



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, October 8, 2024
6:00 PM

APPROVED MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Jensen Christen at 6:00 p.m.

Members present: Commissioners Evenson, Finkelson, Groseth, Jensen Christen, Johnson, Kurek, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka

Staff present: Sulmaan Khan, Assistant City Engineer
Andrew Boucher, City Planner
Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist

Council Liaison: Connie Buesgens

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion by Commissioner Johnson, seconded by Jensen Christen, to approve the minutes of August 14, 2024. Motion passed unanimously. Motion by Commissioner Jensen Christen, seconded by LaPlante, to approve September 10, 2024, as presented. Motion passed unanimously.

OLD BUSINESS

1. Sustainable Purchasing Policy Update

Commissioner LaPlante and Planner Boucher are scheduling a meeting with representatives of Finance, Maintenance, and other City departments. Staff and commissioners discussed other likely City staff to include in the meeting. A revised draft of the policy will be presented at a future meeting after the purchasing policy meeting.

2. Complete Streets Policy Update

Assistant City Engineer Khan presented a revised version of the Complete Streets Policy with edits and comments by Commissioner Finkelson. Finkelson expressed concerns that the policy as written does not treat safety as the most important and first priority. Engineer Khan explained that in his opinion some balance is necessary between safety and mobility, and that safety is not being put second but it is not the only consideration. Khan further explained that all modes of transportation need to be considered in a Complete Streets Policy, including the use of roadways by motor vehicles. Commissioner Finkelson feels that safety should be the top priority, followed by mobility and convenience for drivers. Khan explained the definition of level of service as it applies to road usage and the traffic flow on a specific roadway. Finkelson clarified that in his position it should be stated in the policy that safety is the primary concern, and that other considerations will be balanced after safety. Commissioner LaPlante agreed that safety for all users should be the primary concern of a Complete Streets Policy. Chairperson Jensen Christen stated that she read the policy as an increase in the prioritization of safety as opposed to historical prioritization of mobility and traffic flow. Khan

expressed that the plan should be specific to Columbia Heights and the road system that we have jurisdiction and control over. Finkleson reiterated that the verbiage related to the prioritization of safety should be more explicit. LaPlante asked for an update on the overall process of the Complete Streets Policy and where we are currently. Khan and Planner Boucher reviewed the current staff involved and what they are discussing and stated that the plan will be going forward to a City Council work session, hopefully in December. Commissioner Evenson inquired about the timeline for final comments on the policy by commissioners. Khan asked that comments be submitted to him within two weeks, by October 22, 2024, and that he would bring another revised draft to the next commission meeting. Finkleson thanked Khan for his efforts and stated that he likes the way the policy looks overall. LaPlante asked for updates on other construction projects in the City. Khan stated that the recent Safe Routes to School project was completed, and that the Safe Streets for All plan will have an open house on Thursday, October 10, 2024. All commissioners are encouraged to attend the open house, where a summary of public comments and data collected related to the project will be presented. Commissioner Kurek inquired about the status of 45th Avenue at Stinson, and whether it was a county road or a city road. LaPlante asked whether the county engaged the City of Columbia Heights and Khan when developing their action plan. Khan responded that the county had engaged city staff during the development of the plan.

3. Sustainable Collaborations Sub-Committee Update

Chairperson Jensen Christen did not have an update, she has not had a response from the University of Minnesota about the possibility of getting an intern for spring semester. Planner Boucher asked if any the sub-committee had any items for the City newsletter, commissioner LaPlante said she was working on an article about winterizing homes. Commissioner LaPlante said that the Central Avenue cleanup will be happening on Saturday, October 19, 2024.

4. Invasive Species Sub-Committee Update

Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka provided an update on a Minnesota Department of Agriculture grant that the committee is working on in collaboration with Forester Genter. Genter described the goal of the grant, which is to create a mobile invasive species volunteer support kit for community based invasive species management events. Funding will be sought for mechanical advantage weed pullers, shovels, gloves, and educational items to aid volunteers in finding, identifying, and controlling invasive plants in the City park system.

NEW BUSINESS

5. November Commission Meeting Conflict

The Veterans Day holiday in November is creating a conflict with the normal City Council meeting and the Sustainability Commission meeting will have to be rescheduled. Engineer Khan suggested sending out a poll to find a time and date to reschedule. Commissioner Evenson agreed and asked whether we can schedule the meeting with the Park and Recreation Commission. Engineer Khan said that he would inquire about their availability in November. Commissioner LaPlante asked what items would want to be discussed with the Park and Recreation Commission. Commissioner Evenson said she would like to discuss the overall Parks plan and the work being done on that. Commissioner Groseth brought up the need for more recycling bins in the parks and felt that we need to have recycling with all the garbage cans. Commissioner Evenson stated the need for asset management in the parks so that assets can be inventoried, tracked, and planned for maintenance and replacement.

6. Round Robin

Commissioner Kurek asked for an update on the upcoming Central Ave reconstruction project. Councilmember Buesgens asked for all commission members to attend an upcoming meeting on Monday, October 15, where MnDOT will be presenting to the City Council about the reconstruction project. Engineer Khan described where MnDOT is currently in the process, which is currently the preliminary design phase. He explained that no preferred design has been selected yet, and that narrowing part of Central Avenue was one of the considerations. Modelling has been done, and MnDOT has concerns about a two-lane concept. Khan explained that the purpose of the meeting is for MnDOT to share with the City Council the data they have collected and share what they have learned thus far in the modelling process. Khan re-iterated that no preferred design has been settled upon, and that no decisions will be made at the meeting. Commissioner Evenson asked for clarification about a two-lane roadway, and whether that included a turn lane. Khan clarified that a center turn lane would be included in a two-lane design, making two through lanes of traffic and a shared third turn lane. Khan clarified that the point of the upcoming meeting is to discuss the information that has been uncovered by MnDOT which will aid the decisions to be made. Commissioner LaPlante asked about the modeling and whether it took account of behavior changes made in response to changes to the roadway. Khan said that the modeling did look at that and considered where traffic will be diverted. LaPlante asked whether MnDOT had data on the length of trips on Central Ave, Khan replied that they do use cellphone-based data to look at that. Commissioner Kurek asked for the date of the public open house hosted by MnDOT, Khan responded that the date had not been scheduled yet. Evenson said that less than two weeks' notice of the public hearing would not be in line with best practices. Khan said that final design will be happening in 2025, and that MnDOT would be trying to finalize a preferred design by the end of 2024. Commissioner Finkleson asked if the modeling brought up issues related to queuing, or if queuing itself was the problem in the modeling. Khan explained that the modeling was showing very long queues, in excess of two thousand feet, potentially backing up into other intersections. Councilmember Buesgens said that people interested in invasive species control in Kordiak Park should contact the Mayor, and that she had proposed to the City Manager that empty City-owned lots be planted with pollinator lawn or another pollinator friendly landscape. Commissioner Johnson brought up a local entrepreneur looking to open small grocery stores in the area and said she would put him into contact with Planner Boucher and Community Development staff.

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Groseth made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Johnson. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist