



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE

Wednesday, November 12, 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, Kurek, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka

Staff present: Mitchell Forney, Director of Community Development
Ursula Brandt, City Planner
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist
Zekima Rashid, Green Corps Intern

Members absent: Commissioners Small, Kurek

Council Liaison: Absent

COMMUNITY FORUM

No community members present.

CONSENT AGENDA

BUSINESS ITEMS

1. Introduction of Zekima Rashid, the city's new Green Corps Member

The commissioners and staff members made brief introductions and described their backgrounds for the new staff. Rashid introduced herself and said that she was excited to work in the community and help the Energy Action Plan get started successfully. Commissioner LaPlante asked how long Rashid would be with the City of Columbia Heights and she answered that her term would be for eleven months. Chairperson Jensen Christen asked when Rashid started work with the city and she replied about one month previously. Commissioner Evenson asked for an update on the GreenStep Cities status and prospects for moving to the next step. Rashid replied that the city was close to reaching step three and that the Sustainable Purchasing Policy would help move the process along.

2. Continuing Sustainable Purchasing Policy Discussion

Planner Brandt described the contents of the packet and the feedback from the staff that reviewed the policy. Brandt described discussions around integrating the proposed Sustainable Purchasing Policy into the city's broader purchasing policy. Brandt described that based upon the content of the current purchasing policy, the proposed Sustainable Purchasing Policy would be added to the city's broader staff purchasing policy as an appendix to the current policy, specifically as appendix C. Brandt stated that staff opinion was that the appendix placement would streamline the addition of the Sustainable Purchasing Policy and its implementation into staff workflow. Commission Johnson asked if the policy could be pulled up on the main screen

in the meeting room. Commissioner LaPlante stated that she didn't have any issues with the policy being added as an appendix if it didn't make the Sustainable Purchasing Policy an afterthought. Brandt stated that the appendix placement was intentional and a means to draw more attention to the new Sustainable Purchasing Policy by not burying it in a long section containing information on purchasing procedures. Director Forney elaborated upon the placement of the new policy into the larger purchasing policy and the desire to make it part of a lasting and impactful change on city staff purchasing culture. Forney stated that the city didn't just want to check the box of creating a Sustainable Purchasing Policy that would meet GreenStep Cities requirements but rather wanted to create something truly impactful that changes the way that the city does business. Commissioner Evenson asked if any language was proposed to refer to the new Sustainable Purchasing Policy in appendix A. Brandt responded that no specific language had been decided upon and that she was receptive to making that addition. Evenson stated that it was valuable to reference the Sustainable Purchasing Policy in appendix A and require its review before purchases are made. Evenson suggested also including the policy change of favoring sustainable options within 10% of the purchase price in appendix A. LaPlante asked if staff had any feedback on the draft policy beyond proposed location within the broader purchasing policy. Brandt replied that the main concerns and questions she encountered were related to the timeline of implementing the proposed policy. Forney further clarified that concerns were largely allayed when it was explained that the policy rollout would be phased and not an abrupt shift in immediate workflows. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka asked if there was a specific topic area that should be addressed initially to aid in the adoption of the policy by staff. Forney replied that staff felt that many of the practices in the proposed policy were already being followed by staff but not recorded in any central or specific location. Staff felt that first identifying practices that were already in place would be the best way to proceed, followed by easy and obvious improvements to existing practices. Evenson asked if it would make more sense for each department to review their monthly purchases in light of the proposed policy and make changes where appropriate. Forney responded that reviews of previous purchases would be part of the process of identifying current practices already in alignment with the proposed policy. Forney elaborated that the review would also identify existing local and sustainable city vendors that staff can easily place orders from. Commissioner Johnson asked which appendices would refer to the Sustainable Purchasing Policy specifically. Director Forney responded that appendix A is functionally a purchasing cheat sheet that all staff are meant to reference when making purchases, and appendix B is really a long list of state law regarding municipal contracting and procurement. Forney stated that the proposed policy could be added as appendix B and the current appendix B could be shifted to appendix C to give the Sustainable Purchasing Policy a more prominent location. Commissioner LaPlante asked which metrics would be most feasible to ask staff to record and measure to track the progress of policy implementation. Commissioner Evenson suggested asking each department to suggest which metrics would be the most appropriate to track, as there could be considerable variation between the different purchasing entities within the city. Commissioner Johnson asked what the next step for the policy would be going forward. Forney responded that staff would revisit the proposed policy in light of feedback from the commission and work through some details of implementation. Evenson asked how many departments were currently making purchases in the city. Forney replied that purchases were mostly by building rather than by department, but some items are specific to each department. Evenson proposed having different purchasers within the city visit the Sustainability Commission meetings after the policy has been

implemented for a few months to provide feedback to the commission. Evenson said that conversations with all the purchasers from the various buildings and departments would help the commission to home in on the most important and feasible metrics to track and report on the website. Forester Genter related that although no formal Sustainable Purchasing Policy currently existed, staff had already been purchasing hybrid and electric vehicle options for years at the direction of City Council. Commissioner LaPlante stated that formalizing existing practices was a big part of the process. Director Forney said that the next step would be for staff and commissioners to work on drafting a final version of the policy to then bring back to the commission for review and approval. Commissioner LaPlante asked if the City Council would want to make strong inputs on the policy during the development process. Director Forney replied that he did not think the Council would have the desire to make strong inputs on the proposed policy. Forney explained that the most time-consuming remaining process would be to get the department heads and city manager to sign off on the proposed policy. The proposed final draft would then be brought back to the Sustainability Commission to make a recommendation for the City Council. Forney reminded the commission that they did not have to agree with the staff recommendation on the policy and could make their own independent recommendation to the City Council. Commissioner Evenson asked what a phased or incremental rollout would look like for a policy of this sort. Director Forney responded that it would be up to the commission and staff working on the policy to make sure that it was consistent with an incremental rollout, and that continuous attention would have to be given to make the policy successful in the long term. Forester Genter stated that purchasing within the city was highly variable and involved many interested parties. Genter further stated that the proposed policy allowed enough flexibility for the commission and staff to work on continuously improving processes and tracking the improvement. Commissioner LaPlante reiterated that the city was already most of the way there in terms of sustainable practices, and that much of this was about formalizing, tracking, and reporting those practices.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates

Director Forney thanked all the commissioners for their help with the Partners in Energy launch which was very well attended and successful. Forney also once again welcomed Zekima Rashid, the Green Corps intern who will be serving as the city's outreach coordinator for the Partners in Energy program. Planner Brandt described the upcoming process of revising the city's Comprehensive Plan, which will be a three-year process and will involve lots of community outreach and communication. Director Forney stated that a new Parks System Master Plan was going to be created by a consultant, and that money had been budgeted for it in the next year. Commissioner LaPlante asked if any updates had been provided on the Central Ave reconstruction project. Planner Brandt responded that the plan was still in the design phase and that necessary right-of-way easements were currently being determined. Director Forney said that MnDOT would be providing updates to the City Council in December and January with more details, with the project expected to start in 2028.

Subcommittee Updates

Commissioner Updates

Planning and Coordination

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:18. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Evenson and unanimously approved by the commission.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist