioner Kurek mentioned that Columbia Heights has a large percentage of single-family homes which would potentially stand to benefit the most from the program and asked if the City would have capacity and budget to send out mailers or postcards about the program. Director Forney responded that the city would be able to publicize the program in the e-newsletter and through an upcoming bilingual homeownership event being held in September by the Community Development Department. Commissioner Kurek asked if food would be provided at the event. Forney responded that light refreshments and snacks would be provided. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked the group to weigh in on outreach and advertising methods to get the identified stakeholders to the event. Commissioner Evenson mentioned that the next meeting of the Sustainability Commission would be very close to the event and that the time to approve advertising materials would be tight. Director Forney responded that city staff would be able to create advertising for the grand opening event itself and that Xcel Energy would create the materials to advertise the program at large. Commissioner LaPlante asked if flyers or other materials could be distributed at City Council meetings. Councilmember James stated that flyers can be distributed at meetings and in the lobby at City Hall, but that in her opinion it was not the most effective way to message residents at large. James also stated that block captains from National Night Out would be excellent community champions to spread the word to their neighbors. Commissioner Johnson asked if postcards would be possible and asked if they were expensive. Director Forney responded that postcards are an expensive option for advertising. Commissioner Groseth asked about including notifications with utility bills as an option for advertising. Forney responded that notifications with the utility bills are a less expensive option than postcards and had been identified in the Energy Action Plan to spread awareness of the program. Commissioner Carlson asked if a notification included with the utility billing would be confusing to residents because the Partners in Energy program covers electricity, which is not a city-run utility. Commissioner LaPlante commented that residents do not generally have a good understanding of which utilities the city is responsible for administering. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked the group what the format and structure of the event should be and what the Commission thought a successful kickoff would look like. Commissioner Evenson asked if an online sign up for the program existed or when it would start and if it would be possible to track before and after the kickoff event. Director Forney stated that the sign up did not exist yet, but that individual programs would be tracked through the process. Commissioner LaPlante stated that the MnDOT open houses around the Central Avenue reconstruction were an excellent example to follow and included good hands-on activities and interactive displays to engage attendees. Commissioner Evenson stated that she really enjoyed the learning process during the Energy Action Plan development, especially learning which appliances utilize the most

energy. Evenson added that activities including appliance energy usage would be a great addition to the event. Commissioner Kurek stated that the food from local businesses provided at the Partners in Energy meetings was a great touch and would help bring in more people and kids to the event. Director Forney said that the city could not provide childcare at the event, but that child-friendly activities could be included, and the event could be advertised as child-friendly. Commissioner Evenson said that coloring sheets with an energy theme would be a great activity for kids. Councilmember James commented that Xcel had a whole education program geared towards children and energy and might have ideas or activities for children that could be used for the event. Commissioner Carlson asked if the Partners in Energy team had provided any ideas from what other cities had done for their kickoff events. Director Forney stated that they had included examples of successful kickoff event components in the packet provided for the Commission, but that most events were tailored to the individual community. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka said that an example of an energy audit from a resident of Columbia Heights would be a great thing to include at the event. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked what the group thought a successful event would look like and how success should be measured. Commissioner Johnson thought that the number of people that attended the event and the number of people that signed up for programs would be good things to measure. Commissioner Evenson stated that collecting emails from attendees of the kickoff event would allow for follow-up advertising of the program. Chairperson Jensen Christen stated that an opportunity to sign up and provide an email after people had engaged in the activities at the kickoff event would be good because it would capitalize on the excitement generated by the activities. Commissioner LaPlante said a staffed registration table by the door would be able to catch attendees on either the entrance or exit from the event, but that it should be clear that registration is not required for entrance. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked which goals should be focused on before the event to ensure that momentum from the kickoff can be captured and move the goals forward. Commissioner Evenson said that any materials created for the event should be circulated to the Sustainability Commission as soon as possible to allow time for review, editing, and oversight. Commissioner LaPlante said that the idea of recognizing energy wins and engaging the community to share their energy wins and stories would be valuable. Director Forney asked if moving forward the goal of recognition and discussing a program to recognize participation and energy savings after the event would be valuable. Forney added that the information from the event could be used to recognize a climate champion of the year, similar to existing city awards like business of the year. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that the group had previously discussed a sustainable business of the year award. Councilmember James brought up engaging different cultural groups in the event, perhaps with a Spanish language table or touchpoint to engage Spanish speaking residents. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka said that creating a multi-lingual outreach campaign would be more effective than just a single Spanish language touchpoint. Commissioner Evenson asked if any of the commission members were Spanish speakers. Commissioner LaPlante stated that she was a Spanish speaker but would need to brush up on her energy related vocabulary. Commissioner Evenson said that as the first year of the program we should focus on setting a baseline and gathering data to inform goals in the future. Commissioner LaPlante what languages other than English were used by the city in standard communications. Director Forney replied that Spanish was the primary alternate language utilized by the city in communications, followed by Somali.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates

Subcommittee Updates

Commissioner Updates

Planning and Coordination

ADJOURNMENT

Chairperson Jensen Christen made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:01. The motion was seconded by Commissioner LaPlante and unanimously approved by the commission.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist