



Park & Recreation Commission Minutes of the Meeting
John P. Murzyn Hall – Senior Center
530 Mill Street NE
June 23, 2021
5:30 pm

Tom Greenhalgh called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and read the opening statement for remote meetings due to a health pandemic and declared emergency. He reported that the meeting could be conducted by a combination of in-person and electronic means.

Oath of Office

Brian Clerkin and Nicole Peterson took the Oath of Office for the Park and Recreation Commission.

Roll Call

Members present: Sean Clerkin, Brian Clerkin, Tom Greenhalgh, Becky Groseth, Rachel James, Nicole Peterson
Staff present: Kevin Hansen, Public Works Director; Keith Windschitl, Recreation Director; Deanna Saefke, Commission Secretary; Connie Buesgens, Council Representative; Erik Johnston, Police Captain.

Saefke reported Commission Members Becky Groseth and Rachel James, Staff members Kevin Hansen and Keith Windschitl are participating through electronic means, all other Members and Staff are physically present at the meeting location and participating in person.

Greenhalgh asked what the fee was for solar subscription. Windschitl replied this is an initiative that the City is participating in to have more green energy. This is similar to paying an electric bill. Hansen replied solar subscription membership began about four years ago. At the same time it was part of a three part program for solar energy. There are two different parts of getting rooftop solar; there are four buildings with rooftop solar. The final stage is subscribing to solar gardens. At the end of the day it is an energy savings, is green, and saves the City money. It is a rate reduction of 1.5 to 2 cents per kilowatt hour. Over time it saves approximately \$3,000 to \$5,000 per building.

Greenhalgh asked if the wading pools will be operable for McKenna Park and Ramsdell Park. Hansen replied the wading pools have passed inspection and are open.

Approval Consent Agenda

Motion by S Clerkin, second by B Clerkin, to approve the consent agenda. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Letters and Requests

None at this time.

Old Business

None at this time.

New Business

A. Private party rentals of the Senior Center in John P Murzyn Hall

Windschitl indicated over the past year private parties in the Senior Center have caused complaints from the renters upstairs in the main hall because they have had guests from the other party come upstairs to their event. He also reported the parties in the senior center are bringing in more people than what staff tells them the capacity is set at. One other issue has been the service of food in the room and the carpet is getting stained. Staff would like to make adjustments to the rental policy for Senior Center rentals. The first would be to limit the amount of people during an event to 50 maximum. All rentals should end by 7 pm. The last item would be to limit food being served to just snacks or a cake and coffee type of event. All changes would go into effect immediately. Current rentals booked would be allowed to continue with the current policy.

S Clerkin agrees with the policy changes. He feels it is a good idea to reduce the amount of people and the number of hours the room is available. Peterson asked what type of events people rent the room for, because it isn't very big. Saefke replied birthdays, 15th birthdays, baptisms, and showers. James indicated the time limit is the best way to get around many of the issues. Groseth replied ending by 7 pm will eliminate a loud dance party. Windschitl added that by reducing the rental time to 7 pm will in turn reduce the opportunities for alcohol being brought in by anyone in the party. Windschitl added that individual requests outside of the policy would be brought forward to the Commission for approval.

Motion by S Clerkin, second by B Clerkin, to make the policy changes for the senior center rentals to have a limit of 50 people maximum, all rentals need to end by 7 pm, and no dinners are allowed. Upon vote: All ayes.
Motion Carried.

B. Park Facility Use Policy.

Windschitl stated the City wants to be proactive and reduce the possibility of unsafe situations that could occur in the parks. On a typical year there are 128 paid park rentals. Staff has discussed policy changes to help reduce issues or unsafe situation in the parks. The amount of activity and overall use of the city parks has increased significantly over the past year. Windschitl referred members to the spread sheet in their packets with the information on park reservations from surrounding communities. The scenario used for comparison was a fifty person park shelter rental. Many cities have a time block of four to five hours used for each rental. Staff recommends setting a time block of four hours per rental and all park rentals need to end at 8pm. The parks are technically open until 11pm but staff feels if there is an ending time to a reservation it will help reduce opportunities for any negative behaviors late at night.

Windschitl reported after comparing rates with other cities staff feels the park rental fee should be increased a little. Currently the rental fee of a park for a resident of Columbia Heights is \$50, a nonresident is \$75, and a large group over 100 people is \$125, all fees include tax. Staff recommends raising the rate around \$20 per rental. S Clerkin asked if there is any idea of how often the parks are used without being rented in advance. Windschitl replied that is one of the biggest problems currently. Recreation staff has recently been putting signs at the parks with a list of the permit numbers that have rented it for that weekend. Many times renters get to the park and there are people under the shelter. S Clerking asked what happens in that situation. Windschitl replied that he has dealt with situations where people do not understand that the park shelters can be rented. Groseth asked if there is a phone number on the signs posted regarding the weekend reservations that if there is a problem with another group at the park the renter can reach someone on the weekend. Saefke replied that renters are told to have a copy of their park permit to prove it has been paid for and reserved. She stated there isn't a number for any weekend staff. Windschitl indicated the renters are also given a sign from the department that says the shelter is reserved with the recreation logo and phone number on it. There are not any park supervisors or park police in the city so ultimately people would need to dial 911 if people do not leave. Buesgens asked if a sign could be posted at the pavilions informing people that the area is for rent. This would

start educating people on the process of the park rentals. Greenhalgh asked Hansen if that can be done. Hansen replied that he would work with Windschitl to create the best verbiage. He also stated that at a park like Huset West there are multiple entrance points to the pavilion. The signs need to be clear and concise so there are not too many signs. S Clerkin asked if the for rent sign could be incorporated with the sign holder used to post what the rentals are for the upcoming weekend. Windschitl replied staff will look into that. Hansen asked Windschitl to verify which city parks are the ones being discussed. Windschitl replied Huset East, Huset West, Ramsdell, Silver Lake Beach, and Sullivan Lake Park.

James replied she is in favor of the time limit, the blocks of rental times, and the signage. She believes that asking more than \$50 for a resident rental rate is possibly asking too much. Windschitl replied one possibility would be to leave the resident rental rate and to increase the nonresident rental rate. Staff is constantly working on rentals for either the park or for Murzyn Hall where the person having the event knows someone that lives in the city and will use them to rent the space. Hansen reminded the Commission to keep in mind is that the rental rate is not even close for the cost occurred to clean up the parks. It should be a fair rental rate and the current rate is just under the median rental fee when compared with other cities. Some of the larger parties take hours to clean up. S Clerkin replied he has literally put out a garbage fire at Huset West in the past. Peterson asked if a damage deposit covers extra cleanup. Greenhalgh replied currently there is no way to prove if one party leaves the park clean and another renter shows up the next day to a mess. Windschitl added that the parks are continually used by people who do not rent the space and then groups that rent the park show up to a mess. He indicated getting a damage deposit also involve additional staff time, potential credit card fees per transaction, and even the research to prove if a renter left the park in good condition. S Clerkin asked if there is a timeline as to how far in advance a park can be rented. Saefke replied that the only timing component is no refund if canceled within thirty days. S Clerkin replied that someone could rent the park on Friday for the next day. Saefke replied yes, if it is available. Windschitl added park reservations begin the first business day of each year for residents and the second business day for nonresidents. Buesgens asked Hansen if he has a ballpark number for what the cost is to clean up a park after rentals. Hansen replied

Motion by S Clerkin, to end all park rentals at 8 pm. If possible to inform current rentals but otherwise begin on all new rentals moving forward.

Amend motion by James, to limit each park rental to a four hour block of time. **Approval** of amendment by S Clerkin.

Peterson asked how limiting the block of time for a reservation will help. James replied that someone would be allowed to purchase to blocks of times. Windschitl replied that many times the parks are having issues with a renter arriving and someone else is there using the facility. He indicated by narrowing the hours for each rental gives the city staff a better idea of when the park is being used. Greenhalgh likes the idea of a four hour block and if a renter wants more hours they can purchase more than one block of time.

Approval of amendment by S Clerkin, to end all park rentals at 8 pm and have all rentals in four hour blocks of time. **Motion** by S Clerkin, second by B Clerkin. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Groseth asked if there has been any discussion on making all of the parks become tobacco free. The current policy was approved in 2010. She would like to amend the current policy. Groseth referred to a recent Minneapolis survey encouraging tobacco free parks. Greenhalgh tabled the topic for a future meeting.

Groseth shared a concern seen on the Columbia Heights Peaceful Community Facebook group where a resident had seen the TruGreen signs at one of the parks. Many people are concerned with having kids or pets on the grass. In the discussion on Facebook people were asking if using chemicals is necessary. Hansen replied TruGreen applies pesticides for weed control. They place the signs as soon as they are done. As soon as it is dry it is safe to use the area again. This is the quickest application versus a granular application that takes longer. It dries very quickly. It is commonly applied to the athletic fields and play areas. James replied seeing the signs at Sullivan Lake Park. Peterson indicated seeing signs along walking trails. She would like to see more information on where it is applied, how often it gets applied, what is being applied, and what the goal is for that area. As a landscape professional she feels it is not a good use of money. Something to think about in regards to the green initiatives that the City is doing. Groseth added TruGreen's prior name was Chemlawn. Peterson replied yes, it is FDA approved but the optics is not great for the community. Buesgens added the chemicals can affect the soil and the microbes that live in the soil. Peterson asked why weeds are a concern on the athletic fields. Greenhalgh replied playing on grass is a lot nicer than weeds. Greenhalgh asked Hansen to provide more information at a future meeting. Hansen replied yes. Peterson asked for financial information for the service as well.

Greenhalgh asked if the park rental rate will stay the same for residents. B Clerkin is in favor of an increase. He asked if a resident making a park reservation is required to show proof of residency with a water bill or some document. Buesgens added if a family member of a renter lives in Columbia Heights the resident should be the one making the reservation. S Clerkin replied the question is to raise the non-resident fee, raise the large group fee, and leave the residential rental fees the same for park reservations. He asked what staff suggests for an increase. Windschitl replied a twenty to twenty-five dollar increase at an even amount including tax. Peterson stated that would be one hundred for a nonresident rental fee including tax. S Clerkin asked about the large group rental fee. Saefke replied there are not many of those rentals in one year. S Clerkin indicated that fee could remain the same.

Motion by S Clerkin, second by Peterson, to increase the Nonresident Park Rental fee to \$100 including tax and to leave the other two rates the same. Upon vote: All ayes. **Motion Carried.**

Reports

A. Recreation Director

Windschitl reported the summer park programs began last week. Participation numbers are very good this year. The athletic programs are going well, in fact the girls fast pitch softball is very successful. There is an umpire shortage. The Senior Citizen program is opening up more and offering various programs. The group is using the new transit van to take small groups on outings. All 48 garden plots on Reservoir Boulevard are rented. There is a job opening for a custodian position at Murzyn Hall. The Hylander Center city gym will open as soon as another person or two can be hired for a supervisor position.

B. Public Works Director/City Engineer

Hansen reported seasonal staffing normally has 12 to 15 staff, currently there are only 5 hired and a sixth is being interviewed. This impacts regular maintenance and things like trimming doesn't happen as frequently. Currently the entire department is focused on getting prepared for the Jamboree celebration. The entire parks department is on duty Friday night, Saturday and Sunday there are usually four to eight people on duty for things like trash collection and other issues. Hansen conveyed a recent uptick in graffiti at the parks and more garbage dumping that requires more staff time. Greenhalgh asked if the hourly rate for a seasonal employee could be raised. Hansen replied the range of pay is right in the middle compared to other cities. Last year a significant increase was made and the current starting rate is \$13.11 per hour and goes up to around \$15 per hour. Just two years ago the rate was \$10 per hour.

C. Commission Members

Buesgens requested from Hansen to collect data on the cost to clean the parks in order to make sure there is enough funding to cover the costs. S Clerkin asked about the process for bonding or funding towards park improvements. Hansen replied various pieces of information is being pulled together to present to the City Council. It revolves around infrastructure, and parks for the next two to four years and how those items will be funded. This includes utility improvements, street and alley improvements, John P Murzyn Hall improvements, a new Public Works building, and it includes parks. Feedback and direction from the Council is needed before the next step. Staff is currently finishing a budget presentation for the City Manager, Hansen included funds in the 2022 budget to hire a consultant that would help on a park bonding effort. The consultant would help with things like educating the public and communicate the needs to complete the park system updates. Over the past year there has been a 15% price increase in building construction related costs. The 2018 Capital Improvement Plan was updated to reflect the 2021 costs. Infrastructure is a common item that falls behind little by little over time. This is one thing that the City Council will be working on soon. S Clerkin asked if the Council approved \$100,000 budget towards parks will begin in 2022. Hansen replied the money has been directed by the City Council to go into the park development fund. He does not have a current balance on available funds because the Silver Lake boat landing improvements are still being paid for. Hansen can give an update on the total amount in the park development fund. He added the Wargo Court updates will be next for funds.

B Clerkin asked if the Huset Park master plan could be updated. S Clerkin added that he would like to see one of the ballfields moved or removed to include a soccer/football field in the plan. This would allow an expansion of Murzyn Hall to go in any direction. Hansen replied there is a dollar amount based on the review from the Commission on the current master plans for completing the park system. If funding was provided the improvements would be completed in a two to three year period. One of the first steps would be to involve the community, review and update the master plans. The Huset Park master plan was created in 2003 and updated in 2015 when the splash pad was installed. If any park is missing a master plan that would be the first step to involve community input, and create a master plan. The review of the Huset Park master plan would be part of the process. S Clerkin conveyed he was thinking that the process needs to begin so that the public can get involved. Hansen replied the intent is to bring the subject to the City Council this summer and receive direction in regards to the updates and a timeline. This does involve large dollar items for park redevelopment. S Clerkin replied an update to the Huset Park Master Plan would cost less because there wouldn't be as much restructuring of the ballfields. Hansen replied that is possible but the current Master Plan does not include John P Murzyn Hall. S Clerkin replied he was just talking about Huset Park.

Greenhalgh adjourned the meeting at 6:40 pm.
Deanna Saefke, Recreation Secretary