



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE
Tuesday, January 13, 2026
6:00 PM

AGENDA

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

Members of the public who wish to attend may do so in-person, or by using Microsoft Teams Meeting at columbiaheightsmn.gov/joinameeting: ID **244 753 634 729 40**, Passcode **Gw9iB36Y**. For questions, please contact Administration at 763-706-3610.

Auxiliary aids or other accommodations for individuals with disabilities are available upon request when the request is made at least 72 hours in advance. Please contact Administration at 763-706-3610 to make arrangements.

CALL TO ORDER/ ROLL CALL

COMMUNITY FORUM: At this time, individuals may address the Sustainability Commission about any item not included on the regular agenda. All speakers need to state their name and connection to Columbia Heights, and limit their comments to five (5) minutes. Those in attendance virtually should send this information in the chat function to the moderator. The Commission will listen to brief remarks, ask clarifying questions, and if needed, request staff to follow up or direct the matter to be added to an upcoming agenda.

CONSENT AGENDA

- 1. Approve the December 9, 2025 Regular Sustainability Commission Meeting Minutes.**

MOTION: Move to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

BUSINESS ITEMS

- 2. Introduction to New Stormwater Specialist, Drew Chirpich**
- 3. 2026 Goal Revisions**

Presenting Item: Mitchell Forney, Community Development Director

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates
Subcommittee Updates
Commissioner Updates
Planning and Coordination

ADJOURNMENT

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SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

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 Tuesday, December 9, 2025
 6:00 PM

MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

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

Members present: Commissioners Carlson, Evenson, Groseth, Johnson, LaPlante, Leoni-Helbacka, Small

Staff present: Mitchell Forney, Director of Community Development
 Ursula Brandt, City Planner
 Liam Genter, City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist
 Jesse Davies, Refuse and Recycling Coordinator
 Zekima Rashid, Green Corps Member

Members absent: Commissioners Evenson, Groseth, Kurek

Council Liaison: Rachel James (virtual)

COMMUNITY FORUM

No community members were present.

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approve the September 9 and November 11, 2025, Regular Sustainability Commission Meeting Minutes

MOTION: Move to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

Motion to approve by Chairperson Jensen Christen, seconded by Commissioner Johnson. The motion was approved unanimously.

BUSINESS ITEMS

2. Better Futures Organic Collection Service

Coordinator Davies introduced himself to the commission and explained that the city was currently offering curbside organics collection service in Columbia Heights. Davies introduced Donnell Scott, the curbside program manager for the contractor that collects the organic waste, Better Futures MN. Mr. Scott introduced himself and described the nonprofit organization Better Futures MN, which seeks to employ and help rehabilitate people who have been previously incarcerated. Mr. Scott described the organic waste collection schedule in Columbia Heights, which includes pickups 4 days a week with an average of about 120 pickups each day. Davies asked if Better Futures had also taken part in the disassembly and recycling of structures in Columbia Heights. Mr. Scott explained that multiple buildings had been disassembled and largely recycled from Columbia Heights by Better Futures employees with very high reuse levels

of materials. Commissioner LaPlante asked where the organic waste was taken to be composted after curbside collection. Davies replied that the waste was first taken to a transfer station in south Minneapolis before being transported to the Waste Management composting site in Empire, MN. Councilmember James asked if Better Futures had experienced any customer usage issues that could be communicated to the public to improve collection. Mr. Scott replied that squirrels and other rodents were the main problems in curbside collection. Mr. Scott added that using compostable liner bags in the collection vessels reduces freezing of waste in the containers and improves collection. Mr. Scott stated that overall collection in Columbia Heights has been going very well and improving over time. He further stated that he expected program usage by residents to continue to grow and increase in the future in Columbia Heights. Commissioner Carlson asked if workforce development or job skills training was a part of the Better Futures program. Mr. Scott replied that all workers receive general safety training with multiple OSHA certifications as well as job specific training depending on which area they will be working in. Mr. Scott explained that all workers receive 2 weeks of training with a combination of computer courses and hand-on training before working in the field. Director Forney stated that the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority had worked with Better Futures to deconstruct several properties in Columbia Heights in the past. Forney explained that Better Futures has a warehouse where they sell the reusable materials from the deconstruction process. Mr. Scott explained that approximately 65% of the materials from deconstruction projects can be reused. Davies discussed the history of organics collection in Columbia Heights in previous years, which included comingled yard waste and household organics collection. That practice ended when Waste Management purchased the composting operation, which spurred the search for a new method of household organics collection. Davies explained that challenges included the desire to not increase the number of waste carts, especially since most households generate less than 10 pounds of organic waste weekly. Collection of waste curbside in small pails by Better Futures was the plan that was developed to address the problem, and a 2-year trial contract was agreed to. Davies stated that the performance of Better Futures over the last 2 years has been excellent and that staff recommended entering into a new 3-year contract with Better Futures.

MOTION: To recommend that the City Council approve a 3-year contract with Better Futures MN for curbside collection of household organics.

Motion was made by Commissioner Johnson and seconded by Commissioner LaPlante. The motion passed unanimously.

3. Community Energy Ambassadors Program Presentation

Green Corps member Rashid introduced the CERTs (Clean Energy Resource Team), a public-private partnership that seeks to connect individuals and communities to opportunities to develop community-based clean energy projects. Rashid further described the role of Community Energy Ambassadors within the CERTs program and the value of becoming an ambassador. Rashid described the example of a Sustainability Commission from the city of Rochester, MN, which chose to complete the program and become certified ambassadors as a group. Rashid described the process of becoming certified and provided examples of potential projects that could be undertaken to become certified. Commissioner LaPlante related that she knew someone that had completed the program and found it extremely valuable.

Commissioner Johnson asked if Rashid was aware of any other community examples. Rashid related that the Rochester example had been highlighted by the CERTs program and that she was not aware of other examples. Director Forney said that based upon the interest of the commission, staff would follow up and create a potential timeline for completing the program. Councilmember James thanked Rashid for bringing this idea to the commission and for her work in general.

4. Sustainability Commission End of Year Review

Planner Brandt gave a synopsis of commission activities for the year 2025, including the adoption of the Partners In Energy Community Energy Action Plan and the very successful kickoff event associated with the launch of the plan. Planner Brandt also mentioned the successful grant project led by the Invasive Species Subcommittee, which saw the creation of a mobile volunteer support kit and 4 community invasive species management events in 2025. The project was made possible through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Brandt continued by discussing the Sustainable Purchasing Policy, which began development in 2025. Brandt further stated that the commission had also welcomed 2 new commissioners and Green Corps member Rashid in 2025. Director Forney provided updates about city staff and milestones from 2025, including the hiring of a new Stormwater Specialist in the engineering dept, Drew Chirpich. Forney said that Stormwater Specialist Chirpich would be attending many Sustainability Commission meetings in the future, and that he had a strong background in sustainability. Forney also talked about City Council strategic planning, including sustainability related items like Green Step Cities step 3 and the creation of a new Parks System Master Plan in conjunction with the upcoming Comprehensive Plan update. Forney asked the commission if there was interest in a new goal-setting session for 2026 or if the commission was comfortable continuing to work on the goals identified in the previous session. Commissioner LaPlante asked when new commissioners would be starting their terms in 2026. Director Forney replied that the current terms run through April 2026. LaPlante stated that she was very much in favor of a new goal setting and planning session, but that the new commissioners starting in April should be included in the goal setting and planning. Commissioner Carlson stated that he was in favor of delaying the goal setting session to include the new members. Chairperson Jensen Christen said that the current goals were still good targets for the commission to work on, and that additional goals could be created once the new commissioners came on board. Commissioner Johnson agreed that the current goals still seemed very relevant. Commissioner LaPlante suggested that a goal related to business engagement could be a good substitute for working on the Parks Master Plan. Director Forney mentioned that any engagement with for-profit business could not be undertaken by Green Corps Member Rashid due to the terms of her employment. Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka stated that climate resiliency for the community would be a good goal for the commission and asked if a community-wide plan was in place for climate related disasters. Director Forney stated that Green Corps Member Rashid had been reviewing the Emergency Management Plan for items related to sustainability as part of the GreenStep Cities process. Commissioner Johnson asked how long Green Corps Member Rashid would be with the City of Columbia Heights. Forney replied that her term would run until September, but that extensions were possible under the program if all parties were interested and funding is available. Director Forney said that staff would update and refine the list of goals previously identified by the commission and bring it to a future meeting as a full

agenda item for continued discussion. Forney provided the commission with an update about planned business engagement for next year including helping prepare Central Ave businesses for the upcoming MnDOT reconstruction project and engaging the business community about energy efficiency rebates and programs. Commissioner Carlson asked if the Central Ave plan was available on the city website. Director Forney replied that the plan had not yet been finalized, and that a final plan would be reviewed by the City Council for municipal consent in summer of 2026. Councilmember James told the commission that the current plan was available on the MnDOT website but was still preliminary and lacking in detail. Councilmember James also told the commissioners that they would be able to speak in favor of the plan during the municipal consent process at public meetings if they were interested.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Staff Updates

