



Park & Recreation Commission Minutes of the Meeting
Keyes Room, John P Murzyn Hall 530 Mill St NE
January 24, 2024

Call to Order/Roll Call

Tom Greenhalgh called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm

Members present: Teresa Eisenbise, Tom Greenhalgh, Taher Harzallah, Andrew Macko, 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

Community Forum

None at this time.

Consent Agenda

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

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

Windschitl indicated he and Cullen will discuss the park usage and how the rental process works. He reported that the park rentals are currently rented one time per park in a weekend. This, however, leaves a disadvantage to a person with a Sunday park rental because they might show up at a messy park. Public Works staff are not able to go to each park that is rented on the weekend. Staff have received complaints due to the lack of cleanliness. Windschitl stated they will also talk about the volleyball groups at McKenna and Sullivan Parks, and the warming houses for the skating rinks. He indicated there are currently six paid park reservations for the 2024 season. Staff are proposing to no longer rent the park shelters and to have them as a first come, first served policy.

Cullen handed out a memo to the Commission regarding the background and issues of park usage. He reported that with the existing fee structure for the park shelter rentals it is not sufficient to cover operational costs, including maintenance, staffing, and preparation of the shelters. This inadequacy affects the level of service we can provide for paid reservations. Within the Public Works Department, staff is currently unable to maintain the 7-day operational schedule necessary to manage weekend shelter rentals. This limitation results in increased costs due to overtime payments, as we do not have the staffing or funding to support regular operations. Regarding service expectations, both the Recreation and Public Works departments have faced challenges in consistently maintaining park shelters in a state ready for renters. This issue has led to customer complaints and the need for refunds, placing our staff in a difficult position. Paying customers have expectations when they arrive at a park and if it isn't clean, we feel that we are not providing the service that they paid for. With many of our park shelters having open-air structures with 24-hour access that makes it impossible to secure the area

prior to a reserved event. Other cities have lockable sides to their shelters, which could be a feature we look at in future renovations.

Cullen indicated given these concerns, it is advisable for the city to reevaluate the park shelter reservation program. Continuing under the current conditions strains our resources and fails to meet community expectations for quality, security, and service. Staff recommend either discontinuing the Park Shelter Rental program entirely or limiting it to shelters with controlled access, such as Huset East and McKenna Parks. For future park planning within the parks master plan, staff suggest consideration of shelter designs that enable secure access should the city opt to continue facilitating shelter rentals. At this time, it is recommended to discontinue renting the open-air shelters and to only rent the park buildings at Huset East, Ramsdell, McKenna, and Keyes Parks.

Cullen indicated the warming houses are no different in that with the current budget there is no way to staff the buildings. Unfortunately, our park buildings are often vandalized or broken into. One other concern is that the park buildings do not have full insulation and only minimal heating to keep the pipes from freezing. Some of the park buildings are closed for the winter season and doors or windows get boarded up. Ostergaard added one idea would be to partner with volunteers to be inside the warming houses on a weekend so the facilities could be available to the public without hiring staff. Windschitl replied, the Recreation Department is offering open skate time at Huset East. The building will be open on Sundays from 10:30am to 12:30pm from January 7 through February 18 if there is ice. There are other skating lessons being offered where staff will be at the park and the building will be open. He stated twenty some years ago the city made the decision to close the warming houses because it wasn't justified to have staff inside the building with such low attendance in skating. He indicated setting up volunteers would be something that could be pursued next year. Cullen added there is a bench at the McKenna rink to help people get their skates on. Macko asked how frequently Ostrander Park is used. Cullen replied it is difficult to obtain those numbers. He indicated that park is very difficult to flood due to the ground conditions. The hockey rink area is always shifting, and the skating rink will often have bubbles come up through the ice. Due to the poor conditions each year the skating classes have moved to Huset East Park. Eisenbise replied she used to skate at Ostrander but often times the conditions were so poor for skating that they would go elsewhere. Last year and this year they skate at Huset East Park.

Marquez Simula indicated that combining our resources and consolidating amenities makes a lot of sense. As the park system is reviewed and improvements are made it would be good to think about what are some of the amenities used in a specific park and keep that specific feature at one or two parks instead of many parks. That would open other areas to install desired features. By moving amenities to specific areas, it can also alleviate bad behaviors at one location that will not be an issue at another area. Windschitl stated years ago when the parks were developed, the goal was to have an amenity like a playground or ballfield in each quadrant of the city. It makes sense to utilize good spaces for specific activities. Huset Park and McKenna Park are viable options for larger activities. It is important to remember that many of our parks are neighborhood parks and we should be cognizant of the people living near the parks when planning. He stated the ice-skating rink was removed from Ostrander Park this year.

Ostergaard asked how many park rentals have been done this year so far. Windschitl replied there are only six paid park reservations far. The open sided park shelters being discussed are at Huset West, Sullivan, Silver Lake Beach, LaBelle, and Ramsdell Parks. Ostergaard indicated these spaces are still useable and just will not be rented out for a specific time frame. Cullen replied yes. The beach, pools, splash pad, and playgrounds have always been open for public use. We are not taking away the use of the open sided shelters, we are just not giving priority to one user. Windschitl reported when he goes to Silver Lake Beach on Fridays to post the rental

for the weekend there are almost always people at the beach and shelter. He knows that Public Works was there to empty garbage and with the amount of people using the park it is likely the garbage is full by the time the renter arrives on Saturday but for sure on Sunday. It is the same situation with the shelter by the splash pad at Huset West. There has been so much garbage at that park that staff need to empty park garbage into the dumpster behind Murzyn Hall because they run out of room at the Public Works garage. Sullivan Park doesn't seem to be as highly used because it is set back further and has limited parking. He reported the revenue in 2023 for the park rentals was approximately \$9,000. Cullen reported the labor costs were closer to \$22,000 for park maintenance/cleanup. Windschitl restated the park reservation fees for 2024 are \$75 for a resident, \$125 if a resident has more than 100 people, and \$175 for a nonresident.

Marquez Simula asked if the public works staff work Monday through Friday all at the same time and not in staggered shifts during the summer. Cullen replied all staff work 7am-3pm Monday through Friday. A lot of their work is done in groups so it wouldn't work to stagger shifts. Eisenbise asked if other cities have weekend staff to cover park rentals. Cullen replied yes. Larger cities will have staff on the weekends and some of them have more than one rental per day. There are other newer facilities with automated entries or key cards. One staff recommendation is for future park construction to have shelter amenities placed further away from public use items like playgrounds. Harzallah stated that he feels it is illogical not to have parks staffed on the weekends because they are so highly used by many groups. Cullen replied many years ago the department would have twenty seasonal staff plus more fulltime workers than there are now. When there were that many seasonal workers, they would stagger staffing times. With the hourly wage increase for the seasonal position he hopes to get more applications. Seasonal workers are used for mowing, picking up trash across the whole city, and other Monday through Friday operations that increase during the warmer months. Marquez Simula asked if we are able to get more seasonals would they be able to work on the weekends. Cullen replied having part-time labor with no fulltime supervisor during the weekend is a concern. Greenhalgh indicated his job has two days off during the week and sees how most people prefer a Monday through Friday employment. Harzallah replied that he understands the practical management of staffing. He would like to see weekend staff go to multiple parks. Cullen replied the city is required to check the wading pools every day they are operating. He feels this is a job that should be done by a fulltime staff person. The person that does this on the weekends will also check the garbage at McKenna and Ramsdell Parks. Cullen explained there is a huge difference in quality and time with this process. It is fine if there is minimal garbage at the park and the one staff can just empty the trash or pick up a few items. If there is a huge mess and the outdoor area would need to be pressure washed that takes a lot more time and if you are going to multiple parks in that condition you may need to refill the water. You can see how the time adds up at each park. Depending on how many parks are rented you might not be able to attend to all parks prior to a paid rental. Harzallah stated if there are not any rentals the parks still get used and there is still trash, it is still viable to staff parks on the weekends. Marquez Simula asked if more trash cans can be installed at the parks. Ostergaard asked if more trash pickups can be scheduled with the trash company. Cullen replied he has been changing out the old receptacle containers with a style that can be emptied by the minitruck. They also need to make sure the cans are secure to the ground. At some locations a concrete slab is poured for that purpose. He stated the use of the parks has continued to increase over the past few years. Windschitl reported in 2022 there were 180 paid park rentals which does not include the people just using the facilities every day. Cullen indicated it is bad public relations to charge for the use of a park shelter and then a renter shows up with certain expectations that are not met. Peterson replied it makes sense to discontinue open sided shelter rentals. Windschitl stated the park buildings require a key and other than being used by our Recreation park programs we know they are secure. It can be guaranteed that the building will be clean for a weekend rental. Ostergaard indicated this is a good transition to offer a half and half situation. The buildings can still be rented, and the open sided shelters will be open to the public. Greenhalgh replied it will be a good trial for one year and can be revisited next year.

Motion by Ostergaard, second by Peterson, to discontinue rentals for open air structures and maintain rentals for the enclosed secure park structures for 2024 and revisit the procedures for the next year. The current paid park rentals will be refunded for any open sided shelter reservation. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

New Business

Cullen presented a memo for a DNR Grant Application at Sullivan Lake Park. Staff are asking for support from the Commission to continue researching grant opportunities specifically for Sullivan Lake Park. The DNR's Outdoor Recreation Program has a grant option that staff would like to pursue. This funding would be used for reconstruction of the trail that loops Sullivan Lake, along with court replacement of the tennis courts which are no longer usable. This is a 50/50 match type of grant. Cullen indicated another grant opportunity is with a national fitness campaign through Blue Cross Blue Shield.

Eisenbise asked if Commission Members can do anything to help the grant process. Cullen replied he is working with the City's Urban Forestry Specialist Genter, Interim City Manager Hansen, and other staff from Community Development on the applications. Marques Simula indicated letters of support from the commission might be good to submit with the application. Eisenbise asked when the applications are due. Cullen replied that the DNR will review the applications in February and give feedback. The Blue Cross Blue Shield grant is a first come first served timeline.

Motion by Eisenbise, second by Peterson, to approve the grant research and application process by staff. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Marquez Simula reported on the current situation at Silverwood Park and their recent concerns with users of the programs offered and funding with the Three Rivers Park District. The park is located in Hennepin County, but the park has users from the surrounding communities of Ramsey and Anoka Counties. She encouraged the Commission Members to fill out the survey from Silverwood Park on how they use the park. There may be ways to consider partnering with the park in the future to continue current programming. She partnered with the Mayor of St. Anthony to write a letter of support for keeping Silverwood Park and the programs running. Eisenbise replied there is a lot of information available on the funding for the facility and programs. They are discussing the possibility of opening their registrations to Hennepin County residents first and then to other county residents, and that will really affect people in Columbia Heights that utilize their facility. Marquez Simula indicated the programming fees pay for staffing costs so there are self-funding programs. She wanted to bring awareness to the members. Eisenbise thanked Marquez Simula for writing a letter with the Mayor of St. Anthony. Harzallah stated that we need to collaborate with surrounding communities to offer as much as we can without duplicating too many of the same amenities. It would also allow opportunities to build larger amenities that can be used by the surrounding community members.

Reports

A. Recreation Director

Windschitl reported the air conditioner unit at Murzyn Hall on the west end of the building has continued to have problems. The unit is approximately twenty years old. The concern right now is the wait time on getting the parts to repair the problem, so the decision needs to be made now to either repair the unit or replace it. Bids were taken from two companies to repair the unit and they ranged from \$11,500 to \$22,600.

Windschitl reported a second grant opportunity has opened for the after-school funding in partnership with the Columbia Heights School District. Recreation staff will work with Library staff and the school district to submit

the application. This grant will be for a lesser amount so we will need to cut back on some of the programs previously offered. The application is due by the end of February.

Windschitl reminded the Commission of the upcoming SnowBLAST event on February 3rd from 4-7pm. If the members are interested in volunteering at a table to discuss the city parks they can contact Saefke or Rottler. The Sustainability Commission is planning to attend and many City Council Members. This event has been very popular in years past. Even with no snow there are still many activities that will be offered.

B. Public Works Director

Cullen reported the Public Works staff have been working hard to maintain the ice for skating. Recently the department took possession of a new pothole patching truck that was ordered three years ago. They also received an F550 truck. Applications are open for a fulltime mechanic and interviews will be happening soon. There is a Super Intendent position open, two in the parks department and one position in utilities.

Windschitl reported the van that was ordered for the Recreation Department in 2021 has been produced but now has a recall on the backup camera and is unable to be given to the City until the recall has been fixed. They do not have the parts to fix the recall and it is unknown when we will receive the vehicle.

C. Commission Members

Ostergaard asked when the summer programs will be available for registration. Windschitl replied that the Spring Newsletter is being worked on right now but is unsure of when the summer programs will open for registration. He added if the grant is approved, we will be able to offer more camps and other programming besides the regular half day programs.

Harzallah indicated he would like to keep moving forward working on the park redevelopment plan. The City of Minneapolis is setting up meetings with other cities park boards. He asked what the willingness of other members would be to meet with another cities park board. Peterson replied the meetings are generally open to the public and anyone can attend another cities meeting. Eisenbise indicated it is on her list to contact members from other boards or commissions one on one. She is also reviewing other cities minutes to see what they are working on. Cullen replied there is a new Public Works administration staff that is working on a portal to share the documents that Hansen reviewed at the previous meeting. He also suggested to have a meeting with Sulmaan Khan the City Engineer and combine a future meeting with the Sustainability Commission. Peterson replied having a joint quarterly meeting with the Sustainability Commission would be a good idea. Ostergaard reported the City of Fridley just published their Park System Improvement Plan. Cullen suggested not to rush having a joint meeting with the Sustainability Commission until some more discussion has been completed regarding the park redevelopment plan.

Greenhalgh submitted a letter of resignation from the Park & Recreation Commission. After almost twenty years of service he will be stepping down as of February 28th. He has enjoyed his time on the Commission, working on various projects, and feels it is time to move on. Marquez Simula thanked Greenhalgh for his many years of service.

Greenhalgh adjourned the meeting at 7:38 pm.
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary