



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE

Tuesday, January 14, 2025

6:00 PM

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jensen Christen at 6:02 p.m.

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

Staff present: Sulmaan Khan, Assistant City Engineer
Andrew Boucher, City Planner
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist

Members absent: Commissioner Finkelson

Council Liaison: Rachel James

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion by Commissioner Johnson, seconded by LaPlante, to approve the minutes of November 20, 2024. Motion passed unanimously.

New City Council Liaison Rachel James introduced herself to the group and was welcomed to her new role for the next year.

Planner Boucher provided an update that the Complete Streets Policy passed during the City Council meeting last night, 1/13/2025. Boucher stated that the next step was to incorporate the new policy into design standards and zoning code. Commissioner Johnson asked if there was any opposition or discussion about the policy voiced at the meeting prior to the vote. Engineer Khan stated that the policy was broadly supported by the Council and passed without any major dissent. Clarifying questions were asked about individual responsibilities and reporting related to the new policy and measuring impacts. Khan related that no major requests for revision were asked for, and only minor changes were made to the draft policy overall. Khan related that the most significant change was to include reference to a MNDOT publication that details best practices related to pedestrian and bicyclist safety in road design and construction. Commissioner Johnson asked if the final Complete Streets policy was available on the City's website. Khan and Boucher responded that the policy was not yet on the website but would be added soon. Commission LaPlante commented that the policy would help dictate accessibility and usability of Central Avenue for pedestrians during the future planned reconstruction.

OLD BUSINESS

1. Sustainable Purchasing Policy Update

Planner Boucher related that he met with the Finance Director, who is currently reviewing the existing City purchasing policy. Planner Boucher discussed general interest in moving to centralize

purchasing for items that are used by all buildings/departments. Centralized purchasing would allow for more efficient purchasing including bulk buys, which will reduce expenditures and packaging. He also expressed a preference for a local and regional purchasing policy and asked for the commission to provide some benchmarks for the policy. Commissioner Evenson asked how the purchasing would be scored or decided based upon different sustainable factors and how it would be tracked. Boucher responded that certain classes of purchase (ex. Energy Star, Water Smart) are already well defined and would not require further evaluation. Evenson asked how various categories of scoring purchases would be weighted and given preference over others, and how price differences would relate. Boucher stated that other cities allow for purchasing authority within a percentage price point for favoring sustainable, local, and regional products. Boucher stated that this would be a good model to explore and see if we can find a number that is a reasonable balance between fiscal responsibility and favoring sustainable purchases. Boucher related that a local representative of the Chamber of Commerce had presented to the City Council the previous night, and that local businesses have an interest in “green to go” for businesses in Columbia Heights to eliminate polystyrene and single-use black plastic to go containers. Boucher said that this seemed like a good opportunity to meet businesses where they are at, and that the Sustainability Commission had discussed this previously with interest. Commissioner LaPlante suggested creating a decision matrix to aid purchasing within broad categories of sustainability. Commissioner Evenson suggested annual review of vendors like coffee/beverage and paper products to ensure purchase of sustainable products. Chairperson Jensen Christen added that any paper products or consumables provided with beverages and food by vendors should also be examined for more sustainable alternative options. Commissioner Evenson stated that the lack of labeling on the waste receptacles at City Hall was a recurring frustration for her. Councilmember James stated that uniform, labeled, tri-waste containers were standard at all city buildings at one point. Planner Boucher stated that improving and standardizing trash/recycling/compostables receptacles at city buildings could be included in the eventual policy. Planner Boucher asked if the Capital Improvement Plan includes life cycle and maintenance analysis, or if maintenance costs and needs are considered when making capital equipment purchases. Engineer Khan stated that he recalled most pieces of capital equipment were given a projected lifespan, but that specific maintenance costs were not factored in at purchase time. Commissioner LaPlante asked if disposal costs and methods were currently factored into purchasing and stated that disposal costs and methods should be considered when crafting the new policy. Commissioner Jensen Christen suggested adding goal post ideas under specific categories and revisiting the policy next month at the commission meeting. Commissioner Evenson stated that centralized purchasing would reduce packaging and delivery vehicles on the road.

2. Sustainable Collaborations Sub-Committee Update

Commissioner LaPlante said that an informal meeting was held in late December. No major updates for the commission were provided. Commissioner Jensen Christen related that the deadline for a summer intern from the Sustainability Corps is tomorrow, and that seeking an intern would be a possibility for the fall. Planner Boucher related that the Community Development department would be hiring an intern, with the potential for a second one later this summer. Boucher also expressed an interest in a Green Corps intern to work specifically on the Energy Action Plan once it is completed. Commissioner LaPlante asked if there was any possibility that one of the interns could work on Sustainability Commission related projects. Boucher stated

that he was not sure, but that priority issues could certainly be explored. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka looked into the potential for a Climate Corps intern, which is a quite flexible program with many potential opportunities and project types. Planner Boucher stated that Robbinsdale was able to get a Climate Corps intern to work on the Energy Action Plan developed through their Partners in Energy experience and hopes that the City of Columbia Heights could do something similar.

3. Invasive Species Sub-Committee Update

Commissioner Evenson suggested a future collaboration with the Parks and Rec Commission for a spring cleanup and garlic mustard pulling event. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka related that the sub-committee's grant application to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture was approved. The grant will be to create a mobile invasive species volunteer support kit, educational materials, and to host four invasive species management events. The grant activities will take place during calendar year 2025 and will include the purchase of the kit and hosting four events. Commissioner LaPlante asked if any of the events would include buckthorn management. Forester Genter responded that three of the four planned events would have a focus on buckthorn management. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka added that a sizeable portion of the \$4,000 awarded in the grant would go to the purchase of mechanical advantage weed pulling devices to aid in buckthorn removal.

4. Sustainable Partnerships With Local Businesses/Restaurants

Commissioner LaPlante stated that she wanted to keep this item on the agenda to continue the conversation around outreach to local business. LaPlante asked if a representative from the local chamber of commerce could come to a meeting. Planner Boucher said that he thought it would be very helpful to have a chamber of commerce representative come to a meeting and help gauge what the business community is looking for in terms of sustainable partnerships. Councilmember James related that the City of Roseville had completed a "green to go" policy and related ordinance. Councilmember James stated that during that process the chamber of commerce was involved as an advocate for business needs, asking for additional time to implement the policy and flexibility. James further stated that the chamber could play a similar role in Columbia Heights connecting the Council with local businesses, but that it would be as an advocate for the businesses. James related concerns local businesses have with the increased costs associated with "green to go", and a lack of grant availability targeting for profit businesses. James suggested finding a way to create collaborative purchasing to help local businesses afford greener options, and the potential for the chamber of commerce to play a role in that. Commissioner Evenson suggested a city-led promotional effort to recognize local businesses with sustainable practices to help provide incentive to make those changes. Commissioner LaPlante said that she felt "green to go" would be a valuable first step, but that other types of businesses should not be forgotten or overlooked.

NEW BUSINESS

5. Partners In Energy Update

Planner Boucher stated that the final workshop would be held next week; if commissioners would like to attend, they can let Boucher know so that he can submit a quorum notice if necessary. Boucher outlined the program for the next workshop and the timeline of the creation of the

Energy Action Plan. Boucher said that after the final workshop it would take a few months for the plan to be drafted, likely sometime in April. The final draft Energy Action Plan would go before the City Council for a vote in May. Boucher said that the commissioners would have a chance to review the draft Energy Action Plan before it was finalized, but that major changes were not anticipated due to the consensus-building process of developing the plan. Boucher said that a kick-off event would be held to launch the Energy Action plan and promote it to the community. Boucher feels that the plan is a big deal and will be well received by residents, especially given the tremendous value in developing the plan through the Partners in Energy collaboration. Engineer Khan informed the commission that the final community-wide goal established through the Partners in Energy process is “Columbia Heights will increase energy program participation by at least %30 between 2025-2030; this will save the community an estimated \$4.6 million and increase energy savings by 63% by 2030.” Commissioner Evenson inquired about the webpage associated with the action plan containing information and resources, and whether it would be ready by May. Planner Boucher said that the page would definitely be ready by May, and it would include elements from the workshop process. Boucher wants to include elements from all of the workshops so that residents can get a feel for the process and how it developed into the Energy Action Plan. Boucher wants to use the kickoff event to take people through the development process. Boucher stated that the next step was to convey the resources and opportunities through already existing contact points like address/business changeovers, property sales, permit applications, etc. Engineer Khan stated that there are a variety of programs available to allow basically any resident to participate in the program. Commissioner LaPlante stated that the city had recently posted about the Home Energy Squad on social media channels, and that she was very pleased to see that. Commissioner LaPlante asked if the resources made available through the program were primarily state and local in origin and stated her concerns about the availability of federal funds for sustainability related projects in future years. Planner Boucher responded that to his knowledge the incentives were largely provided by Xcel Energy, with some state and local resources as well.

6. Urban Forestry Program Presentation

Forester Genter gave a presentation about the urban forestry program in Columbia Heights with a focus on planting and grant efforts in recent years. Genter reviewed some of the tools used to manage and plan the urban forest in Columbia Heights, including survey information from MnDNR, Metropolitan Council online mapping tool, and the city’s GIS inventory of trees. Genter described recent planting programs and efforts, Emerald Ash Borer management efforts, and grant activities undertaken by the urban forestry department. Genter also described the community gravel bed and its use in planting trees. Commission Evenson noted that canopy disparities and lack of tree cover in the city are strongly correlated with areas of high surface parking lot coverage. Commissioner Evenson asked if Genter had any favorite “trees of note” in the city and suggested a promotional program featuring these trees to encourage more tree planting on private property. Forester Genter replied that he had many favorite trees in the City on both public and private property and strongly supported this idea. Commissioner LaPlante asked if ecosystem services, and other ecological considerations were taken into account when choosing trees. Genter responded that the focus of planting was to grow successful, mature trees that will diversify the City’s canopy coverage. Genter elaborated that mix of mostly native tree species will provide the broadest set of ecological services to the City while also providing

resiliency in the face of changing climate and the possible introduction of non-native insect pests and pathogens.

7. Round Robin

Commissioner Kurek stated that the passing of Complete Streets Policy would allow for an update of our Green Step Cities progress. Planner Boucher said that he had started the program in question. Commissioner LaPlante said that Green Step should be revisited at the next meeting, to general agreement. Commissioner Johnson asked if the invasive species management grant could be used for a Green Step goal. Forester Genter said that he would look into the possibility of using the new grant for Green Step goals. Commissioner Evenson asked what the process would be to fill the vacancies on the commission. Engineer Khan replied that applications would be accepted starting in February, with new commissioner starting in April. Khan stated that Commissioner Finkelson had resigned from the commission, and that his vacancy would be filled at the same time as the other vacancy. Commissioner Johnson asked if all the commissions would all be filled at the same time. Councilmember James stated that applications allow for multiple commissions to be applied for and that new appointments would happen at the same time. Commissioner Groseth said that the pet bed workshop would be February 8 at the library for anyone interested in attending. Commissioner Johnson stated that she would be absent for the next commission meeting. Engineer Khan stated that Councilmember Buesgens asked him to relay an opportunity for a community climate leaders program through the University of Minnesota. The workshops are available online and in person, but there is a \$200 fee to register for the program. Khan also relayed that he had accepted a new job opportunity outside the city and would not be attending any further commission meetings. He expressed his gratitude to the commission and his best wishes for the future of the commission.

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Johnson made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Evenson. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist