



Park & Recreation Commission Minutes of the Meeting
City Hall – 3989 Central Ave NE
December 6, 2023

Call to Order/Roll Call

Tom Greenhalgh called the meeting to order at 6:01 pm

Members present: Teresa Eisenbise, Tom Greenhalgh, Dayna Gulley, Taher Harzallah, Andrea Ostergaard, Nicole Peterson

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Interim Director; Keith Windschitl, Recreation Director; Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary; Amada Marquez Simula, Mayor Council Representative; Kevin Hansen, Interim City Manager

Community Forum

None at this time.

Consent Agenda

Eisenbise indicated the parks training and instructional supplies budget line item didn't have any expenditures in October and wonders if that is an opportunity that we are missing or is it not needed for the budget. Cullen replied there was a Phase One 49ers training that staff were sent to for equipment operations, and Parks staff attended the training. There is also a Green Expo event that is a huge training opportunity for Parks staff coming up. There are also upcoming verification processes that are coming up and will come out of that budget.

Motion by Eisenbise, second by Peterson, to approve the consent agenda. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

Kevin Hansen, Interim City Manager, indicated that he would discuss park development or redevelopment and what things the commission could be working on for future progress. He will touch base on what already has been accomplished and also thoughts for funding down the road. Hansen reported the park system had not been invested into since the early 1970's and in 2008 started to do that again. The method that was chosen was to work on each park as funds became available. Huset Park had a master plan completed in 2003. Sullivan Lake and Silver Lake Beach parks were done in 2008. Money is obtained largely from redevelopment within the city. When residential redevelopment occurs part of the approval process is to pay into park dedication fees. Park dedication fees are set up so that you can only use the funds for park-related items. The other funding source is to apply for grants. We have not been very successful with these because there are not a lot of grants available in the metro area for state and federal grants related to small scale park redevelopment. There are more opportunities for parks with regional significance. The City does qualify for other grant funding like with storm water treatment. When land area is disturbed in any of our parks you have to do storm water treatment. Hansen indicated we have been successful in partnering with the MWMO, the Mississippi Watershed

Management Organization, in acquiring grant money. The other thing the City has done is to put in general fund money but that kind of goes with the budget and that has been an average of \$50,000 per year for a few years but some years it was zero. We are limited in terms of our revenue resources. Right now, there is little money in the Park Dedication Fund. For all of the past projects, on average \$450,000-\$650,000 was spent on each park. In 2018-2019 the Park and Recreation Commission visited every park and did a quick analysis of what they felt was appropriate at each park. The reason that was done was to develop some cost estimates and then COVID hit, and everything came to a standstill. In 2022 the Park & Recreation Commission had the estimates prepared by staff, based on what the Commission input guided staff to look for and brought that to a consultant. The goal was to have the estimates updated after the COVID supply chain issues. Staff estimates were around 9 million and the consulting firm ended up around 15 million. Some other issues were looked into more closely, with soil conditions being one of them. Hansen reported this past summer in 2023 staff brought the information from the Commission to the City Council and showed how much it would cost to develop all of the remaining city parks. Staff provided different scenarios for the Council to look at. One possibility was to focus on the largest park, Huset and another was to try and get multiple parks done with a certain dollar amount. The Council elected to focus on Huset Park. Staff are in the process of submitting an application for state bond money. To redevelop both sides of Huset Park is approximately 8 million. State bond money likes to see a 50/50 match. The only other revenue source would be the Park Dedication. The redevelopment of the old Rainbow site or the old Medtronic site if that redevelops. The last remaining source would be bonding. Staff do not feel we are in a position to go and propose bonding for our remaining park improvements. Part of the reason for that is we need to do some more work and outreach to the community. Hansen indicated one of the things that the Commission could do is to get the word out to the community.

Hansen reviewed the 1996 Comprehensive System Park Plan that is about 100 pages and is a very detailed analysis of the park system, the park needs, and what the community demands were at that time. He believes the Commission could work on updating this document. The other part is getting community feedback through outreach. Hansen reported a community survey was conducted in 2022. The City hired a firm to conduct the survey with approximately 150 questions. To be statistically accurate, they had to receive feedback from over 450 residents. He indicated the results from the survey are available online. There were park questions in the survey that formed a general basis for support from the community to do investment within the park system. The results indicated that the City is around the right sizes for the parks that we have a what we offer. One item where people would like to see more offered is with the active recreation side, and sidewalks/trails. Hansen highlighted some of the results of the questions regarding city parks. One thing to look at is how we can draw more people in because the survey results indicate only a third of the people contacted said that they use the parks or City Recreation programs. He feels the results from the survey offer a good starting point for the Commission to begin updating the overall plan. Going back to the community at this time would not be beneficial until we have further development on the plan, but thinks this needs to happen. What the community wants right now is something for the Commission and the City Council to be asking. Not only for recreational offerings but what is within each park. Ballfields would be a question and what type of ballfield, athletic fields, soccer fields, pickleball, senior citizen related activities, types of playgrounds with accessibility. He feels these specific questions need to be asked but we are not ready yet to ask these types of questions.

Hansen added one of the primary issues the City Council needs to look at is the Murzyn Hall facility. A condition analysis was done on the Murzyn Hall building. At this point do we invest more money into the building and keep it as it is to use for another twenty years or so, or does it make more sense to explore something different. Then, what is that something different? This is a question for community feedback. When people think about a community center everyone will have different ideas and opinions. The last item once all of that is put together is what is the community willing to pay for. Hansen reported one of the questions on the community survey

asked if the city invested in the park system would the resident be willing to have their taxes increased. The community results were yes in an amount around \$9 per month. This dollar amount would get us close to the needed amount for the park system but not enough for a community center. Hansen indicated staff meet with the City Council every two to three years to discuss a goal and vision setting plan. Earlier in 2023 the top two priorities of the city council are to look at the Public Works building and a financing plan for the reconstruction of that building. The number two goal is to take the Parks Master Plan and develop a financing plan and establish interactive communication with interactions in the community to meet their needs. In the meantime, the Commission could start working on a park redevelopment by looking at Wargo Court and where the previous Commission left off in the process. For improvements in that that area any other projects along Central Avenue should be taken into consideration. The funding was recently approved by the Wargo Foundation, so that is available. Hansen indicated he would not have time to go through the park process step by step until February. He suggested looking at other metro cities who have updated park plans within the last ten years. The last thing to keep in mind is to stay in line with the City's Comprehensive Plan. He added the process of updated the master park plan is a lengthy process and should take all of 2024.

Ostergaard asked what exactly the Commission is supposed to do with these documents and what they should do moving forward. Hansen replied staff would take the reports by each section and throw some ideas out to the Commission to have an interactive discussion. The plan looked at each park to determine what is important and what is active or passive in each park. One item of feedback from the community is there is a lack of green space. Harzallah indicated the old Rainbow site is possibly going to have public space. Hansen replied there are multiple iterations of the plans, and nothing has been decided yet. Harzallah asked if they would be adding another park in the City. Hansen replied possibly but one of the last iterations did not indicate that. The changes indicated would be to replace Jackson Pond. He indicated the 1996 Comprehensive System Park Plan was completed by an intern and the Community Survey conducted in 2022 was statistically correct at 400 results for our size of a city. There were additional results with an online survey. The community has shown support for park improvements, but what are they. Hansen indicated there isn't a budget right now to hire a company to gather the information, but it could be done through direct mailing and online questions. He stated during the individual park master planning process staff and the commission met at the parks and invited the residents to attend. Sometimes there was a good turnout and other times not a lot of feedback. Gulley suggested Nation Night Out would be a good event to discuss the parks with residents. Ostergaard replied there are a lot of community events the Commission members could plan to attend. Marquez Simula replied the police are typically the ones who organize National Night Out and they could have some ice breaker questions ready. Cullen replied the Art & Info Fair has tables from various city and community groups, Truck or Treat, the Holiday Train, and many others. Ostergaard added there are many school events that have table opportunities. Eisenbise asked if the future meetings would be to make a plan and also come up with funding ideas. Hansen replied yes, it would be a good idea to discuss options within the Commission first, talk with staff regarding any concerns and feasibility of the ideas, prior to bringing the ideas to the community. Cullen added that it would give staff the opportunity to look over the ideas, fill in costs and go over operational processes. Harzallah asked if the total acreage for the parks is 121. Hansen replied 144 to 145 acres. Gulley asked if more informal meetings would be needed and even more than once a month. Hansen suggested that the next meeting would be to discuss the things that can be worked on and what the following steps will be. Once that is determined they can plan for the number of meetings. Ostergaard asked who is responsible for updating the park plan. Hansen replied that it is the Park and Recreation Commission and the city staff in attendance. Ultimately the suggestions from the Commission are brought forward to the City Council for approval.

Ostergaard asked where a trail system fits into the Community Survey. Hansen replied that staff completed a bikeway and pedestrian plan in 2008. This gets updated every two years.

Ostergaard asked if they need to form a task force to move forward, does the whole Commission need to be included, and are staff required to be present during discussions. Hansen replied it will be discussed in February. This will give staff some time for a broad layout and give the Commission some time to review what has been done in the past or what other cities have accomplished. Cullen replied this is a good opportunity for this group of individuals who are motivated to be involved. Marquez Simula reiterated Councilmember Buesgens suggestion to take field trips other than just have meetings. Individual Commission Members can go to our city parks on their own and intentionally look at them. Viewing the parks can give different perspectives in the summer compared to the winter. Cullen added that he and Windschitl can be used as resources, so the Commission is welcome to reach out to either one of them with questions or comments. Marquez Simula mentioned the current discussion about Silverwood Park, and that is a good thing to keep in mind what types of amenities are in our region. Harzallah indicated that makes sense to know what types of amenities are in our region so we can think of alternatives. Eisenbise replied that is a point to consider not all users of our facilities are from Columbia Heights, but those outside users potentially spend money within our community as well. Ostergaard asked how the potential rebuilding of the Medtronic site will affect Sullivan Lake Park. Hasen replied that will be a conversation with whomever buys the property and redevelops it. What is the correct thing that should be built there in regards to park development. Hansen added that Minnesota state law has become more restrictive on what you can do with land redevelopment. He indicated there is a public meeting coming up on the Medtronic site on January 9th. This will be hosted and moderated by the consultant. Marquez Simula invited members to attend any Planning Commission meeting.

Hansen stated that at the February meeting staff and commission members can start laying things out for the park planning process. Commission Members agreed.

New Business

None at this time.

Reports

A. Recreation Director

Windschitl reported the Murzyn Hall HVAC has a major leak in one of the units. Staff are waiting for estimates on repairs. During the last meeting there were good discussions on the situations regarding volleyball at the parks and would like to continue that discussion at the next meeting. He asked members to think about how they would suggest proceeding regarding park rentals.

Windschitl invited the Commission to attend the annual SnowBLAST on February 3rd from 4-7pm at Huset Park East. If anyone wants to be at a table during the event to let him, Saefke, or Will Rottler know. This is a very well attended event.

Eisenbise asked if the Garden Plots are all booked up. Windschitl replied the current season ended in October and the current renters will have the opportunity to get their same plot again beginning in January. A timeline of renewal time is sent to the current users. He indicated rentals for Murzyn Hall in 2025 will begin after the first business day in January.

B. Public Works Director

Cullen reported work within the parks is winding down for the year. Four end dumps of 22 cubic yards of compost and biochar down with aeration and over seed on all of the athletic fields, a lot of areas at Huset and some other parks. This will be the first year conducting that large of operation. He thanked Peterson for the

information and lead regarding biochar. Cullen indicated the holiday decorations are up along Central Avenue. He would like to continue the discussion on park rentals at the next meeting in regards to costs and staffing.

Greenhalgh asked what ice rinks will be filled this year. Hansen replied it may get to the point where we cannot make rinks when the ground isn't frozen and even tomorrow will be close to 50 degrees. Cullen replied with the very low frost level in the ground last year it was difficult to have good ice. Harzallah asked if the holiday décor is stored or if it is purchased every year. Cullen replied that in 2020 many items were updated, and new items were ordered. The items at Wargo Court are in need of replacement. He indicated holiday decorations are very expensive and did not want to replace those items without knowing the direction of the park redevelopment. Harzallah asked if there is a particular vendor the City works with. Cullen responded that he tries to go with high quality commercial providers but he does shop out the prices and watches for sales. Hansen replied Northern Lights is one vendor and they use vendors off of the state purchasing contract. Marquez Simula replied the decorations look great and they are fun to see. Cullen reported he was able to switch all decorations to LEDs. Eisenbise loves the purple hue of the lights on Central Avenue. Greenhalgh asked if people are able to rent the warming houses at the parks. Cullen responded yes. Saefke replied they are rented for skating and sledding parties. Eisenbise asked if staff are worried about the skating classes occurring. Windschitl replied if there is ice, they will happen or there will be a refund. Everyone is hoping for ice by SnowBLAST. Ostergaard asked what the Commission needs to do to fix the park rental issues. Windschitl responded at the first of the year we will continue renting one park per weekend. In regards to getting a key for some of the park rentals it is hard to say that we would never rent out the parks. Cullen indicated the two main questions from the last meeting were one, if we should be in the business of renting the parks if we can't do it to the best of our ability. Meaning staffing for the cleanup process prior to a rental. Second became the cost of staffing on the weekends. Ostergaard asked if those items we be included in the Comprehensive Plan thinking or are they items that need to be addressed now. Harzallah responded it could be both. A decision needs to be made now but could be readdressed during the Comprehensive Plan updates. Greenhalgh responded this will be discusses at the next meeting.

C. Commission Members

None at this time.

Greenhalgh adjourned the meeting at 7:16 pm.

Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary