



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE

Tuesday, December 9, 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, Johnson, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka, Small

Staff present: Mitchell Forney, Director of Community Development
Ursula Brandt, City Planner
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist
Jesse Davies, Refuse and Recycling Coordinator
Zekima Rashid, Green Corps Member

Members absent: Commissioners Evenson, Groseth, Kurek

Council Liaison: Rachel James (virtual)

COMMUNITY FORUM

No community members were present.

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approve the September 9 and November 11, 2025, Regular Sustainability Commission Meeting Minutes

MOTION: Move to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

Motion to approve by Chairperson Jensen Christen, seconded by Commissioner Johnson. The motion was approved unanimously.

BUSINESS ITEMS

2. Better Futures Organic Collection Service

Coordinator Davies introduced himself to the commission and explained that the city was currently offering curbside organics collection service in Columbia Heights. Davies introduced Donnell Scott, the curbside program manager for the contractor that collects the organic waste, Better Futures MN. Mr. Scott introduced himself and described the nonprofit organization Better Futures MN, which seeks to employ and help rehabilitate people who have been previously incarcerated. Mr. Scott described the organic waste collection schedule in Columbia Heights, which includes pickups 4 days a week with an average of about 120 pickups each day. Davies asked if Better Futures had also taken part in the disassembly and recycling of structures in Columbia Heights. Mr. Scott explained that multiple buildings had been disassembled and largely recycled from Columbia Heights by Better Futures employees with very high reuse levels

of materials. Commissioner LaPlante asked where the organic waste was taken to be composted after curbside collection. Davies replied that the waste was first taken to a transfer station in south Minneapolis before being transported to the Waste Management composting site in Empire, MN. Councilmember James asked if Better Futures had experienced any customer usage issues that could be communicated to the public to improve collection. Mr. Scott replied that squirrels and other rodents were the main problems in curbside collection. Mr. Scott added that using compostable liner bags in the collection vessels reduces freezing of waste in the containers and improves collection. Mr. Scott stated that overall collection in Columbia Heights has been going very well and improving over time. He further stated that he expected program usage by residents to continue to grow and increase in the future in Columbia Heights. Commissioner Carlson asked if workforce development or job skills training was a part of the Better Futures program. Mr. Scott replied that all workers receive general safety training with multiple OSHA certifications as well as job specific training depending on which area they will be working in. Mr. Scott explained that all workers receive 2 weeks of training with a combination of computer courses and hand-on training before working in the field. Director Forney stated that the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority had worked with Better Futures to deconstruct several properties in Columbia Heights in the past. Forney explained that Better Futures has a warehouse where they sell the reusable materials from the deconstruction process. Mr. Scott explained that approximately 65% of the materials from deconstruction projects can be reused. Davies discussed the history of organics collection in Columbia Heights in previous years, which included comingled yard waste and household organics collection. That practice ended when Waste Management purchased the composting operation, which spurred the search for a new method of household organics collection. Davies explained that challenges included the desire to not increase the number of waste carts, especially since most households generate less than 10 pounds of organic waste weekly. Collection of waste curbside in small pails by Better Futures was the plan that was developed to address the problem, and a 2-year trial contract was agreed to. Davies stated that the performance of Better Futures over the last 2 years has been excellent and that staff recommended entering into a new 3-year contract with Better Futures.

MOTION: To recommend that the City Council approve a 3-year contract with Better Futures MN for curbside collection of household organics.

Motion was made by Commissioner Johnson and seconded by Commissioner LaPlante. The motion passed unanimously.

3. Community Energy Ambassadors Program Presentation

Green Corps member Rashid introduced the CERTs (Clean Energy Resource Team), a public-private partnership that seeks to connect individuals and communities to opportunities to develop community-based clean energy projects. Rashid further described the role of Community Energy Ambassadors within the CERTs program and the value of becoming an ambassador. Rashid described the example of a Sustainability Commission from the city of Rochester, MN, which chose to complete the program and become certified ambassadors as a group. Rashid described the process of becoming certified and provided examples of potential projects that could be undertaken to become certified. Commissioner LaPlante related that she knew someone that had completed the program and found it extremely valuable.

Commissioner Johnson asked if Rashid was aware of any other community examples. Rashid related that the Rochester example had been highlighted by the CERTs program and that she was not aware of other examples. Director Forney said that based upon the interest of the commission, staff would follow up and create a potential timeline for completing the program. Councilmember James thanked Rashid for bringing this idea to the commission and for her work in general.

4. Sustainability Commission End of Year Review

Planner Brandt gave a synopsis of commission activities for the year 2025, including the adoption of the Partners In Energy Community Energy Action Plan and the very successful kickoff event associated with the launch of the plan. Planner Brandt also mentioned the successful grant project led by the Invasive Species Subcommittee, which saw the creation of a mobile volunteer support kit and 4 community invasive species management events in 2025. The project was made possible through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Brandt continued by discussing the Sustainable Purchasing Policy, which began development in 2025. Brandt further stated that the commission had also welcomed 2 new commissioners and Green Corps member Rashid in 2025. Director Forney provided updates about city staff and milestones from 2025, including the hiring of a new Stormwater Specialist in the engineering dept, Drew Chirpich. Forney said that Stormwater Specialist Chirpich would be attending many Sustainability Commission meetings in the future, and that he had a strong background in sustainability. Forney also talked about City Council strategic planning, including sustainability related items like Green Step Cities step 3 and the creation of a new Parks System Master Plan in conjunction with the upcoming Comprehensive Plan update. Forney asked the commission if there was interest in a new goal-setting session for 2026 or if the commission was comfortable continuing to work on the goals identified in the previous session. Commissioner LaPlante asked when new commissioners would be starting their terms in 2026. Director Forney replied that the current terms run through April 2026. LaPlante stated that she was very much in favor of a new goal setting and planning session, but that the new commissioners starting in April should be included in the goal setting and planning. Commissioner Carlson stated that he was in favor of delaying the goal setting session to include the new members. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that the current goals were still good targets for the commission to work on, and that additional goals could be created once the new commissioners came on board. Commissioner Johnson agreed that the current goals still seemed very relevant. Commissioner LaPlante suggested that a goal related to business engagement could be a good substitute for working on the Parks Master Plan. Director Forney mentioned that any engagement with for-profit business could not be undertaken by Green Corps Member Rashid due to the terms of her employment. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka stated that climate resiliency for the community would be a good goal for the commission and asked if a community-wide plan was in place for climate related disasters. Director Forney stated that Green Corps Member Rashid had been reviewing the Emergency Management Plan for items related to sustainability as part of the GreenStep Cities process. Commissioner Johnson asked how long Green Corps Member Rashid would be with the City of Columbia Heights. Forney replied that her term would run until September, but that extensions were possible under the program if all parties were interested and funding is available. Director Forney said that staff would update and refine the list of goals previously identified by the commission and bring it to a future meeting as a full

agenda item for continued discussion. Forney provided the commission with an update about planned business engagement for next year including helping prepare Central Ave businesses for the upcoming MnDOT reconstruction project and engaging the business community about energy efficiency rebates and programs. Commissioner Carlson asked if the Central Ave plan was available on the city website. Director Forney replied that the plan had not yet been finalized, and that a final plan would be reviewed by the City Council for municipal consent in summer of 2026. Councilmember James told the commission that the current plan was available on the MnDOT website but was still preliminary and lacking in detail. Councilmember James also told the commissioners that they would be able to speak in favor of the plan during the municipal consent process at public meetings if they were interested.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates

Director Forney told the commission that the city has been in conversation with MnDOT, the watershed district, and the prospective developer about the future of the Medtronic site, specifically as it relates to stormwater issues and Sullivan Lake. Forney stated that the meetings were ongoing and centered around improving stormwater management during the design and execution of the new development. Forney asked if the commission was able to provide more details about the desired GIS mapping discussed during the goal setting session. Commissioners generally replied that Commissioner Evenson was the expert on that area and that she should be consulted for details.

Subcommittee Updates

Commissioner Updates

Planning and Coordination

Commissioner LaPlante suggested that a 2026 calendar should be created, highlighting events related to the Sustainability Commission and other sustainability topics and community action opportunities. Commissioner Johnson agreed that a calendar would be great to have well in advance to help with planning and attending more events. Commissioner LaPlante said that the calendar would be a good addition to the city email newsletter for publicizing events. Chairperson Jensen Christen suggested adding the calendar to the commission's Teams channel to allow commissioners to edit and add events.

ADJOURNMENT

Chairperson Jensen Christen made a motion to adjourn, Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist

