



**Park & Recreation Commission Minutes of the Meeting**  
**Senior Center, John P Murzyn Hall 530 Mill St NE**  
**March 27, 2024**

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**Call to Order/Roll Call**

Andrew Macko called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm

Members present: Teresa Eisenbise, Taher Harzallah, Andrew Macko, Andrea Ostergaard, Nicole Peterson

Staff present: David Cullen, Public Works Interim Director; Keith Windschitl, Recreation Director; Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary

**Community Forum**

Columbia Heights High School Soccer Coach Hector Leon spoke about the need for soccer fields in the city. Leon is a coach for the traveling soccer program, Strikers, a nonprofit club soccer program. This costs \$40 per month per student. Leon indicated that the school district has been very good about letting this program meet in their facility because Leon is an employee of the district. He stated there is a lack of full size soccer fields outside in the city. For the past four years the President of the Strikers program has been servicing grades Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup>. The Middle School coach has forty 8<sup>th</sup> graders playing, and a few 6<sup>th</sup> graders but not many 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Leon is trying to bring traveling soccer for the High School ages into Columbia Heights. The city has rented the fields to the Strikers program in the past. They are hoping to partner with the city moving forward to make it more of a category 1 sponsored program. That would hopefully provide more space availability that the city has. The group has been practicing in Blaine from November to April, and then from April to July the space is limited and that is what the club is looking to try to foster. For boys soccer they had tryouts last weekend with about 50 kids for the U16 team and the 18/19 team. Harzallah asked if the biggest obstacle is lack of space to play. Leon replied yes a lack of a concrete, designated space. If the schools sets up goals that field will be used by anybody and everybody all day, every day. There isn't even a conversation currently about having a designated or rentable space.

Eisenbise asked if they want outdoor or indoor. Leon replied both. They have been using the gym at Columbia Academy but the big goal is to keep this affordable for students. At \$40 per month this covers the coaches and insurance. Actually the program has been paying to rent the gym and will hopefully switch to be able to pay the coaches by moving into a category 1. They could use the city side of the gym for free. Other than the High School there isn't a full-size soccer field. Macko iterated the Strikers are looking for an outdoor soccer field that is going to be designated for their group and would be a soccer field at all times. Leon replied yes and no and they do not mind sharing. He doesn't want to kick out other sports. He would like to see a space for soccer to have room to prosper. Peterson stated she feels there is enough demand to have a designated soccer space if it can work. Ostergaard asked if the field space behind Valley View and Columbia Academy is used year-round. Leon replied it is used during the warmer months and rented through the school district. A rugby team also uses the field. Ostergaard mentioned the principal at Vallely View was talking about having the traveling soccer program for the younger kids using that field. The principal stated the field is hardly used. She doesn't understand the disconnect if the field is underutilized by the school and the principal is talking to her as a Commissioner to get the field better utilized. Leon indicated that he has discussed this with various school district staff and it seems

like no one knows who is in charge of the field or the soccer goals. Cullen asked how this group can help. Leon replied the biggest thing is the category 1 conversation much like the Freights softball program that is sanctioned by the city or the school and would be able to use the field for free. The next item would be a conversation between what the school needs are and what the city needs are for space and programming. Windschitl asked with the fifty kids trying out this past weekend, how many make the team. Leon replied they can roster 20 kids at a tournament, and they can keep a total of 40 kids with the reserves. The remaining 10 kids could stay in the program with a reduced cost or they try to get kids into a free program in Minneapolis called Futsol Society. If there were more coaches he could easily see another team at 14, 15, 16, and 18. They advertised for a week and got 50 kids for the tryouts. Leon stated the Strikers Club has also worked with the CH Athletic Boosters to fundraise for kids that cannot pay the \$40 each month on their own. Windschitl clarified the Strikers Club plays the leagues in the Minnesota Youth Soccer Association MYSA. Leon replied yes. Windschitl replied that is an expensive scenario all around for league play and insurance per player. He asked what Leon sees as the cities role in this whole process. Leon replied evaluating and implementing where the city wants to have its priorities. He indicated space, if there is a high demand for soccer, what does the city want to commit to that. To have a field for anyone in the community would be the first step. Harzallah indicated that if they want to host tournaments for that many people you would need at least two fields. Windschitl indicated both would need to be full size regulation fields. Leon replied hosting a tournament is way out in the future. If there is one field the Strikers can rent for practice two days a week, that is great and then it can be open to the community or other groups can rent it on other days. He sees the Strikers programing filling the role of the older players. The city recreation covers K-5<sup>th</sup> grades and that is great. There is a hole in opportunities for the older students. If becoming a category one program that would make it easier for students to pay when there is free gym space for practices. Windschitl replied that is how the Hylander Center is run, it is open when the school custodians are on duty. Boys basketball just ended their season and now programming for girls softball, women's basketball, volleyball, and futsal will be happening at the Hylander Center. Ostergaard asked when the city side is closed and the school side is open are their different staff. Windschitl replied that could happen, not often, where something is scheduled in the school side but the timing is off from the rec programs. This also could happen in the reverse way too. There used to be a lot of open gym times on Saturdays and the school side would be empty so we would ask to use their gym at times to accommodate more groups. The city and the school district have had a great relationship with facilities, in that we both share. Windschitl indicated the school requires a facility supervisor when programs are in the gym so we staff people to monitor the facility while the door is unlocked. A custodian is the ultimate requirement to be allowed into the facility.

Harzallah asked when the outdoor season is for the Strikers. Leon replied the league is from April through June and in July is the USA Cup. There are other tournament options available. Harzallah asked if the rec soccer fields are setup for the summer. Windschitl replied yes, they are setup in the late summer. Macko asked how big the field is. Leon stated it is slightly bigger than a football field. Windschitl replied the soccer field at Huset East is really setup for the fall program and used by Immaculate Conception Schools as the rec program has not had a group that plays on a full size field in recent years. That field used to be for football and soccer during the same timeframe. The problem with that field being setup in the summer time is that three other athletic fields come into contact with that area. The baseball field and two coach pitch fields will play into that larger field area. Harzallah asked how many total baseball/softball fields are in the city in all of the parks. Windschitl replied it depends on what size field you are talking about. T-Ball fields for example are at McKenna, Keyes, Huset Park has two. Frequently all of those are used during the season. As far as the girls softball fields there is one at Huset 3, Ramsdell, and Keyes Park. The two adult fields are Prestemon Park and Huset 5. Ostergaard asked what making the fields ready for Immaculate Conception means. Windschitl replied this was setup long before he started working here. Ostergaard asked if they have leagues. Windschitl replied yes they have soccer teams and do not have any fields. Ostergaard asked if they pay for the service. Windschitl indicated there is no monetary

compensation. Ostergaard stated the field is otherwise unused and is in between the softball fields. Windschitl stated it uses up three ballfield outfields. As Leon mentioned wherever this full size field is put it will be utilized a lot and not just by Columbia Heights people. There are leagues using Huset Park on the weekends that have never reserved the field with the City. Even the Strikers program tried to get our rec soccer program to move from the field last year. We obviously don't have enough soccer fields. He doesn't know where we would put more fields. Gauvitte Park has parking issues. It does have enough open space, especially if the hockey rink is removed. Cullen indicated he was asked about removing the hockey rink a year or two ago and looked into it. The open space is close to the desired size. The rink could be removed. Gauvitte Park does have future plans being the lowest park in the city, to turn that park into a storm water treatment area. There is no timeline on that right now. Leon replied a full size soccer field could fit in that space. Yes parking is a concern but players will park where needed to get to a field. Peterson indicated the field is unusable at time with heavy rain. Windschitl replied all of our fields have drains in the middle of them and none of our parks have irrigation. When a field space was offered to the Fridley Heights Soccer Program they realized the conditions of the field were not great or supplied consistent play. Cullen indicated with no irrigation staff try to move the goals around in the field so that people are not running over the same section constantly. At Gauvitte that would be hard to do. Leon indicated this is a good problem to have in there is a high demand for soccer fields. Cullen indicated that part of what this Commission is doing is to work on the park development plans; what are the current and future needs in the city and what does that look like. We can do what we can for now, but Leon would be a good person to stay in contact with for the future when we are talking about redeveloping our parks. We are actively working towards a master plan now. Leon offered his help as a resident and coach for the future plans. Ostergaard indicated the Commission should plan to address this need sooner rather than later. There is something with the Hylander Center that can be done since there are other programs like softball with a lot of investment into it using the gym. There is a demand for soccer and has a lesser need for equipment but just needs space. There should be a similar level of attention to soccer as other sports. At a baseline she feels we should evaluate the needs and what is really available to offer to the program. This group has a desire to use space, is doing good things for the youth in our community and is heavily engaged. Ostergaard indicated she will investigate the field use at Valley View. Windschitl replied one immediate solution might be to use the practice field behind Highland Elementary. It is not a fenced field so there will be other groups using that space if there are goals out. Due to the lack of irrigation he doesn't feel that field will be able to sustain the amount of use that it will have and maybe that is a reason the school doesn't put goals there. Ostergaard replied it feels weird to say we don't want our youth to have organized activities because we don't want the grass to be ruined. Windschitl replied it will not just be used for youth either. Peterson replied playing on dirt isn't a problem and it would show that there is a need to go out for funding to provide more usable field space. Harzallah replied it is clear there should be a temporary fix while future plans are being developed. He asked what can be put into practice in the short term that can mitigate this problem so we can give people access to fields. Cullen replied staff can definitely look into that. Peterson asked if there is anything that can be done to mitigate parking issues. Cullen replied there is a small lot at Gauvitte with eighteen spots, and a public road is a public road. Windschitl replied a field could be put in on the east end of Huset Park East. It could be offset so it is not overlapping the same area as the youth. Peterson replied if the Strikers program could only get one field a full size would be the desire, but if all the city can manage to provide is a youth field someone will be very happy to use that now. Leon replied yes a full size would be ideal but even a half size for adult and older youth league play. This size would be used by kids and a half field game for adults. Turf conditions will always be a concern for coaches and will be tough to control until a schedule is established for all users. Macko recapped we are looking at where in the city will be the best place to have the ability to get a soccer field up and running. To have it open to the public. Also, look into other field areas such as behind Highland or Valley View Elementary. Then to get the Strikers Club into a Category 1 program. Leon indicated that will be a further discussion with Windschitl and Jake at the school district. Harzallah replied this is not the first discussion about soccer but gives direction.

### **Consent Agenda**

Eisenbise asked about the park finances, the graffiti be gone purchase; is there a lot of graffiti on government buildings. Cullen replied it comes in spurts. It can be on sidewalks, the street, buildings or even playground equipment. Eisenbise asked what the local travel expense is for. Cullen replied it is dedicated when city employees are sent anywhere outside of Columbia Heights for trainings this funding is for meal expenses or even overnight stay. Eisenbise asked how the out of town line item is different than local travel expenses. Windschitl replied it could easily be put in the wrong category and some of the line items are reflected more in overall budgets and many individual line items have been combined. It is also the perception of the person entering the bill. In the end it is the overall department budget. Saefke indicated many of the individual budget categories have been combined but yet there are still separate line items. Just because it is taken out of one line item doesn't mean it isn't take out of the same overall budget category. Cullen indicated he is trying to work with the finance department to clarify all of the budget categories. It is a work in progress. Windschitl replied staff work more with each department budget than the individual lines items. Eisenbise asked if the directors of the departments create the budgets and the city council approves them. Windschitl replied yes. Staff start next month to create the budget for next year. It first gets presented to the city manager and then city council for final approval. Ostergaard indicated it would be nice for the commission to review the proposed budget before it is approved. Windschitl replied that could be done. On the recreation budget it has not changed a whole lot from year to year. The only items that change are what is told to staff by the finance or IT departments when there are equipment needs or staff salaries to increase. Ostergaard indicated it might be useful for the Commission to make sure things like money for increased programming or staffing are included in future budgets. There might be places where the members can help to apply pressure to get more money in the budget or be able to have a voice to show the city council what the needs are of the community.

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

### **Letters and Requests**

None at this time.

### **Old Business**

Park Improvement Discussion.

Cullen indicated Hansen will be presenting a power point of old plans and new plans for park development. He reported the grant was approved for the multiuse sport court. More than likely it will be at Sullivan Park. Commission members were excited and congratulated staff. Cullen indicated there are a series of steps to figure out. This is the larger sport court where outdoor class sessions can be held, the other side is the workout stations, and there will be the public mural component. Windschitl asked if the court side will be open and how large is it. Cullen replied it is an open area. Staff are waiting to hear back on some DNR grant funding for the removal of the tennis courts or in-kind matches. Windschitl reported he received a concerned call from a citizen today regarding the group that uses the tennis court for volleyball. Cullen indicated the tennis courts will be removed, the question right now is who will be removing it. The sport court will not go in until 2025. The area will also have potential changes with the sale of the old Medtronic site.

Cullen referred to the draft version of the Park Development Plan. He informed the commission that staff will write the plan and then the commission will go over it for comments, reviews and recommendations. This is time set aside during the regular meeting to go over this plan together. He is using the framework of the 1996 plan and updating it with notes and comments. Eisenbise commented that it would be nice to have a separate

working session devoted to this plan. Ostergaard replied it is very confusing on how anyone is supposed to get work accomplished if you can never meet separately. She contacted the League of MN Cities and was told we could establish a one time task force for the purpose of updating the Park Development Plan. Cullen replied we will talk with the City Clerk and see what we are allowed to do. He attached his changes to the preface and introduction for the review of the commission. Members replied they are good comments. Cullen indicated other good examples of park improvement plans can be seen at the city of Burnsville, Minneapolis, and Fridley. Peterson stated it is good to see this document getting reviewed and refreshed because it is a different time than in 1996. She feels under sustainability there needs to be environmental sustainability to an extent. This was not thought about in the same way in 1996 as it is today. This may be reduction of water use or just tying in the mention that it will be a consideration as improvements are made. Macko restated that staff will look into the open meeting laws and report back to the commission on how they can plan additional time to work on the Park Redevelopment Plan outside of the regular monthly meetings. Cullen replied this Park Improvement Plan gives direction for what the Master Plan looks like. In his experience it is best to keep the topics more broad. One interesting point is defining the role of the commission members because they are the voice of the public and making sure the parks system is reflecting what is needed now. He would like to keep working on the review for the next meeting.

Cullen reported on Thursday April 11<sup>th</sup> from 5-7pm there will be a City Services Expo at City Hall and would like to see commission members there to provide some community engagement. Ostergaard suggested having a dotmocracy survey to get interaction with the public. Windschitl replied that was done to determine the features that the public wanted to see at the splash pad. Ostergaard asked if multiple members are at the Expo does something need to be posted about that in terms of open meeting laws. Saefke replied City Clerk Ion does that for any city event where there could be a quorum and indicates this is not a meeting, there will be no official business or voting on any items. Ostergaard asked if other commissions will be there. Windschitl replied every city department will be represented and not sure about what other commissions or boards will be there.

Ostergaard indicated it might be useful in this process to know about the partnerships that have been established with the city and other community entities. Like having Immaculate Conception Schools use our fields, or understanding the relationship with the Lions Club. Is there a give and take between the groups or how do the relationships work. Should we deepen a relationship or even cut ties with some. Saefke replied in regards to the use of John P Murzyn Hall there is a give and take with meetings and donations between some groups. There are also civic groups like Girl Scouts or Toastmasters that meet here. Windschitl replied yes there are various civic groups like scouts or blood mobile that involve residents and benefit the community. This has been a question in the past if the city council wants this building to make money or remain open to community civic groups. At the time they were in agreement to keep it open to civic groups. Ostergaard replied it is useful to just know who some of those groups are.

### **New Business**

None at this time.

### **Reports**

#### **A. Recreation Director**

Windschitl indicated that he likes to give an overview from time to time for newer members on what activities and programs happen in the Recreation Department. The new Senior Coordinator has done a fantastic job with the Active Ageds program and they have been doing a lot of different programs and trips with the city van. She takes them to lunches and various tours. Participants have been very happy. The Bunny Disco Easter event was very successful and was held inside Murzyn Hall. The boys basketball league had a great year. This is one of the

first years that we haven't had behavior issues with either coaches or parents. All the teams did great this season and one team even finished first place.

Windschitl revisited the programs that use the Hylander Center. The recreation program does offer recreational soccer programs and they do use the gym for family soccer, and futsal. Typically the rec programs have been geared towards skill building and fundamentals. Even the girls softball program can be in competitive leagues but we never turn any students away from being in our programs.

The HVAC air conditioner was repaired and has already run with no problems. The new company, Northand Refrigeration, has a technician who has previously worked on our facility with a different company. That tech has already fixed a number of things in the building that have not been working correctly for years. Windschitl hopes to work with him more to fine tune things to work more efficiently in this building.

Windschitl thanked Nicole Peterson for her service on the Commission as this was her last meeting. He stated we appreciated her commitment and look forward to working with her again on future projects.

#### **B. Public Works Director**

Cullen reported staff responded to the recent weather conditions with plowing and snow removal. For staffing there are two parks positions and one streets position open for fulltime positions. The seasonal positions are also posted on the city website and League of MN Cities. They are also looking for another full-time mechanic.

#### **C. Commission Members**

Eisenbise invited everyone to the Valleyview Elementary Carnival event. The Recreation Department will have a table at the event. Saefke indicated we try to represent the department at all of those school events. Ostergaard indicated it is Friday April 19<sup>th</sup> from 5-7pm and is very well attended.

Macko adjourned the meeting at 7:46 pm.  
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary