



CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION
City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, September 08, 2026
6:00 PM

Mayor
Amada Márquez Simula
Councilmembers
Connie Buesgens
Rachel James
Justice Spriggs
Laurel Deneen
City Manager
Aaron Chirpich

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Márquez Simula at 6:00 pm.

Present: Mayor Márquez Simula, Councilmember Deneen, Councilmember Buesgens, Councilmember James, Councilmember Spriggs

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Jesse Hauf, IT Director; Matt Markham, Police Chief; Kloiber, Finance Director; Rochelle Widmer, City Engineer; Chris Bower, North Area Engineer at MnDOT; Mathew Thibert, Lead Project Manager at MnDOT; Will Rottler, Communications & Engagement Coordinator

Columbia Heights City Council and Staff Norms.

While we are accountable to each other for these norms, the Mayor and City Manager will help us adhere to them with respectful reminders and reinforcement as needed.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

1. Group Ice Breaker.

Mayor Márquez Simula led the group in an icebreaker, asking participants, "Name one thing about the City you didn't understand until you sat on this Council, started working here, or worked in partnership with the City as a consultant."

2. Continue Discussion on MnDOT's Central Avenue Improvements Project Layout. (30 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Rochelle Widmer, City Engineer

City Engineer Widmer introduced the discussion on MnDOT's Central Avenue Improvement Project layout and noted that representatives from MnDOT were present at the meeting. North Area Engineer at MnDOT, Chris Bower, provided a presentation regarding the Highway 65 Project update. He highlighted the municipal consent update/MOU, the traffic signal at 50th Avenue and 52nd Avenue, examples of the proposed designs, the alternatives that were considered, and MnDOT-acceptable options.

Councilmember Buesgens expressed concern that there could be increased backups at the roundabout during rush hour traffic. Mr. Bower explained that there are cameras installed

at intersections where MnDOT can adjust traffic signals in real time to help with traffic flow.

Mr. Bower reviewed the Memorandum of Understanding and stormwater at the Medtronic site.

Mayor Márquez Simula inquired about the location of the stormwater treatment areas and explained that the Council was in favor of the proposed GSI locations. Mr. Bower explained that the Medtronic site provides flexibility for the stormwater treatment.

Councilmember Buesgens stated that her preference would be to have as many stormwater treatment areas as possible. She asked about flooding on 49th Avenue and if the new stormwater design would address the issue. Mr. Bower replied that the flooding concern was flagged for further design review, including downstream effects.

Councilmember James expressed concern about keeping businesses open during construction. She added her concern about traffic flow and the traffic signals at 50th Avenue. Mr. Bower expressed his understanding of the traffic flow concerns and explained that the traffic signal would be shortened to accommodate the flow of traffic. MnDOT will monitor the traffic flow via cameras in real time.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there would be a pedestrian light at 47th Avenue. She added that it would be helpful to have an updated list provided of all of the pedestrian light locations along Central Avenue before the Council votes on the project. MnDOT representatives explained where pedestrian locations would be.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if there could be before and after pictures of Central Avenue.

3. Overview of 2027 Proposed Budget (20 minutes.)

Finance Director Kloiber provided an overview of the 2027 proposed budget. He highlighted a 5.3% gross tax levy increase and a 4.1% levy increase for property owners, the reasons to budget for a surplus, key activities after 2027, the 5-year financial plan for tax-supported funds, the 2026 enterprise funds, and the budget items reclassified in 2027 versus 2026.

The Council thanked Finance Director Kloiber for his presentation and his work. Councilmember James thanked staff for providing the information publicly ahead of time so that business owners and property owners could prepare ahead of time.

Mayor Márquez Simula recessed the meeting at 7:32 pm. The meeting convened at 7:39 pm.

4. Chatham Road, Fairway Dr NE to 45th Ave NE – Response to Traffic Safety Concerns. (15 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Rochelle Widmer, City Engineer

City Engineer Widmer provided an overview of a response to traffic safety concerns at Chatham Road, Fairway Drive NE to 45th Avenue NE. Staff recommends that Council permit City staff to gather the necessary resources to conduct a formal engineering traffic study on Chatham Road between Fairway Dr NE and 45th Ave NE. The study will provide recommendations for the appropriate traffic control measures that may be utilized on Chatham Rd by investigating factors such as traffic counts, roadway geometry, and current roadway safety standards.

Councilmember Deneen stated she would like to see a traffic study conducted. Councilmember James noted that data shows that it is the densest corridor in the City with high safety concerns. She added that speeding is a large part of the area not feeling safe.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked what the estimated cost was for the traffic study. City Engineer Widmer replied that most of the work could be done internally, but would need to work with a consultant to install cameras.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there could be community engagement with the neighborhood included in the process. City Engineer Widmer replied that staff would explore the option. Mayor Márquez Simula explained that a traffic study cannot always capture the feel of a street and encouraged staff to have community input from the community members near the roadway in order to collect more data.

Councilmember Buesgens suggested having an email where residents could submit feedback or concerns. She added that there could be a QR code included for the public to provide input. City Engineer Widmer mentioned that staff has to be careful not to skew the results of the study by having signs posted about the study. If the public knows the area is under study, vehicles may drive differently. Councilmember Buesgens suggested having a sign to indicate why there are cameras posted. Police Chief Markham mentioned that the police use a device that does not look like a camera to gather traffic information.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if staff could explore having a sidewalk on the west side of the road because a lot of children are walking on the side of the road. When cars are parked on both sides of the road, the street gets narrow. She added that the City has discussed doing a sidewalk study in the City.

Councilmember Spriggs explained that many residents in the area use back streets to avoid the road since there is so much traffic. He pointed out areas that feel unsafe in the area due to speeding cars. He added that there is a lot of concern in the area because the school is in the area and there are a lot of pedestrians and activity.

City Manager Chirpich reviewed the next steps staff was exploring and noted that they are looking at ways to create a process to receive input from the public. He added that there are specific areas in the City where there are traffic concerns, and staff is looking to reach

out to consultants to see if there could be studies conducted in the specific zones to address traffic and safety concerns. Staff will begin to gather estimates for the Council to consider.

City Engineer Widmer explained that staff has developed a traffic control request form where the public could report concerns. The form is on the City's website under the Engineer page.

5. Proposed Disconnection of Water Service for Noncompliant Water Meters (10 minutes.)

Mayor Márquez Simula asked if there was concern about cutting off the water in the winter. Finance Director Kloiber replied that the ground should not be all the way frozen when the water is shut off. Staff had considered waiting until the spring to start the process, but the new water meters were installed almost 18 months ago. If there is a weather incident that causes the weather to freeze sooner, the Public Works Department can decide to wait to shut the water off.

Finance Director Kloiber stated that approximately 68 customers have not responded to the City's requests for an appointment to replace the water meter on their property over the last eighteen months. To accommodate this noncompliance, the billing staff is operating both the old meter-reading system and the replacement meter-reading system.

Councilmember Spriggs noted that shutting water off to residents is a health and safety concern. He added that having the water shut off in the winter could cause some homes to not be able to get their water turned back on until the spring since the ground is frozen. He noted that it is a liability for the City to shut off water in the winter. He expressed his understanding that there are consequences to actions, and that the City would like to take action for the noncompliant water meters.

Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that the residents who have not complied do not owe the City money. The residents simply have to allow the City to install the new water meter to come into compliance. She explained that she would want a guarantee that residents would be able to get their water turned back on in the winter, other wise she suggested waiting until the spring.

Councilmember Deneen asked if the majority of the properties not in compliance are rental properties. She explained that she would not want to punish residents because the landlord is not doing their job.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked to include language in the letter to residents who have not complied that the City is not responsible for any damage that occurs after the water is shut off. Finance Director Kloiber suggested that the City Attorney review the proposed language.

Finance Director Kloiber noted that staff could find a way to determine how many of the properties are rental properties.

Councilmember Deneen suggested that the rental license gets suspended if the property is not compliant with the water meter policy. Finance Director Kloiber replied that he would follow up with the Fire Department regarding rental license enforcement.

Councilmember James explained that shutting off the water seems extreme, especially when there are multi-home properties involved. She explained that with the license being revoked, residents would have 90-days to find a new home, whereas shutting off the water would give residents one day. She wondered if the City could extend the temporary surcharge and that it would not be refundable. Councilmember Buesgens suggested having a large surcharge.

Mayor Márquez Simula stated she would like to see additional options on how to get the residents into compliance than just shutting off the water.

The Council agreed that the homes with no occupants could have the water shut off.

Councilmember James stated she is not in favor of the water being shut off.

Mayor Márquez Simula suggested that rental properties that are not in compliance are not in good standing with the City and may not be able to renew the rental license.

Finance Director Kloiber stated that staff would provide a list of potential options for the Council to explore. City Manager Chirpich explained that the City is currently using resources to maintain two water meter systems. If the enforcement is pushed out to the spring, it would allow more time to reach out to the noncompliant properties.

Councilmember Buesgens suggested a way in which the rental license could be revoked immediately if the property does not come into compliance. She asked if the Council could address the home-occupied and rental properties separately. She suggested addressing the rental properties in the spring.

Mayor Márquez Simula stated she would like to address all of the properties at once and to wait and see what staff come up with for alternative options.

Councilmember James stated it would be helpful to have community outreach to understand why properties are not coming into compliance.

Finance Director Kloiber confirmed that he would follow up.

6. 2026 Summer Events Update / Civic Organizations Partnerships Framework. (30 Minutes)
Presented by Will Rottler, Communications & Engagement Coordinator

Communications & Engagement Coordinator Rottler provided an update regarding the 2026 summer events and the changes that would be made. He reviewed the civic organizations partnerships framework and shared what other cities do.

Councilmember James stated she would like a list of the City's partners and what is included in the partnership. Councilmember Deneen added that the City needs to be transparent in what the City is providing in the partnership.

Mayor Márquez Simula emphasized the importance of the City partnering with organizations with a 501(c)(3) or an organization that has insurance in order to protect the City.

Communications & Engagement Coordinator Rottler emphasized the importance of including language in the policy that would ensure that the City is notified about events so that it can determine if there are staff and space available and grant permission for the event.

Councilmember Deneen noted that it is equitable to have organizations reserve the locations and receive permission from the City to do an event. City Manager Chirpich noted the most challenging aspect would be to notify the current partners to share the information about the new framework.

Councilmember Deneen suggested including language in the policy that event leaders need to act professionally. Mayor Márquez Simula suggested having a liaison between the event organizers and the City to debrief each event and discuss the planning for the event.

Communications & Engagement Coordinator Rottler led a discussion about the City's policy regarding partnering with organizations that are collecting donations at an event, and the possibility of restricting late-night hours for events in parks.

Mayor Márquez Simula suggested having the City be clear on what it is providing, and if the event requires additional staff time or resources, that the City could bill the organization for the additional resources. She asked if staff had considered having Music in the Park and Movie in the Park on the same days. Communications & Engagement Coordinator Rottler replied that staff has discussed various options, including having Music in the Park with the Jamboree.

Communications & Engagement Coordinator Rottler stated he would follow up with the Council.

Mayor Márquez Simula recessed the meeting at 9:18 pm. The meeting reconvened at 9:21 pm.

Mayor Márquez Simula reordered the agenda to consider item 8 before item 7.

8. Continuation of the Anoka County Drone Program Discussion (20 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Matt Marham, Police Chief

City Manager Chirpich provided a summary and update regarding the Anoka County Drone Program discussion. He requested feedback from the Council on how to engage with the County and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Councilmember Deneen stated she still has the same concerns that she expressed during the last meeting, such as the contract provisions that allow for changing things if it is good for business, or for other agencies to get the City's video footage and keep it for an uncertain number of days. She explained that her preference is for the City to have its own drone program. She added that she respects the need for a drone program.

Councilmember James expressed her concern about the recording aspect of the drones. She stated she is not in favor of using Flock products, but would be in favor of the City having its own drones and spending more money on additional resources and staff. She expressed her concern about drones that can do facial recognition or retinal scanning.

Councilmember Spriggs agreed and asked if the MOU could include language that would have the City not be financially liable if it opts out of the program. Police Chief Markham noted that if the City is not in an agreement, it would not be financially liable. City Manager Chirpich added that JLEC would review the cost sharing of a continued program if the pilot is successful.

Councilmember Buesgens asked what it would take for the City to have its own drone system. Police Chief Markham explained that the goal would be to have drone operators at every shift. He added that he could purchase another small drone, but did not have a timeline for when there could be full coverage.

Councilmember Buesgens explained that the City having its own drone system would take time to set up. She emphasized the need for there to be balance between the public feeling safe and not feeling like there is surveillance. There has to be a middle ground between safety and privacy. Drones help the Police Department catch people in the midst of the crime or afterwards. By opting out of the program, the City has fewer resources in keeping the community safe. She noted that she wished that the County did not pick Flock for the company to use. She explained that the discussion has not been balanced between safety and privacy, and the City will suffer because of it. She asked the Council to have more balance.

Councilmember James mentioned the community engagement and noted that residents are opposed to the drones. Flock is selling data, which is unsafe for the community. She suggested using some of the Fire Department's resources with drones. She explained that the interconnectivity of the data is the issue she has.

Mayor Márquez Simula reviewed the letter from the City Attorney. Councilmember Buesgens explained that everyone is afraid of data breaches and AI and wondered what the fear was of having a drone go to a specific site for a crime. Councilmember Deneen explained that she is not afraid of AI but is reading the contract and sees intentional loopholes. She added that she trusts the City's Police Department to use their drones. She

noted that the discussion is whether the contract is good for the City. Mayor Márquez Simula agreed and noted that it is a tool that is not trustworthy.

Police Chief Markham explained that there are State statutes in place for police staff to operate the drones. He added that he would like to supervise his own staff with the drones instead of using the Fire Department because police officers are trained differently than staff in the Fire Department. There are a few instances where the Police and Fire Department work together with drones.

Councilmember Buesgens asked if new drones would fit into the 2027 budget. Police Chief Markham replied that there are not several drones included in the 2027 budget, but he is currently under budget and could purchase them this year. The training is ongoing. Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that the budget has not been voted on and there is room for changes.

The consensus of the Council was to opt out of the pilot drone program with Anoka County.

Councilmember James stated she would like in writing that the County indicated that the City could opt out of the program. Councilmember Deneen suggested including a letter from the City opting out of the program and stating that the City does not want to be on the hook financially, and a draft MOU.

Councilmember Buesgens inquired about staffing at the Police Department. Police Chief Markham provided a summary of the staffing and emphasized employee well-being and maintaining the ability to respond to emergency calls.

7. New Council Corner Process (20 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

City Manager Chirpich introduced the new Council Corner process. IT Director Hauf showed the Council the steps in the process for submitting Council Corner initiatives using Project Hub.

The Council expressed excitement over the new process.

8. Continuation of the Anoka County Drone Program Discussion (20 Minutes)

The item was reordered and considered before item 8.

9. City Manager Follow Up on Previous Work Session Topics. (10 Minutes)

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich – City Manager

City Manager Chirpich followed up on the 2025 Alley Project. He noted that the City is in the process of hiring a new contractor. The City is taking all of the legal steps required. He

provided an update on finances and noted that the City has an approved plan for phasing the Finance Director out when he retires and training the new Finance Director.

10. Council Corner:

Councilmember James expressed concerns about Citywide deportations and deportations occurring at the courthouse in Anoka County. She added her concern about people not being able to pay for rent or students leaving the School District. She referenced an incident where someone was arrested in the City, and ICE deported them before they were allowed a court hearing. She explained that there is not much control with the City but wanted to notify the Council about her concerns. Councilmember Spriggs added that it is probably an action the Anoka County Board would need to take for there to be change.

Councilmember Deneen noted that the issue is likely going to get worse as election day is approaching and asked how the City could prepare for it. Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that City Clerk Ion is aware of the concerns and is providing training to the election judges.

Councilmember Buesgens brought forward draft language asking the County to reconsider restrictions on small, walk-through community events at Kordiak Park. The consensus of the Council was supportive of the first draft of the letter.

The Council reviewed the September calendar, notified each other of upcoming events, and discussed proclamations for upcoming meetings.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Márquez Simula adjourned the meeting at approximately 10:58 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Aaron Chirpich, City Manager