



**Park & Recreation Commission Minutes of the Meeting**  
**John P Murzyn Hall – Keyes Room, 530 Mill St**  
**October 25, 2023**

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**Call to Order/Roll Call**

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

Resident Scott Skaja indicated he and his wife have been playing pickleball for a few years. They have used courts in Columbia Heights and the surrounding communities. They appreciate the new court at Prestemon Park and feel it is a good step towards making something more people in the pickleball community will come and enjoy. Not too many people want to go back to Prestemon when there are other nearby courts with better setups. Skaja would like to see the court at Prestemon resurfaced, a low level fence, and some kind of shade. Cullen replied the original court was a basketball court with old pavement. The Public Works staff removed the two basketball hoops, put an overlay on the court and did the striping. The cost to make that into a pickleball court was less than installing two new basketball hoops. Cullen did look into the cost for fencing but the quote was approximately \$8,000 or \$9,000 a few years ago. He is looking into the current costs for fencing. Skaja appreciates all the work that has been done, he likes Columbia Heights and wants to bring friends who play pickleball here instead of going somewhere else. He offered his assistance in whatever way he can help, as a voice of support or ways to fundraise. Skaja added that the surface of asphalt can get slippery when playing and if the court can be resurfaced it will be safer and a better experience. Eisenbise asked what fundraising would look like. Skaja replied he is unsure but one of the first steps is social medial feelers. Marquez Simula indicated corporate sponsorship. Ostergaard indicated pickleball is the hot new sport. Skaja replied it is the fastest growing sport. Courts are popping up all over. Harzallah indicated that Lifetime Fitness is changing half of the tennis courts over to pickleball courts.

Macko asked if the three-disc golf baskets at Prestemon Park are going to have tee boxes put around them. Cullen asked if he means cement pads. Macko replied just stakes even and if numbers will be put on the baskets. Cullen replied that was discussed. Next year they will look at using miscellaneous concrete to install pads. Macko replied he has wood stakes that are already made up if staff want to keep them there. He also has a nine-hole layout that he has been playing a lot.

Marquez Simula has a suggestion from a resident to install a concrete cornhole at one of our parks. Other residents have asked if the volleyball courts and soccer could be moved to Huset Park away from McKenna Park because it is such a crowded area. Residents would like to see the tennis courts removed at Sullivan Park. Cullen replied the tennis courts will most likely be removed in the spring due to staff time being so short in the fall for other projects like tree plantings and street sweeping. Marquez Simula added that Public Works staff are

repairing roads to prepare for snow plowing. Cullen replied staff also lower the gate valves in the roads for the water shutoffs because they will rise and lower with the frost. This is done so that the streets are safer for the snowplows. Potholes are filled until it snows.

Eisenbise asked if the tennis court at Sullivan Park will be completely removed. Cullen replied yes. The land in that area is mostly swamp and you can see the ground heave as much as six to eight inches in the spring. Macko replied that park would be a great location for a pickleball court. Windschitl responded that residents near the park called and said that they do not want a pickleball court there but would rather see open green space. Marquez Simula indicated residents want quiet walking paths and additional picnic tables. Cullen replied an effective use of the tax dollars to the biggest benefit, a pickleball court at that location would cost a lot more than just finding a different location or just including it in the master park plan. You would get more bang for your buck that way as opposed to trying to develop on that site due to the conditions. He feels an open green space would be an excellent use of that area. Ostergaard shared that Valley View Elementary does a lot of field trips to Sullivan Park so having more open space would be great for them. Ostergaard asked how all of these things fit into a bigger plan. Is there a plan for all of the parks. Cullen replied there was a parks master plan created in 2004. The plan was updated in 2014. There has been talk about getting grants or possible bonding to move forward with park improvements, but the 2014 plan would need to be updated. Ostergaard asked if that is something the Commission does or who says that it needs to be updated to proceed forward. Marquez Simula replied there is a grant application for some work at Huset Park but that is still waiting on approval. The type of work done would still need to be determined. Community outreach and feedback would be needed because staff do not want to go off the old 2014 plan as needs have changed. Ostergaard asked if there is something that the Commission can be doing in the meantime to be ready to go out for more grants. Do the members need to start collecting ideas and data to be able to take advantage of other grant opportunities. She indicated there should be a larger plan as opposed to doing one random project at a time. Cullen replied a large park master plan would be beneficial. Ostergaard asked how do they work towards getting a large master park plan over the next three to five years. Peterson replied a designer would need to be hired. Ostergaard stated money would need to be allocated towards that. Cullen replied the last master park plan cost around \$35,000 to look over the site and usage of the park. He indicated with the current grant application, Interim City Manager Hansen is asking for money for the Public Works facility and Huset Park. Nothing can really be done until staff have more information after this proposal is returned.

### **Consent Agenda**

Eisenbise asked if seasonal employees are done for the year or if there is new batch of seasonal employees for snowplow driving. Cullen replied they are now two seasonal employees. As the summer winds down, they switch over to in-house operations. In the past there has been one seasonal person that might float through the winter to shovel ice rinks and other work. Depending on the budget they may or may not use one seasonal person through the winter. Eisenbise asked for next year if he is anticipating another raise in wages. Cullen replied that has been discussed and even getting the initial raise in wages was a huge help in getting staff. The current seasonal rate is at the middle or the higher end of what other cities are offering. He will revisit the wage scale in the spring and compare it with other surrounding cities.

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

### **Letters and Requests**

None at this time.

### **Old Business**

Ostergaard wanted to add to the previous discussion on a master park plan so that the topic doesn't just die. There is an opportunity coming up with Truck or Treat to get feedback. Is there something that can be done like creating a survey, or members circulating among themselves to pull something together. Consultants do not mean anything without getting input first. She feels there is more to be discussed. Peterson replied a good consultant will have community outreach as part of their job. They determine what the community needs are and what is feasible within the budget provided. The master plan is then a reflection of that. The Commission could do preliminary things like that but it will ultimately be covered in the planning process. Eisenbise indicated when she was on the library board they created a strategic plan for the next year or two based on what the results were from the most recent city survey. Having a strategic plan for the Park & Recreation Commission might be a good idea. Ostergaard replied that might be a first step to work towards something. Greenhalgh replied that masterplans have been created for different parks within the last few years. Windschitl indicated Hasen presented the park plans one by one with the amenities in March of 2023. Hansen should be included in this discussion because he has updated cost estimates. Windschitl stated most of the costs had doubled since the 2014 plans. Cullen agreed that Hansen has a lot of the information and there is a lot of moving parts involved in this whole process. Hansen will be able to put things into context with regards to the rest of the City.

### **New Business**

#### **4. City Park Use Discussion**

Windschitl reported the city park usage and rentals have significantly increased over the last few years. This is with paid rentals and with general usage where people just show up at the parks. With this extra usage it creates a lot of extra labor, a lot of extra costs, a lot of extra clean up, and incidents. He wants to discuss the park rental process and the volleyball groups using the parks. Windschitl has worked with the organizers of the volleyball at one of the parks almost weekly this summer and the police department has been involved.

Windschitl indicated due to the shortage in seasonal staff for the cleanup of the parks, staff made the decision to only rent each park one time per weekend. A shelter that might be rented for Sunday, would not have a rental their on Friday or Saturday, but it will most likely be used by the public. So, when the renter shows up on Sunday there could be a big mess or a minimal mess. This decision to rent only one day was made over a year ago because without seasonal staff to work we did not want to pay full-time staff double time to come in on the weekend. The revenue generated for park rentals this summer was just over \$9,000. Currently a resident of Columbia Heights can rent the park for a four-hour block of time for \$50, a non-resident \$150, and a resident group over 100 people is \$125. The Recreation Department does the park rentals, takes in the money, gives the key to any park building, and the Public Works Department does the park cleanup and maintenance. Windschitl would like to see what the Commission has heard from the residents, what their input is as far as what should be done moving forward. Should parks be rented all three days with the potential of having a full-time staff work to clean each park, or not rent the parks at all, or keep one rental at each park on the weekend. Greenhalgh stated the revenue from park rentals was \$9,000 but asked how much labor costs were to clean the parks. Cullen replied at one point in time seasonal staff were used for cleaning the parks on the weekends. Since the city operates two wading pools they are required to check the chlorine levels daily. With seasonal positions if they work on the weekends they need two other days off during the week. Seasonal staff are used during the week for various duties. Cullen indicated full-time staff were coming in on the weekends to check the chlorine levels because they are better trained and it should be a qualified person checking the pools anyway. Marquez Simula asked if the full-time staff person is getting paid time and a half. Cullen replied yes. Marquez Simula asked if a person could be hired to only work weekends. Cullen replied that is a possibility but once you fill a position like that what does the rest of their position look like. He gave an example of when there are back to back rentals the fulltime staff clean the park, then go and check the two pools, and then go back to check the

park, the staff puts in a full day of work. He believes if there is a transaction taken for a park reservation we should be providing the service that is paid for. There was a park rental over the summer where the park foreperson came in at 7:30 in the morning, pressure washed and cleaned the park shelter, and when the renter came in at 11am the shelter was trashed and looked like no one had cleaned it. It is also hard to predict how long one park will take to clean from day to day. Macko stated the question was how much money was brought in for park rentals versus how much was paid out for labor. Cullen replied in 2022 labor costs were \$86,000 and in 2021 it was \$75,000. This only represents the costs and does not reflect the fact that when staff works on the weekend they are off during the week so work gets shifted around and regular duties often get shifted. Peterson stated either we need to go full in for park rentals or pull out completely. Macko agreed. Peterson asked if a large deposit could be put down for each rental to ensure it is cleaned up when a reservation is done. Greenhalgh stated that city staff would not go to the park until Monday morning so if a rental is done on Saturday or even Sunday afternoon there is the potential of the area being trashed by other users. Peterson replied there is an online component where the renter would upload a photo of the park with a time stamp at the end of their rental to show the condition of it. Ostergaard stated it is typically not the people who pay to rent the parks that leave trash. Peterson asked if there is signage showing the parks are rented. Windschitl replied yes signage is put up at each park indicating there is a rental. For this year there is a permit number on the day it is rented and the other two dates say City Use. He reiterated that the mess left behind at some of the parks is unbelievable at times. The parks staff even use the dumpster behind Murzyn Hall to empty trash from the parks because the dumpster at Public Works is too full. Peterson stated there could be ways to increase a damage deposit and raise rates to allow more revenue for staff cleaning. Ostergaard asked if the hours a park is allowed to be rented can be limited so there is time for staff to go and clean prior to a rental. For example if rentals didn't begin until 11am or 12pm. Greenhalgh stated people are not always willing to leave a park just because someone shows up with a park permit or confirmation of rental. Peterson stated a physical barrier or closure of the park could be installed and then unlocked at the time of the rental to keep other people out. Cullen restated it goes back to the question if we are in the business of park rentals or are they just amenities for the public to use. Marquez Simula asked how other cities operate their rentals. Saefke indicated the Commission talked about this during the initial discussion to only rent one day per weekend. Many other cities have specific time frames for a reservation but then they have staff that go to the park to clean for the next rental. They even do two rentals in one day. Marquez Simula stated with our large number of parks we wouldn't be able to staff multiple cleanups at the same time. Cullen indicated that it takes time to get around to each park, transport the equipment and even fill up the pressure washer. Ostergaard asked if we should limit the number of parks that get rented. Harzallah stated that might get more confusing. Marquez Simula indicated that if parks are not open to be rented people just need to adjust how they plan for an event and have someone stationed at the park first thing in the morning. Windschitl agreed with Cullen, in that if we are charging for a service and we do not follow through on that service it makes us look bad. On several occasions this year we have received phone calls about the poor conditions of the parks and if they ask for a refund we do not have a way to prove that one way or another. Ostergaard asked how trashed the parks will be on the weekends if we are not having any staff go through them. Cullen replied as long as we have the wading pools open, we are required to have staff come and check them. The staffing schedule looks different when you are just having the trash emptied versus pressure washing. The initial thought for a compromise could be that the person checking the pools would go to each park that is rented and see if there is a large mess that needs to be cleaned and save more of the detail cleaning for the Monday through Friday duties. Windschitl reiterated that the garbage amount really adds up. He has gone to the parks almost weekly and knows that the park staff were there emptying the trash and by Friday afternoon the trash is already half full. If there is a rental Saturday or Sunday they do not have any more room for their own garbage. Eisenbise rented Huset Park West for a work party and was planning to clean for an hour or two prior to the party because of seeing how much trash gets left in the parks. They got there the day of the event, and it was clean. She thanked the parks staff for cleaning. Cullen reported the parks department is only

six members and one working foreperson. They still need to cut grass, prepare and drag ballfields, trim shrubs, plant trees, and a lot more work other than just picking up trash at the parks. Macko asked what an estimate would be for the cost of an extra employee, how many rentals would need to be taken to cover that cost. Are two rentals per weekend needed to cover the cost, or do we need to increase rental fees. Greenhalgh indicated it would be ideal to hire a part-timer on the weekends to work at parks. Cullen replied that is very hard to get. Eisenbise presented an idea. She participated in the Anoka County Ambassador Recycling Program and to be certified in that program you need to put in a large number of volunteer hours. Some of the hours that people put in are volunteering for events at parks and monitoring how the group is recycling. Maybe this program could be of use for private functions at the parks in our city. There would at least be someone there asking the group to pick up trash properly. Cullen replied this might be a good opportunity for the commission members to supply a volunteer schedule and take over a program like this. Macko asked if Anoka County gets a lot of participation. Eisenbise replied they offer the program two times per year and get anywhere from 15 to 20 people on average. Windschitl indicated this could be tabled until the next meeting.

Windschitl reported staff, the police department, and city manager have been discussing the situation of the group playing volleyball at McKenna Park. They are typically there Friday night, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday nights. An additional group uses Gauvitt Park and also Sullivan Park. The police have been at Sullivan Park numerous times. That group of volleyball players have come into our office to try to get a permit to use the tennis courts and we denied that request because there are renters of the Sullivan Park shelter and a large group playing volleyball would occupy all of the parking. These are large groups of people playing volleyball, they are good people but there have also been some issues. An alcohol permit was giving to the group at McKenna Park and staff have worked very closely with them renters for many years. Originally some of these players started using Huset Park East and there were complaints from the neighbors regarding public urination so the group went to Keyes Park and after some issues from neighbors and the hockey rink being torn down, the group moved to McKenna Park. This group pays for additional biffs at the park. This year Windschitl and Captain Johnson have met with the renters numerous times about behaviors at the park. The neighborhood directly across from the hockey rink was having cars parked blocking their driveways. Later this summer the group set up a tournament and now the attendance has grown with other players from north and south Minneapolis, and vendors selling food and alcohol without permits. The police have seen this happening but when the group sees the police, they hide things. The alcohol permit was revoked from the group. Being a resident near a park you can expect various uses of that park, but he believes no resident signed up for this type of usage. He isn't sure how the Commission wants to move forward with this situation. Windschitl has a contact at each site. Sullivan Park would be remedied by the removal of the tennis courts. He would like input from the Commission to remedy the situation prior to next year. Windschitl reported the group at McKenna Park pays for one park permit for the year because we never would rent out the hockey rink, it gets their contact information on file. One option would be to implement a permit every day. This group did pay to resurface the pavement of the hockey rink.

Ostergaard lives near McKenna Park but on the 7<sup>th</sup> Street side and is not bothered by any of these issues. She asked what the complaints are from other residents. Saefke replied that the most recent one was that a teenager came home and had been drinking alcohol at the park saying he got it from people playing volleyball. Windschitl reported the issues have been liquor available to minors, the selling of alcohol without a license, the public urination has not been an issue since the three biffs are there, residents getting blocked from parking in their driveways, and after talking with the renters, they posted signs in Spanish to park elsewhere so the problem was taken care of until all of these other Minneapolis groups started coming. Peterson stated that it kind of feels they are walking all over us. Windschitl indicated that ultimately it is a public park. If we no longer allow them to rent the area in the park we no longer have any contact information or anyone to work with when

there are issues. Ostergaard asked if there are requirements such as an off duty police officer required on site when there is alcohol, or something else that can be put into a conditional use permit. Windschitl replied they probably won't do a permit if we make it any more difficult and they will just show up. Cullen stated that parks are there for a reason and meant to be enjoyed for public use. With the high demand of McKenna Park it is just unfortunate that it is in a neighborhood. This is somewhat of a unique situation that is just in the wrong area. This might be something the Commission wants to keep in mind when looking at future park designs. Marquez Simula agreed that it is in the wrong area. She also added that the police officers do not want to be arresting people in the parks either and would rather work with someone to correct the issues. As Mayor she receives a lot of complaints about McKenna Park with pictures, videos, and letters. Greenhalgh indicated Huset Park would still have issues with parking when there are other events going on. Ostergaard asked if the organizers are aware of the complaints. Windschitl replied yes, the renters at McKenna Park are aware. They have been working with the people that they invite but cannot control the people coming in from other areas and using the other parks. Greenhalgh indicated this topic can be brought up again at a later meeting after members have had time to think about the next course of action. Windschitl added for the most part the volleyball players are abiding by the rules. It can be an inconvenience to the neighborhood. They had an alcohol permit earlier to consume but never to sell. Ostergaard added the streets are public and as a homeowner you are not entitled to any spot along the street, but blocking driveways is different. Windschitl indicated there was another issue in the past with a group of soccer players at various parks and the same problem is with parking.

#### 5. Rental Rates for 2024 and 2025.

Windschitl indicated this is an annual procedure to set the rental rates within the Recreation Department and those are recommended to the City Council for approval. He reminded the Commission that the Murzyn Hall rental rates increased significantly a year and a half ago. Staff believe the rates are comparable with other city venues and do not recommend any increase in Murzyn Hall rental rates for 2025. All Saturdays for next year are not rented yet, which in the past would have been booked for most of the year at the old rates.

Ostergaard reported she works with a lot of rentals for events and typically sees an automatic annual increase of something like 3%. Have staff ever considered an automatic increase each year. Windschitl replied that has been done almost every year in the past between 3% and 8%. Saefke added that the rental of Murzyn Hall is for the space, the tables and chairs, and building amenities, but we do not require any other minimums with food or alcohol or do we have an event coordinator on staff. The facility looks good at a glance but when you walk around you see there are many things that need to be fixed or updated. Currently in 2024 all of the Saturdays are booked in May, June, July, and August. Beyond that there are barely any Saturdays reserved and only a few Fridays booked during the summer. Prior to this past increase most of the summer dates were booked at this point in the year. Ostergaard asked if the off-season dates need to have a discounted rate. Saefke replied that had not been done in the past because there already was a different rate for a Friday or a Sunday, plus in the quieter months we were able to offer the use of Murzyn Hall to nonprofit organizations. It is a future decision for the city council as to if they want this facility to be a revenue producing site or more of a community based facility. It is also ok to have quieter months for community groups to use the building. Cullen stated profit is one thing, but they should think about operating costs as well. If another Murzyn Hall was built tomorrow the day after you start paying for its replacement. There are costs to maintain a building, its upkeep, and think about its future replacement and then incorporate that all into the rental costs. Ostergaard added that is often why there are small annual increases. She asked how many dates would need to be rented to break even on the operating costs. Windschitl replied that we would never break even. The building is set up for community usage. We have community groups like the Lions Club, Toastmaster, Athletic Boosters, and recreation programs that we staff the building for so it could never make money. This building is not just for rentals. Within the budget other recreation programs put money back into the Murzyn Hall budget. We generate eight to ninety thousand dollars annually

for the revenue of the building, yet the costs with maintenance, air conditioners, and other repairs, it is up to \$300,000 for the building costs. It is not all just building but we are maybe making a third of the costs back in revenue.

**Motion** by Ostergaard, second by Macko, to increase the rental fees of John P Murzyn Hall by 3% for 2025. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl stated regarding park rental rates the current rates are \$50 for a resident of Columbia Heights, \$150 for a non-resident, and \$125 for a resident with a large group over 100 people. These are for a four-hour block of time, one day per park per weekend, and include tax. He stated that we do not want to overprice the rental so that people don't pay to reserve it and we don't know when anyone is there. The Commission can set the rates now and in the next few months if they decide not to rent the parks anymore, that can be decided later. Saefke added that beginning January 2<sup>nd</sup> the park reservations open for 2024. Eisenbise indicated if she were planning an event she personally would not use a location that she could not reserve. Windschitl replied that a key would not be obtained if it wasn't rented. The Jefferson building and Ramsdell Park building with indoor bathrooms, and the indoor bathrooms at Sullivan Park would not be available. Cullen replied the Public Works Department could make up for that and order more portable restrooms at those parks. Marquez Simula asked if when a park is rented for 100 plus people do they bring more garbage cans. Windschitl replied sometimes if it is for a large event or fundraiser. Marquez Simula asked what is the incentive to tell you they are expecting more than 100 people and pay the higher rate. Unless we are going to bring more biffs and trash or recycle bins to help the event be better. For the Pride Festival they rented additional Biffs and they are not expensive. Eisenbise suggested charging \$80 for a resident to rent the park. Macko wonders if that would overprice it and people would just go and use it without reservations. Peterson indicated \$60 is too low for a rental fee and \$80 is too high. \$75 sounds like a better middle number. Ostergaard stated the nonresident fee should be significantly more than the resident fee. There should be a benefit to living in the city.

**Motion** by Macko, second by Eisenbise, to increase the rental fees for the city parks in 2024 to a \$75 Resident fee, \$150 for a resident large group over 100 people, and \$175 for a nonresident; all fees include tax. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl reported the Event Wagon is for use within the city and has tables, chairs, and various recreation equipment. Staff drop off the wagon at the resident, park, or place of business in Columbia Heights and give the renter the key for the wagon. The wagon is then picked up the following Monday or day after the event if it is during the week.

**Motion** by Macko, second by Eisenbise, to increase the rental fees of the Event Wagon to \$75 for 2024 including tax. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl reported ballfield rental fees have not been changed in many years. Currently the fee is \$40 per day or \$10 per hour. Staff recommend \$50 per day or \$20 per hour. Macko indicated a game can run up to three hours. Peterson suggested a higher hourly rate but you can buy in bulk at a discounted rate. Harzallah suggested \$125 per day and \$20 per hour. Windschitl indicated there are other fees not included such as chalking the field that can be added when needed. Macko does not want to outprice users.

**Motion** by Macko, second by Harzallah, to increase the ballfield rental fee to \$75 per day and \$20 per hour. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl indicated the Garden Plots are located on Reservoir Boulevard and 46th Street. It is an unbuildable lot that Public Works tills, the Recreation Department stakes out the plots and takes the reservations. There are 48 plots that are 10x15 feet. Staff recommend changing the rate from \$25 per plot to \$30 with tax. Marquez Simula has received complaints that no new people can get a garden plot.

**Motion** by Macko, second by Harzallah, to increase the Garden Plot rental fee to \$30 per plot including tax. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl added that a decision needs to be made regarding the meetings for November and December because the regular dates fall on holiday weeks. Ostergaard asked if anything typically happens at the end of the year or if something needs to be decided before the end of the year. Windschitl replied what we just discussed regarding rental rates is the only thing that needs to be done prior to the end of the year.

**Motion** by Macko, second by Harzallah, to combine the November and December Park and Recreation Commission meetings to Wednesday, December 6. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Windschitl reported the Truck or Treat event is Saturday from 1-4pm. Commission members are welcome to be at the event. There will be a dry erase board for the members to ask the community their thoughts on the parks, and a game with candy. If members want to attend please let Saefke know. Saefke added the Sustainability Committee will be there at the table as well.

## **Reports**

### **A. Recreation Director**

None at this time.

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

None at this time.

### **C. Commission Members**

None at this time.

Greenhalgh adjourned the meeting at 7:58 pm.  
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary