



CITY COUNCIL MEETING
City Hall—Council Chambers, 3989 Central Ave NE
Monday, December 08, 2025
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 Monday, December 08, 2025, in the City Council Chambers, City Hall, 3989 Central Avenue NE, Columbia Heights, Minnesota

WELCOME/CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Mayor Márquez Simula called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

Present: Mayor Márquez Simula; Councilmember Buesgens; Councilmember Spriggs; Councilmember James

Absent: Councilmember Deneen

Also Present: Aaron Chirpich, City Manager; Mitchell Forney, Community Development Director; Sara Ion, City Clerk; Joe Kloiber, Finance Director; Travis Lutz, Assistant City Attorney; Adam Hardy, Landlord/property owner; Patrick McVary, City resident; Stacy McVary, City resident; Eric Paulson, City resident; Bashir Siyad, City resident; Mark Veronikas, City resident

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

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

PROCLAMATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, RECOGNITION, ANNOUNCEMENTS, GUESTS

A. Universal Declaration of Human Rights Proclamation.

Mayor Márquez Simula proclaimed December 10, 2025, as Universal Declaration of Human Rights Day and read the City's proclamation. She explained that there are 30 Universal Declarations of Human Rights. The Council read the declarations.

CITY COUNCIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS

Report of the City Council

Councilmember James shared that many community members have had a scary week due to threats of harassment and difficulties with the Federal Law Enforcement. She noted that she attended the EDA meeting, the Council work session, the Columbia Heights and Fridley Business Council meeting, a meeting with leaders in the community about community gardens, the high school musical, the League of Women Voters Holiday Social, and an event with Mayor Márquez Simula and the mayor of Mounds View.

Councilmember Buesgens announced that HeightsNext would be hosting the Buy Nothing event on December 14th from 4:00-7:00 pm at Murzyn Hall. The event will have holiday-related items. She stated she attended the Parks and Recreation Commission meeting and the high school's musical.

Councilmember Spriggs stated he attended the EDA meeting, the Council work session, and the quarterly business council meeting.

Mayor Márquez Simula shared that she attended the Regional Council of Mayors meeting, the League of Women Voters luncheon, and the listening session with the mayor of Mounds View and families from Annunciation School. She explained that the stories from the families were heartbreaking, and the Council is talking about ways to support legislators in reducing large capacity weapons. She noted that the City hosted the North Metro Business meeting, the Library Board meeting, the EDA meeting, and the Council work session meeting.

Mayor Márquez Simula read a statement regarding recent ICE activity. She highlighted that immigrants have continued to strengthen the City. She noted that she stands with every immigrant family. Increased ICE activity, including reports of racial profiling and actions taken without clear warrants, has caused fear among families, students, and businesses. Immigration is a part of the City's history and identity. She condemned the deployment of ICE agents to the City and metro area. She urged federal lawmakers to reverse the approach and to protect the civil liberties of Minnesotans everywhere.

Report of the City Manager

City Manager Chirpich noted that the holiday train is coming to town on Sunday, December 14th, at 8:00 pm. The train will stop at Lions Park between 37th Avenue and Stinson Boulevard. The holiday City tour takes place on Tuesday, December 16th, from 5:00-6:30 p.m. The event includes a festive fire truck and special guests who will be touring the City. The route can be found on the City's website and Facebook page. After the tour, festivities will continue at Murzyn Hall at 5:30 pm with free cocoa, cider, cookies, crafts, and more from 6:00-8:00 pm. A special guest will be available for holiday photos.

City Manager Chirpich stated that the community is invited to attend an open house regarding the future of Sullivan Lake Park on January 7th, from 6:00-7:00 pm at City Hall. There will also be an online survey for the community to provide feedback on the park concepts that are being moved forward. He reminded the community about winter parking regulations. Crews will be removing snow during the day and encourage people to move their vehicles until the street has been cleared curb to curb.

Mayor Márquez Simula mentioned that the Council discussed during a work session the possibility of having a winter parking listening session. She added that they would let the community know when that will happen.

2. City Manager Response to November 24, 2025, Community Forum Concerns.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that there were two individuals during the last Community Forum who expressed concerns related to ICE activity in the City. The individuals had a meeting with the Police Chief following the Council meeting.

City Manager Chirpich noted that there were questions regarding winter parking and parking on Gould Avenue and Peters Place. One question was regarding what the City's winter parking regulations were. Between November 15 and March 15, it is unlawful to park or leave unattended automobiles, motor vehicles, recreational vehicles, or trailers on any public road or parkway within the City between 2:00-6:00 am unless a permit has been issued for that vehicle. The rules also apply for March 16th through May 1st during snow events producing 2 or more inches of snow.

City Manager Chirpich explained that there was a question regarding where winter parking permits could be purchased. Individuals can apply for winter parking permits on the City's website.

City Manager Chirpich stated there was a question regarding how the City enforces winter parking restrictions. Generally, on a regular basis, the City's Police Department patrols City streets to identify infractions, issue tickets, and authorize towing of vehicles that are violating the winter parking restrictions. There was a question regarding why the City is not issuing a ticket for each vehicle that violates the rules every night. The City uses a grid system to ensure that each neighborhood is patrolled on a regular basis in a fair and equitable manner. The City does not have a dedicated parking enforcement team and does not have sufficient staff to patrol every street for every parking violation each night. It is common for the plowing crew to coordinate with the police in areas of greater concern that need immediate attention.

City Manager Chirpich noted that there was a question regarding how the parking conditions on Gould Avenue and Peters Place were different this year from previous years. The City implemented year-round parking regulations on Peters Place and Gould Avenue in 2025. The regulations include several no-parking zones and ensure that driveways and trash cans are not blocked by parked vehicles.

City Manager Chirpich mentioned that there was a question regarding what residents could do to help make sure plows can clear the streets. Residents are welcome to call the non-emergency police dispatch line to report a snow or winter parking-related infraction. The phone number is 763-427-1212. He added that there was a question on what residents can do if they notice a vehicle without

ADA or handicap accessibility plates or hang tags that is parked in those designated spaces. He encouraged residents to call the non-emergency number.

City Manager Chirpich stated there was a question about whether the police try to contact vehicle owners before issuing or towing vehicles. It is past practice for the police to get a hold of vehicle owners before towing as an effort to educate residents on the Ordinance. The procedural manual has been updated in the snow emergency response guidelines to remove that.

City Manager Chirpich explained that there was a question about using the library parking lot as public parking. The library parking lot is reserved for library patrons and City activities and is not available for public parking. The City has two free public parking lots that are near the area. He added that there was a question on whether the City anticipated any updates to the parking regulations in the City Code. Staff have noted several parking standards and regulations in City Code that could benefit from a review, but there is no timeline for the process.

City Manager Chirpich stated that there were concerns about the fan noise at City Hall. The City received updated plans for November 19th regarding the progress of the project. The redesigned plan would include changes to the ductwork with the fans. The goal is to complete the project before the cooling system is needed.

Mayor Márquez Simula encouraged residents to call the non-emergency number or call 911 and tell the dispatcher that it is not an emergency so that there can be data collected on the issue.

COMMUNITY FORUM

Mark Veronikas, City resident, expressed concern regarding plows not being able to plow Peters Place and Gould Avenue due to cars parked on the street. Between the two streets, there were 15 cars snowed in. He added that there was a semi-truck that was blocking half of the alleyway. He called the non-emergency number, and the police officer spent 45 minutes trying to contact the semi-truck driver. After the semi-truck driver moved the vehicle, the police officer drove down the street and did not issue a ticket for the 15 vehicles that were parked on the street. He suggested that the library charge people to park overnight until the library opens. That way, it would provide funds for the library that the City does not need to pay for, and could lower taxes. He added that the semi-truck blocked his alleyway for a second time.

Bashir Siyad, City resident, stated that there is parking on only one side of the street on Monroe Street. He wondered why parking was only allowed on one side of the street.

CONSENT AGENDA

Council member James pointed out item 10 and asked if the two options for where the lift station would go were examples of where they could go. City Manager Chirpich agreed that it was an example of where they could go. He added that he expects that it would be moved further south to be closer to the parking access for ease of maintenance.

Mayor Márquez Simula pointed out item 11 regarding the license agenda. She expressed her understanding that the paperwork can take some time to get in. She thanked the staff for their work.

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

- 1. Approve November 24, 2025, City Council Meeting Minutes.**
MOTION: Move to approve the November 24, 2025, City Council meeting minutes.
- 2. Approve December 1, 2025, City Council Work Session Meeting Minutes.**
MOTION: Move to approve the December 1, 2025, City Council Work Session meeting minutes.
- 3. Accept January, April, and July 2025 Charter Commission meeting minutes.**
MOTION: Move to accept the January, April, and July 2025 Charter Commission meeting minutes.
- 4. Accept August 27, 2025, Park & Recreation Commission Minutes.**
MOTION: Move to accept the August 27, 2025, Park & Recreation Commission minutes.
- 5. Accept November 5, 2025, Library Board Minutes.**
MOTION: Move to accept the November 5, 2025, Library Board meeting minutes.
- 6. Adopt Resolution 2025-90, Establishing the City of Columbia Heights Fee Schedule for 2026.**
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2025-90, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Motion to adopt Resolution 2025-90, approving the 2026 City-Wide Fee Schedule.
- 7. Adopt Resolution 2025-91, Establishing Precinct Polling Locations.**
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2025-91, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Motion to adopt Resolution 2025-91, establishing precinct polling locations.
- 8. Adopt Resolution 2025-92, Approving Legal Services Contract for 2026.**
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2025-92, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Motion to adopt Resolution 2025-92, authorizing the City Manager to enter a contract with Barna, Guzy, and Steffen (BGS) for Legal Services for 2026.
- 9. Adopt Resolution 2025-93, Setting the Sale of Bond Series 2026A.**
MOTION: Move to waive the reading of Resolution 2025-93, there being ample copies available to the public.
MOTION: Move to adopt Resolution 2025-93, being a resolution providing for the issuance and sale of taxable general obligation tax increment refunding bonds, series 2026A, in the proposed aggregate principal amount of \$7,635,000.

10. Approval of Contract for Professional Services for Lift Station and Water Main Improvements at Sullivan Lake Park.

MOTION: Move to award the Sullivan Lake Park Lift Station and Water Main Improvements, City Project No. 2608, to the consulting firm of ISG Inc., based upon their qualified, responsible proposal for a cost not to exceed \$130,500.

11. License Agenda.

MOTION: Move to approve the items listed on the business license agenda for December 8, 2025, as presented.

12. Rental Occupancy Licenses for Approval.

MOTION: Move to approve the items listed for rental housing license applications for December 8, 2025, in that they have met the requirements of the Property Maintenance Code.

13. Review of Bills.

MOTION: Move that in accordance with Minnesota Statute 412.271, subd. 8 the City Council has reviewed the enclosed list to claims paid by check and by electronic funds transfer in the amount of \$1,615,028.24.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

14. Resolution 2025-86, Renewal of SJB Enterprise's Currency Exchange License.

Item Presented by Community Development Director Mitch Forney.

Community Development Director Forney stated on October 31st, City staff received the attached letter from the Minnesota Department of Commerce regarding the renewal of SJB Enterprise's (dba Your Exchange) Currency Exchange License. The letter in the Agenda Packet outlines the City's role in reviewing the application and submitting a decision to the State.

Community Development Director Forney explained that the City does not have a dedicated currency exchange license, nor do we independently license check-cashing businesses. However, as outlined in the attached letter and pursuant to Minnesota Statutes Chapter 53A.04, it is the City's responsibility to review the renewal application and forward a decision to the State within 60 days. As part of the State's review, the application includes:

- Background checks conducted by the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension,
- A fee schedule for services provided by the business,
- A \$10,000 surety bond valid through December 31, 2026, and
- The \$500 renewal fee.

Community Development Director Forney noted that staff have reviewed the application and supporting materials submitted to the State and have found them to be complete. Minnesota Statutes Chapter 53A.04 delegates authority to the City for reviewing and

providing a decision on currency exchange licenses. The statute states that the City must provide published notice of its intention to consider the license renewal and solicit testimony from interested parties, including community members. The statute further requires the City to make a determination based on whether the licensee meets all applicable City codes.

Community Development Director Forney stated that in reviewing the renewal application, staff considered:

- Compliance: No significant compliance issues were identified in the submitted materials.
- Background Checks: The owners and officers passed the State's required background checks.
- Community Impact: In consultation with the Police Department, the business has not been associated with a high call volume or significant community disturbances.

Mayor Márquez Simula opened the Public Hearing.

Motion by Councilmember James, seconded by Councilmember Buesgens, to close the public hearing and waive the reading of Resolution 2025-86, there being ample copies available to the public. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Motion by Councilmember James, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to adopt Resolution 2025-86, being a Resolution of the City Council of the City of Columbia approving the license renewal of SJB Enterprises Currency Exchange License. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

15. Resolution 2025-89, Adopting a Budget for the Year 2026, Setting the City Levy, Approving the HRA Levy, and Approving a Tax Rate Increase.

Item Presented by Finance Director Joe Kloiber.

Finance Director Kloiber stated as required under the City Charter, the City Manager provided the City Council with a proposed 2026 budget in August 2025. That document, available on the City's website, explains the proposed 2026 budget with 114 pages of summary and detailed information, including comparisons to the current year and two prior years. This information was then reviewed at three Council work sessions (September, October, November)

Finance Director Kloiber noted that preliminary approval by the City Council of the proposed 2026 budget and tax levy was made by Resolution 2025-68. Based on that preliminary approval, Anoka County mailed in November a notice to each property owner listing their property's share of the proposed 2026 City property tax levy. Those County notices also report the proposed 2026 property taxes for all other applicable jurisdictions (county, school district, HRA, and other special taxing districts).

Finance Director Kloiber explained that the proposed 2026 gross tax levy is a 9.2% increase in the amount received by the city. The annual portion of the City tax levy subsidized by the

Metro Area Fiscal Disparities program will increase by 13% for 2026, under the State formula for that program. These two changes combine to yield an 8.2% average increase to local property owners for the portion of the City levy. Under state statute, the City Council cannot adopt a final 2026 tax levy greater than the amount reported by Anoka County in the notices sent to each property owner in November.

Finance Director Kloiber stated that through the budget review process, the City Council identified two functional areas to increase service levels, potentially beyond those included in the 2026 budget proposed by the City Manager. These are additional remediation of wear and tear at the Murzyn Hall recreation center and staffing increases at the City Library. Staff and the City Council then reached a consensus that staff will initially develop work plans to address these matters, and then, if additional resources are required to implement those plans in 2026, staff will request the City Council to amend the 2026 budget as needed at that time. More specifically, in regard to these two functional areas:

- The one-time nature of the expected updates to Murzyn Hall will be funded by appropriating additional fund balance for use from Government Buildings Fund 411, once the scope of the project is firm.
- In the most recent years, the primary staffing challenge for the City Library has been filling vacancies and retaining staff. Management is reviewing strategies for addressing this, including restructuring scheduled hours per week, position grades, etc. Additional ongoing resources may be a part of the solution to these staffing issues, but the dollar amount, if any, cannot currently be determined.

Finance Director Kloiber stated staff recommends adopting the 2026 budget and final tax levy as shown in Resolution 2025-89, which are the same amounts as preliminarily approved by prior Resolution 2025-68.

Mayor Márquez Simula opened the Public Hearing.

Stacy McVary, City resident, noted that Finance Director Kloiber stated that there were residents outside of the area who subsidize the tax. She asked for more clarity on the matter. Finance Director Kloiber clarified that it is property owners instead of residents. The metro area, under State law, has a revenue-sharing agreement where a certain percentage of the commercial and industrial property tax base is shared among metro jurisdictions. Some communities had a lot of commercial properties, while neighboring communities that did not have as much commercial development bore greater needs because they had more services required.

Ms. McVary asked if the agreement was evaluated each year. Finance Director Kloiber replied that there is a formula and State law that is updated based on the prior year tax levy.

Adam Hardy, Landlord/Property owner, asked how often property values are looked at and considered. Finance Director Kloiber replied annually. Each spring, the City holds a board of appeals. Each property owner is mailed a statement of proposed value. During the board of

appeals, property owners are given an opportunity to question their evaluation. The County staff who conduct the property evaluations are present in the meeting to answer questions. The County staff has a goal to see 20% of the properties. Over the course of five years, they see all of the homes. During a year when a home is not physically seen, the County has a pricing model based on recent sales that estimates the value of the property.

Mr. Hardy asked if the new apartment buildings that are going in would be subsidized with a lower tax value. Finance Director Kloiber replied that most of the development in the City has some incentive. City Manager Chirpich replied that the new apartment buildings benefited from tax increment financing. The developer receives a tax break based on development agreements. It is a way for the City to level the playing field to promote redevelopment. He explained that the State recently changed the tax rate that affordable housing projects pay to a significantly lower rate than all other property classifications. The idea was to incentivize housing development by the State.

Mr. Hardy explained that he invests in properties in the County. The City's portion of taxes is twice the amount as Blaine, Coon Rapids, and Anoka, based on the value of the houses. He asked why his Columbia Heights house is twice the amount in City taxes as his property in Blaine. He noted that the houses have a similar value. Finance Director Kloiber replied that the library is the only municipal library in Anoka County, and it takes up part of the budget. Other communities do not have their City levy funding the library. The County is levying on other cities for the library. He mentioned that he would follow up with Mr. Hardy to provide more insight. He explained that it is difficult to compare the value of a house in different cities. It is more useful to compare the median values between the communities. He added that there are varying levels of services between communities.

Mr. Hardy summarized that the City is a bedroom community and does not have the commercial and industrial development that other places have. Therefore, the brunt of the costs is taken by homeowners instead of companies. Hopefully, the affordable housing units will offset some of the homeowner costs. He noted that he looked at Edina Realty's website, and there are two condos that are not valued properly, and homeowners take the brunt of it, which is why the taxes are double the amount from other communities. City Manager Chirpich mentioned that the condos are for sale. He added that the City is already developed, whereas other communities have room for development, which moves at a more rapid pace.

Mayor Márquez Simula explained that many residents have wondered if the Medtronic site could be turned into a park. The property would be taxed based on the use, so if it were turned into a park, it would be tax-exempt, and the City would not receive the tax money from it. The City is old, which makes it difficult to put in new development because developers would be working with old systems underground, or there is no space for construction to happen. She thanked Mr. Hardy for his questions and mentioned that the County is present during the assessment hearings and is available to hear if the home is valued incorrectly.

Bashir Siyad, City resident, stated he had the same question as Mr. Hardy regarding the tax valuation. He asked what the taxes were based on and explained that his taxes went up a lot. He added that property taxes keep coming up each year, and he wanted to gain an understanding. Finance Director Kloiber replied that if the County does not physically look at a home to determine the value, the County will rely on recent sales of other similar properties in the area to determine the property value. Between 2025 and 2026, residential properties in the City went up 3.5%.

Mr. Siyad asked if the whole metro area was seeing higher property taxes, or if it was just in Anoka County. Financial Director Kloiber replied that there is a wide range of tax increases in 2026. It is difficult to compare across communities.

Councilmember Buesgens explained that there are several reasons that the City's taxes are higher. The City is an urban center, and the City only has 5% commercial property, which means the bulk of taxes falls on the residents. The previous Councils made a lot of cuts. There are a lot of old buildings that can no longer be patched up and need to be replaced. The housing values in the City have gone up significantly. Staff are coming before the Council, already making cuts. The City has a skeleton staff, and prices continue to go up since COVID.

Patrick McVary, City resident, stated what due diligence the City does to ensure that it is providing the right services for the citizens, or developing services that may be needed. Mayor Márquez Simula replied that the City has boards and commissions of community members that volunteer their time to inform the Council and staff of what they are seeing in the community. She added that the City does community outreach to gather input and feedback from the community. She explained that she wants to steward the funds in the City well.

City Manager Chirpich added that the City desires to have constant improvement to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the community. He explained that he wants staff to be curious, ask questions, and be more efficient with everyone's resources. He noted that the Council, division heads, and staff get together to review the primary goals for the next two years and assess if they need to make any changes. He read the core strategies, which include: A community that grows with purpose and equity; high-quality public spaces that are safe and accessible that are built for everyone; safe, engaged, effective, and forward thinking; a resilient and prosperous economy; and an inclusive and connected community.

Councilmember Spriggs explained that the tax increases are seen across the nation. He stated that there is a rise in inflation, and there have been cuts in State and Federal funding programs and grants. Therefore, the City has to decide to keep the services stable and raise taxes, or cut services to keep taxes stable.

Finance Director Kloiber noted that in 2026, the City is making a change from using street assessments to finance street construction. The street construction would be paid for with a tax levy. The shift comprises about a third of the increase for 2026. A third of the tax increase is due to the increase in the cost of living and two additional positions at the City.

Councilmember James acknowledged that the tax increase is a hardship. Half of the budget is for public safety. There have been years of underinvestment in basic services over the years. If the City cuts services or delays maintenance, it will cost more in the future. Everything the City is doing in the budget is are backbone items that have to get done; it does not include extra items. She noted that there are property tax refunds that are available. She explained that the City is working for efficiencies, advocating for sustainable revenue sources at the State and Federal levels.

Eric Paulson, City resident, asked if the budget for 2026 reflected the costs for the new Public Works building. Mayor Márquez Simula replied that it does not, and the City is hoping for assistance from the State. City Manager Chirpich noted that there are some 2026 budget expenditures that are related to advancing the project, including the architectural and engineering plan development and the acquisition of the property adjacent to which is about \$800,000 in the budget.

Mayor Márquez Simula explained that there have been more calls to the Police and Fire Department than they were meant to handle. It is due to more mental health concerns and fewer medical areas for people to receive services. The City invested in a full-time social worker who was paid through grants. When the grant ended, the City decided to continue paying the social worker since it caused so many calls to the Fire and Police Department to go down, and it was successful. She added that the City received a grant for a therapy dog for the Police Department. Staff have been creative in how the City can access grants and provide services that the City can use. There will be an additional position for code enforcement. She explained that it is a long process for staff to go to a home to check on code enforcement. She added that the City does not have the staff to do it, so the new position will help with staff time. She explained that she wants to do things right and invest in the resources for the future. She stated that the staff work hard and expressed her pride in the staff. She noted that City staff are paid in an equitable way because the City wants to keep the staff that they have. She acknowledged that the tax increases are a financial hurdle.

Motion by Councilmember Buesgens, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to close the public hearing and waive the reading of Resolution 2025-89, there being ample copies available to the public. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Motion by Councilmember Buesgens, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to adopt Resolution 2025-89, being a Resolution of the City Council of the City of Columbia adopting a budget for the year 2026, setting the city levy, approving the HRA levy, and approving a tax rate increase. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Councilmember James, seconded by Councilmember Spriggs, to adjourn. All Ayes, Motion Carried 4-0.

Meeting adjourned at 7:53 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Sara Ion, City Clerk/Council Secretary

DRAFT