



CITY COUNCIL MEETING
City Hall—Council Chambers, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, October 13, 2026
6:00 PM

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

MINUTES

The following are the minutes for the Meeting of the City Council held at 6:00 pm on Tuesday, October 13, 2026, in the City Council Chambers, City Hall, 3989 Central Avenue NE, Columbia Heights, Minnesota.

WELCOME/CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Council President James called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

Present: Councilmember Buesgens; Councilmember Deneen; Councilmember Spriggs; Councilmember James

Absent: Mayor Márquez Simula

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Jesse Hauf, IT Director; Scott Lepak, City Attorney; Andrew Splinter, Finance Director; Ed Minnema, SACA Executive Director

MISSION STATEMENT

Columbia Heights is a vibrant, healthy, and connected City. We are here to actively support the community, deliver equitable services, build and strengthen connections, improve upon our past, and uphold our successes. We strive to be better and ensure Columbia Heights is a great place for everyone, today and in the future.

A. 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.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Council President stated that Items C "Domestic Violence Awareness Month Proclamation" and D "Breast Cancer Awareness Month Proclamation" under Proclamations, Presentations, Recognition, Announcements, Guests would be addressed during the next meeting.

Motion by Councilmember Deneen, seconded by Councilmember Buesgens, to approve the Agenda as amended. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

PROCLAMATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, RECOGNITION, ANNOUNCEMENTS, GUESTS

A. Indigenous Peoples' Day Proclamation.

Council President James proclaimed October 12, 2026, as Indigenous Peoples' Day and read the City's proclamation.

B. Hunger Action Month Proclamation.

Accepting Proclamation: Ed Minnema, Executive Director

Councilmember Buesgens proclaimed October 2026 as Hunger Action Month and read the City's proclamation.

SACA Executive Director Ed Minnema accepted the Proclamation and thanked the City for being supportive during the move to the new building. He explained that they are able to serve four to five times as many people as they were prior to the move. SACA averages about 200 individuals a day and 7,000 pounds of food a day.

C. Domestic Violence Awareness Month Proclamation.

The item will be addressed at the next City Council meeting.

D. Breast Cancer Awareness Month Proclamation.

The item will be addressed at the next City Council meeting.

CITY COUNCIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS

Report of the City Council

Councilmember Buesgens stated she volunteers with the beautification committee for Murzyn Hall. She added that the Blooming Sunshine Garden is winding down and there are still hot red peppers available, as well as collard greens and raspberries. She mentioned that she attended the Library Board meeting, the HeightsNext planning meeting, and the Fire Department's open house. She stated that the Council recently finished interviews for the Planning Commission positions.

Councilmember Spriggs stated that he attended the Fire Department's open house and has been working with some public health advocacy groups for initiatives for the upcoming legislative session. He mentioned he would be attending the Charter Commission meeting on Thursday.

Councilmember Deneen noted that she attended the School Board Candidate Forum, the Council Work Session, the Fire Department open house, and the interviews for the Planning Commission positions. Friday at Kordiak Park will be the Spooktacular event.

Council President James stated she attended the School Board Forum, a meeting with the City Manager and the Mayor, and the Central Avenue cleanup with HeightsNext. She encouraged residents to do storm drain cleanup. She mentioned that she attended the Heights Theater 100-year celebration

showing, the Council Work Session, and the Columbia Heights High School Strikers Adapted soccer team game. She added that she attended the Fire Department's open house. She thanked staff for the Sullivan playground project and the street improvements in the southeast portion of the City. She announced that the mayor is hosting an event with the mayors of Hilltop and St. Anthony called Democracy Defense. The event will be on October 20th at 7:00 pm at First Lutheran Church.

Report of the City Manager

City Manager Chirpich reminded the community that early voting for the 2026 general election starts October 16th at City Hall during regular business hours and select extended hours. The trunk-or-treat event is on October 24th and is sponsored by Magnify Financial. The event is scheduled from 1:00 to 4:00 pm at Huset Park East. The Fire Department is partnering with the American Red Cross to offer smoke alarms free of charge for owner-occupied homes in the City. The program is intended for people who cannot afford a smoke alarm or are physically unable to install them. More information can be found on the City's website.

City Manager Response to September 28, 2026 Community Forum

City Manager Chirpich stated that three residents spoke at the Community Forum. The first resident expressed concerns related to the City's rental density cap program and the boundaries established in the blocks. After the meeting, a Councilmember submitted a request for staff to research the item further and bring it to the Council at an upcoming Council Work Session. The earliest the item would be put on a Council Work Session meeting is in December.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that there was a resident who spoke about concerns about water quality at Silver Lake and offered an extension to the City to partner on water quality initiatives. The resident requested that the City annually set aside funding for different water quality improvement initiatives that are led predominantly by the Lake Association in partnership with other agencies, including the DNR. The Council reviewed the concept at a recent work session and provided guidance that the City would be open to considering participating in cleanup efforts around aquatic invasive species and other efforts. The financial amount that was requested was \$3,000, and staff believes that the amount can be set aside, but they would want some formal policies put in place.

City Manager Chirpich stated a resident had concerns about election safety at polling places and wanted to make sure that the City was coordinating with the County for potential safety issues at polling places. The resident emphasized that residents should be able to vote without fear. He explained that the City administers the elections locally on behalf of the County and the County has oversight. He explained that staff expects the election to run just like any other election that has been administered in the past. The local team is ready, trained, and certified by the County. He added that he met with the mayor and Secretary of State a few weeks ago to discuss expectations from their perspective, and recommended early voting. Staff who are responsible for helping administer the election are meeting with the police to discuss election day and have more officers on call.

COMMUNITY FORUM

Eric Hodell, City resident, mentioned that he is a resident at Ratio Apartments. He expressed concern about parking options for Ratio residents. It costs \$125 a month for limited parking on site. The hefty tickets and restricted parking on Gould Avenue have limited parking for Ratio residents. He mentioned that he spoke with the City Manager to express his concerns, and they agreed that the ramp by the old Fairview building would be an adequate place to park. Within the past month, it appears that the City has made a change and included signage on the ramp that limits parking to 24 hours, with the potential outcome of getting towed. He expressed his understanding that the garage cannot be used as a permanent garage for parked cars without moving them. He explained that the majority of Ratio residents use the ramp and may leave their car in the ramp on weekends. He expressed concern that the restrictions would continue and parking would become more limited. He noted that rent continues to increase at the Ratio apartments. He asked the Council to consider reasonable parking options for Ratio residents.

Paul Ramacher, City resident, referenced Consent Agenda item 8 and asked if the individual addresses would be listed and what the addresses were. Council President James replied that the addresses are listed in the Agenda Packet.

CONSENT AGENDA

Council President James requested that Item 7, "Adopt Resolution 2026-065, A Resolution Approving Three Contracts with Eckberg Lammers, P.C. for Civil, Criminal Prosecution, and Labor and Employment Legal Services" be removed from the Consent Agenda for further discussion.

Motion by Councilmember Spriggs, seconded by Councilmember Deneen, to approve the Consent Agenda as amended. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

- 1. Adopt Resolution 2026-062, Appointing Me'Shulon Langley to the Sustainability Commission as a Youth Commissioner.**

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-062, there being ample copies available to the public.

MOTION: Move to adopt Resolution 2026-062, appointing Me'Shulon Langley to the City of Columbia Heights Youth Commission as a non-voting member of the Sustainability Commission.

- 2. Adopt Resolution 2026-063, Appointing Kenza Manseur to the Parks and Recreation Commission as a Youth Commissioner.**

Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-063, there being ample copies available to the public.

MOTION: Move to adopt Resolution 2026-063, appointing Kenza Manseur to the City of Columbia Heights Youth Commission as a non-voting member of the Parks and Recreation Commission.

3. **Accept September 2, 2026, Library Board Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to accept the September 2, 2026, Library Board meeting minutes.
4. **Approve September 28, 2026, City Council Meeting Minutes.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to approve the September 28, 2026, City Council meeting minutes.
5. **Adopt Resolution No. 2026-064 Amending The 2026 Personnel Budget For Certain Estimates.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-064, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Motion to adopt Resolution 2026-064, amending the 2026 personnel budget for certain estimates.
6. **Enter into Separation Agreement and Release of All Claims with Employee.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Motion to approve the attached Separation Agreement and Release of All Claims with Employee and further authorize and direct the City Manager to execute the Agreement.
7. **Pulled from the Consent Agenda for further discussion: "Adopt Resolution 2026-065, A Resolution Approving Three Contracts with Eckberg Lammers, P.C. for Civil, Criminal Prosecution, and Labor and Employment Legal Services".**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2026-065, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Move to adopt Resolution 2026-065, a Resolution approving three contracts with Eckberg Lammers, P.C. for Civil, Criminal Prosecution, and Labor and Employment legal services.
8. **Rental Occupancy Licenses for Approval.**
Presenting Item: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager
MOTION: Move to approve the items listed for rental housing license applications for October 13, 2026, in that they have met the requirements of the Property Maintenance Code.
9. **Review of Bills.**
MOTION: Move that in accordance with Minnesota Statute 412.271, subd. 8, the City Council has reviewed the enclosed list of claims paid by check and by electronic funds transfer in the amount of \$1,189,249.36.

ITEMS PULLED FROM THE CONSENT AGENDA

7. Adopt Resolution 2026-065, A Resolution Approving Three Contracts with Eckberg Lammers, P.C. for Civil, Criminal Prosecution, and Labor and Employment Legal Services.

Council President James explained that she would like to discuss the selection process and the goals of the contracts. City Manager Chirpich explained that the City currently retains Barna, Guzy & Steffen for civil, prosecution, and labor/employment legal services. The retirement of the City's lead attorney, together with the City's planned competitive review of legal services, created an appropriate time to evaluate the market and identify the service model that best meets the City's current needs.

City Manager Chirpich stated staff issued a request for proposals for three service tracks: Civil Legal, Prosecution, and Labor/Employment. Eight firms submitted proposals for one or more tracks. Staff reviewed the proposals, developed track-specific scoring criteria, and interviewed five firms representing the highest-ranked proposals across the three tracks. The interviews used standardized questions and practical scenarios to evaluate experience, staffing, responsiveness, transition planning, and overall fit.

City Manager Chirpich noted that Eckberg Lammers received the highest overall score on each track. The firm submitted the most complete proposal across all three service areas, and staff concluded through the interviews that its team, depth of municipal experience, communication approach, and transition plan provide the best overall fit for the City.

City Manager Chirpich stated that the RFP process also showed that a fixed retainer does not align well with the City's Civil Legal service volume. Staff recommends an hourly structure that allows the City to pay for services as needed and assign work to attorneys and paralegals based on the complexity of each matter. Compared with the other proposals, Eckberg Lammers' pricing was at the higher end for Civil Legal services, the lower end for Prosecution, and near the median for Labor and Employment.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that prosecution and Labor and Employment spending is expected to increase generally with cost-of-living and service demand. Civil Legal costs may increase by up to 30 percent because the City has received discounted rates from its current firm, Civil Legal usage was lower than average during the past two years, and current market rates are higher. Actual Civil and Labor costs will depend on the amount and complexity of work requested.

Councilmember Deneen thanked staff for taking the time to conduct the interviews and do research. She thanked the current legal team and explained that best practices are to steward public funds well by making sure that the City is getting a good deal with the services that are being provided.

Council President James explained that she was pleased with the number of detailed proposals. When the City is in litigation, it often uses the attorneys through the League of Minnesota Cities. City Manager Chirpich agreed and explained that when there is litigation, it will go to the League of Minnesota Cities for review.

Motion by Councilmember Deneen, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to close the hearing and waive the reading of Resolution 2026-065, there being ample copies available to the public. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Motion by Councilmember Deneen, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to approve Resolution 2026-065, being a Resolution of the City Council of the City of Columbia Heights approving three contracts with Eckberg Lammers, P.C. for Civil, Criminal Prosecution, and Labor and Employment legal services. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

This is the public's opportunity to speak regarding this matter. Speakers who are in-person are asked to complete a Speaker Form and submit it to the City Clerk. Speakers attending virtually should send a request to speak with this information to the moderator using the chat function and wait to be called on to speak. When speaking, virtual attendees should turn their camera on. Speakers should limit their comments to five (5) minutes. Any comments made after the public hearing is closed will not be considered by the City Council and will not be included as part of the formal record for this matter as the item will have been voted on and the item formally closed by the Council.

10. ADOPT AN ASSESSMENT ROLL AND LEVY A SPECIAL ASSESSMENT FOR DELINQUENT ACCOUNTS RESOLUTION 2026-66.

Presenting Item: Andrew Splinter, Finance Director

Finance Director Splinter stated that annually, staff recommends that the City Council adopt a special assessment levy to collect miscellaneous charges on customer accounts that have reached the delinquent stage within the past year. These charges are for city-provided services required to maintain property conditions in accordance with City ordinances. These services include water, sewer, refuse, weed cutting, tree removal, water meters, nuisance/hazard abatement, etc. A rate of 6.5% interest is proposed for the one-year assessment rolls. These payment terms were included in the public hearing notice published in *the Life* newspaper on September 18, 2026, and mailed to each property owner with a delinquent account. A copy of the notice is attached. The services provided to these properties were all initially invoiced prior to July 31, 2026. The effective interest rate is therefore lower than 6.5%, depending on the specific date(s) service was provided to each property. Staff notes that typically 25%-35% of the total assessment roll is collected from customers within six weeks of the assessment hearing.

Council President James opened the Public Hearing. There were no public comments.

Motion by Councilmember Spriggs, seconded by Councilmember Buesgens, to close the hearing and waive the reading of Ordinance No. 1695, there being ample copies available to the public. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Motion by Councilmember Spriggs, seconded by Councilmember Buesgens, to approve Resolution 2026-66, being a Resolution of the City Council of the City of Columbia Heights adopting an assessment roll and levy a special assessment with a one-year term for certain delinquent accounts. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Councilmember Buesgens, seconded by Councilmember Deneen, to adjourn. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Meeting adjourned at 6:50 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Aaron Chirpich, City Manager

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