Director Forney told the commission that the city has been in conversation with MnDOT, the watershed district, and the prospective developer about the future of the Medtronic site, specifically as it relates to stormwater issues and Sullivan Lake. Forney stated that the meetings were ongoing and centered around improving stormwater management during the design and execution of the new development. Forney asked if the commission was able to provide more details about the desired GIS mapping discussed during the goal setting session. Commissioners generally replied that Commissioner Evenson was the expert on that area and that she should be consulted for details.

Subcommittee Updates

Commissioner Updates

Planning and Coordination

Commissioner LaPlante suggested that a 2026 calendar should be created, highlighting events related to the Sustainability Commission and other sustainability topics and community action opportunities. Commissioner Johnson agreed that a calendar would be great to have well in advance to help with planning and attending more events. Commissioner LaPlante said that the calendar would be a good addition to the city email newsletter for publicizing events. Chairperson Jensen Christen suggested adding the calendar to the commission's Teams channel to allow commissioners to edit and add events.

ADJOURNMENT

Chairperson Jensen Christen made a motion to adjourn, Commissioner Leoni-Helbacka seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Liam Genter
City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist



SUSTAINABILITY COMMISSION

AGENDA SECTION	BUSSINESS ITEMS
MEETING DATE	01/13/2026

ITEM:	2026 Goal Revisions		
<i>Presenting Item:</i> Mitchell Forney, Community Development Director			
DEPARTMENT: Community Development		BY/DATE: Mitchell Forney, 12/30/2025	
CORE CITY STRATEGIES:			
_Community that Grows with Purpose and Equity		<u>X</u> Engaged, Effective and Forward-Thinking	
_High Quality Public Spaces		_Resilient and Prosperous Economy	
_Safe, Accessible and Built for Everyone		_Inclusive and Connected Community	

BACKGROUND

At the previous Sustainability Commission meeting, the Commission received a year-end report summarizing the accomplishments of staff and the Commission during 2025. At that meeting, staff raised the possibility of conducting 2026 goal setting; however, the Commission determined that a full goal-setting process would be most effective after upcoming term expirations in April, when new members are seated. With several commissioners expected to leave at that time, the Commission chose to defer comprehensive goal setting until later in the year.

In the interim, staff are bringing this item forward to provide an update on sustainability-related work currently underway and to revisit certain 2025 goals that have been completed, need refinement, or may no longer be appropriate given timing and staff capacity. This approach is intended to maintain continuity while allowing flexibility for the reconstituted Commission to establish priorities later in 2026. Staff are also identifying short-term, achievable items that can reasonably be advanced in early 2026.

Several initiatives aligned with Sustainability Commission and City Council goals are already in progress. The City’s GreenCorps member, Zekima, is leading efforts related to achieving GreenStep Cities Step 3, including completing required reporting on items the City is already doing. Zekima has also begun developing a GIS-based tool to help track sustainability initiatives occurring throughout the City. In addition, Zekima is supporting expansion of the Partners in Energy program and will coordinate with Commission members on outreach and engagement activities as those efforts move forward. The City Planner is working with Commission members to finalize the purchasing policy, develop the Parks Master Plan RFP anticipated for issuance this winter, and initiate the Comprehensive Plan 2050 update. Engineering staff are reviewing stormwater maintenance agreements for larger developments to ensure long-term compliance, and the City Forester remains actively engaged in forestry management and invasive species coordination.

Outlined below are the Sustainability Commission’s 2025 goals, along with staff suggestions for minor adjustments and identification of items appropriate for early 2026. Given ongoing workload and limited

capacity, this review is intended to focus Commission efforts on items where involvement can have the greatest impact in the near term, while leaving broader goal setting to later in the year.

1. Parks and Public Spaces

- a. ~~In alignment with City Council, update the Parks Master Plan in collaboration with city departments such as Parks and Recreation, Engineering and Public Works and commissions like Parks and Rec. and Planning Commission.~~ **Staff Are Currently developing the RFP for this project. The plan will be updated starting in 2026.**
 - i. Organize park walks to identify invasive species, native plantings, and whether individual parks meet community needs.
- b. Implement the Complete Streets Policy and include current bike/pedestrian facilities on GIS map and identify opportunities to close connectivity gaps with a focus on accessing public facilities. **The GIS Map is currently added to the work plan of the green corps member, and the complete streets policy has been passed and implemented.**

2. GreenStep Cities Communications and GIS Storymapping

- a. Updated business retention and expansion welcome packet updated six months/year and include updates to laws, grants, and other resources available.
 - i. Develop Partners in Energy landing page for developing programs and outreach on how citizens can save money. **The landing page has been created and will be expanded with the implementation of a new City Website in 2026.**
 - ii. Encourage investment into existing housing stock.
- b. Expand the City's use of GIS/ESRI Storymapping for City Initiatives:
 - i. Monitor initiatives such as reuse/recycling champions, new tree plantings, complete street connections, racial covenants removed
 - ii. GreenStep City Step 4/5 metrics tracking for inclusion in the Annual Report.
- c. Establish a Sustainability Forum; i.e. themed series/lectures/classes on sustainability topics, topics chosen by public, open to the public, and expert speakers.
 - i. Develop a working list of intern/project needs across the city to easily address city needs and advocate for intern or develop opportunities as they arise.

3. Stewardship

- a. Create "FAQ" page/info for residential and businesses to access:
 - i. Adopt-a-tree program
 - ii. Water quality, conservation, and uses
 - iii. Gardens and yards; support for residents and businesses to educate and engage on issues such as water and pollinator support.
 - iv. Stormwater management.
 - v. How to properly dispose of items; sources for sustainable purchasing (bulk); reducing waste.

4. Plans and Policy

- a. Green-to-Go; black plastic ordinance
- b. Sustainable purchasing policy
 - i. City has existing purchasing policy; option of addition sustainable purchasing as an addendum
- c. Residential green roof/space initiatives
- d. Increase housing density in single-family zoning ADUs allowed as accessory uses to single-family dwelling units. **Additional dwelling units were added as an accessory use in 2025.**

ATTACHMENT(S)

1. 2025 Sticky note table

IDEAS LIST with VOTE TALLIES: Sustainability Commission March 2025 Goal Setting

GreenStep Cities Communications and GIS Storymapping	Parks and Public Spaces	Stewardship	Plans and Policy
Business outreach through updated welcome packets	Parks Master Plan	Adopt a tree program	Green-to-go; black plastic ordinance
Interactive GIS/ESRI Storymapping for City Initiatives	Identifying invasive species in CH and city parks	Water quality, conservation, and uses	Sustainable Purchasing Policy
Partners in Energy landing page for developing programs and outreach on how citizens can save money; community solar discussion; and encouraging investment into existing housing stock	Native plantings in public areas and beelawn as a type of planting	Gardens and yards; support for residents and businesses to engage and educate on issues such as water and pollinator support	Residential green roof/space initiatives
Recognizing businesses for sustainability initiatives	Invasive species grants, cleanup events, and promotional materials	Stormwater Management	Increase housing density in single-family zoning
Monitor initiatives such as reuse/recycling champions, new tree plantings, complete streets connections, racial covenants removed	Organize park walks	Create FAQ page/info on topics such as waste reduction, how to properly dispose of items; reducing waste	
Presence of invasive species	Pedestrian/Bike Plan		
Establish a Sustainability Forum where upcoming events such as themed series/lectures/classes on sustainability topics chosen by the public	Update bike plan/map on website		
Develop a working list of intern/project needs/department wishlists across the city to easily address city needs as opportunities arise	Dedicated funding streams for sidewalk, trail, and other pedestrian/bicycle improvements		

11 VOTES CATEGORY	8 VOTES CATEGORY	5 VOTES CATEGORY	11 VOTES CATEGORY
TOTAL: 11	TOTAL: 8	TOTAL: 5	TOTAL: 11