

Official minutes
Parks & recreation advisory commission

Members present: Bruce Cantor (6:05 p.m.), Jay Jaffee, Sonya Rippe and David Yakes

Members absent: None.

Staff present: Jason West, Parks and Recreation Director, Jason Eisold, Facilities Superintendent, Geoff Clarke, Rec Center Manager, Mike Bahe, Natural Resources Manager, and Carrie Mandler, Recording Secretary

1. Call to order

Commissioner Rippe, chair, called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m.

2. Introductions

3. Roll call

4. Approval of minutes – February 21, 2024

It was moved by Commissioner Jaffee, seconded by Commissioner Yakes, to approve the meeting minutes of February 21, 2024, as presented. The motion passed 3 – 0.

5. Presentations

a. Facilities 2024 capital improvement projects (*Jason Eisold and Geoff Clarke*)

Jason Eisold, Facilities Superintendent, advised that all City of St. Louis Park facilities are now part of the Parks and Recreation department. Commissioners viewed slides of various 2024 projects. He advised that many of the capital improvement projects (CIP's) are tied to state and federal grants and rebates which will save the city significant funds. He advised that there are plans to build a solar array on Fire Station 1 and that Westwood Hills Nature Center (WHNC) is also researching the expansion of their array.

Another 2024 CIP project is the installation of a boiler that is dedicated to the pool. Mr. Eisold advised that this will take place by mid-April. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes, Geoff Clarke, Rec Center Manager, advised that the Rec Center boiler, a much larger system, previously covered the Rec Center and pool, however, an energy audit showed that there could be significant savings by providing a smaller boiler dedicated only to the pool. Mr. Eisold added that the current heater uses 11.5 million BTUs, however, only 2 million BTUs are needed to heat the pool.

Mr. Eisold advised that the Rec Center Aquatic Park is approximately 25 – 30 years old and in need of on-going maintenance and repairs. He advised that a study will be conducted in 2024 to evaluate the need for repair versus facility replacement. He advised that several

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other communities are undergoing similar studies. He added that the study will take approximately six to eight months and that the city recently hired a firm to conduct the study. He advised that there are many considerations to ensure that the needs of the community are met. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes, Mr. Eisold advised that underground piping is the main concern, adding that there were three breaks in the past. Mr. Clarke added that with proper planning, most maintenance repairs can be completed without closing the pool in the summer. In response to a question from Commissioner Cantor, Mr. Eisold estimated that approximately 70,000 visitors use the pool in the summer. Jason West, Parks and Recreation Director, estimated that the net expense to the city to run the aquatic park after revenue, is somewhere between \$200,000 and \$250,000.

Other 2024 projects that Mr. Eisold highlighted include a new garage at Westwood Hills Nature Center, and camera replacements throughout the city. He advised that there are over 250 cameras in St. Louis Park facilities and that older cameras will need to be replaced in 2024. In response to a question from Commissioner Cantor, Mr. Eisold clarified that the cameras are on buildings and in parks throughout the city. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes regarding the use of cameras for traffic counts, Mr. Eisold advised that the cameras are only used for security at this time.

Mr. Eisold advised that the police station was built in 1993 and, like the pool, needs a repair assessment. He advised that the space needs study is needed due to changes in policing/public safety over the past 30 years. He added that several other cities are going through similar transitions.

Mr. Eisold advised that there will be a municipal service center (MSC) garage door upgrade in 2024 and it is 100% covered by the department of energy. He advised that a high-speed garage door will save energy and noted that the same doors might be added to the fire stations in the future. Mr. Eisold advised that additional 2024 upgrades include replacing all florescent lights with LED in the fire stations. He added that LEDs are brighter so fewer will be needed.

Mr. Eisold advised that the city hall IR office space will be reconfigured and remodeled to capitalize on space in 2024. There are plans to create a customer service desk like the desks in the Apple Stores. He added that this will begin by the beginning of summer.

Other projects listed include adding fleet electric vehicle chargers at city hall, a police department evidence room remodel, MSC LED lighting upgrades, fire station bay floor sealing, Rec Center audio visual upgrades, ROC dasher facing replacement and aquatic park slide recoating. The slide recoating is part of the on-going maintenance of the aquatic park.

In response to a question from Mr. West, Mr. Eisold estimated that there are approximately 50 projects including 13 carry-over projects to be completed in 2024. He added that the city is using contractors for several of the projects to allow staff to keep up with day-to-day operations.

In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes about the use of artificial intelligence (AI) Mr. Eisold advised that AI is intriguing although they have not yet used it. He added that it could be a helpful tool in the future. Mr. Eisold advised that he would like more data-driven information.

b. Natural Resources update (*Mike Bahe*)

Mike Bahe, Natural Resources Manager, mentioned that he had a tree planting contractor scheduled for Monday, however, now for the first time in weeks, significant snow is in the forecast. He then advised that in 2023 there were 492 trees marked with emerald ash borer (EAB) on streets, parks and private property and added that he expects that number to rise in 2024. He advised that the city is shifting its management focus to high-risk trees adding that residents will be informed and may be offered grants for removal if they meet the criteria for the grants. In response to a question from Commissioner Cantor, Mr. Bahe advised that residents are given 20 days to respond to a notice and then 20 more days to remove the tree.

Commissioners viewed a map which depicted 785 tree replacement locations including open boulevard space. Mr. Bahe advised that the number is currently closer to 1000 spots. He added that the map includes Westwood Hills Nature Center. In response to a question from Commissioner Jaffee, he advised that the map does not include private orders. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes, Mr. Bahe advised that the map covers ash and any other trees that were removed. Mr. Bahe advised that there are tree replacement funds in the park improvement budget.

Mr. Bahe advised that the goal at the end of this year is to have every designated boulevard location filled with a tree. Mr. West advised that it is important to understand the process and care that goes into planting each tree. Mr. Bahe advised that there are contractors that can plant a tree in 20 minutes with the right equipment, however, the trees need care after planting. He advised that there is a lot of planning to determine the planting sites and that there is thought and care in selecting the appropriate species. He added that a list must be prepared for the contractors. Door hangers are distributed to notify residents and every planting needs to be inspected. Mr. Bahe advised that, in addition, last year's trees are under warranty and need to be inspected. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes regarding the biodiversity of the trees and if there is a particular species that is targeted, Mr. Bahe advised that St. Louis Park is now in the zone five planting region which allows for more species to be planted. He added that native trees are given preference and then trees that are adapted to our area. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes, Mr. Bahe advised that the boulevard trees are almost all deciduous. He added that evergreens are generally less tolerant of the salt and other materials used for street maintenance.

Mr. Bahe advised that the Arbor Day event is May 11 from 9 a.m. – noon at Birchwood Park. He noted that it is funded by a donation from a Tree Trust contributor. Mr. Bahe advised

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that volunteers will plant 50 – 75 trees during the event and added that there will be treats and Park Tavern pizza served. He mentioned that Birchwood is known to have a very active neighborhood group. He advised that there are many ice rinks in the park, therefore, space is tight for planting locations.

Mr. Bahe advised that Great River Greening (GRG) will be completing the final phase of the initial buckthorn removal at WHNC. Their goal is to reduce the growth enough, so that it is manageable for staff to remove on their own.

Mr. Bahe updated Commissioners on two other GRG projects that volunteers can help with. One is the Oak Hill/Louisiana Oaks buckthorn removal area. Another is a potential partnership with Cedar Manor school to turn the wooded area near the school into a “school woods”. Mr. Bahe mentioned that evidence of a previous teaching area was discovered in the woods.

Mr. Bahe advised Commissioners that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR) recently awarded the City of St. Louis Park two Community Forestry Grants: \$489,232 for a shade tree bonding grant for boulevard trees, and \$371,100 for the Shade SLP Plus Program, which is available for families who meet specific criteria. He advised that they have already received approximately 50 requests for consultations. Mr. Bahe advised that Shade SLP Plus Program recipients can also receive tree removal, tree planting, and insecticide injections for their ash trees at no cost. Mr. Bahe noted that the injection for EAB is effective if administered early. Mr. Bahe credited the Climate Impact Corps members for putting together the information for the Shade SLP Plus grant. Mr. Bahe encouraged Commissioners to read the February Park Perspective publication for more information.

Commissioners viewed a video about the MnDNR grant. In response to a question from Commissioner Rippe, Mr. Bahe advised that the grant is a one-time award and when funds run out it will no longer be available. Mr. West advised that only one third of the communities that applied received grants and added that there is a very intense and thorough process to write the grants.

In response to a question from Commissioner Jaffee, regarding staff concerns for any new invasive insects, Mr. Bahe noted that the Asian long-horned beetle appeared in Chicago, however, it was eradicated. In response to a question from Commissioner Yakes about tent caterpillars, Mr. Bahe advised that they are manageable and to let him know if any are seen.

In response to a question from Commissioner Jaffee, Mr. Bahe estimated that there are approximated 21,000 – 22,000 trees in St. Louis Park on public ROW and maintained parks. Forested areas are not inventoried.

Commissioners viewed a slide showing an electric truck and water trailer. He advised that the council approved the purchases along with a seasonal staff to water trees. Mr. West added that the two grants and the equipment are all council driven initiatives.

Mr. Bahe advised that staff are in the process of writing a tree preservation ordinance. He advised that there are many things that weigh into creating the ordinance. He added that the council is concerned about the tree canopy. Commissioner Yakes suggested providing maps of the canopy before and after new initiatives. Commissioner Jaffee suggested that the map could help residents understand what their tax dollars are doing.

Commissioner Yakes commented that the city website is functional, however, stories should be told as well. Mr. West advised that the site is limited due to the need for a mobile friendly experience for customers. He added that the system currently used is limited. Commissioner Rippe complemented the new social media staff and added that what is missing on the website shines in the attention catching social media videos. Commissioner Jaffee advised that people get their information in different ways and added that both should be given attention. Mr. Bahe advised that one work-around to the website limitations is the added use of QR codes.

Mr. Bahe advised that other 2024 items include 3 new Climate Corps service members, and the annual spring and fall tree sales which sold out immediately this spring. Mr. Bahe advised he is considering restricting the number of times a resident can buy a tree to allow others to receive an opportunity. He suggested a delay in the ordering window for those who already received their trees. After a limited discussion, Commissioners agreed that a delay or limit of some sort should be implemented to give everyone who wants to buy a tree a chance. Mr. Bahe advised that in addition to the tree sales, the annual plant sale is always well received.

Mr. Bahe advised that a new program this year is the Adopt-a-plot program created for individuals, volunteers, or local organizations to manage plant growth sites at WHNC. Naturalist, Greg Feinberg, is the contact for that program.

Mr. Bahe advised he would like to schedule a date for the Minnehaha Creek cleanup very soon. Mr. West advised that the date should be set before the fall brochure is printed.

Commissioners thanked Mr. Bahe for his time and efforts.

6. Business

a. Athletic Association President Summit (May 7) (*Jason West*)

Mr. West advised that the president summit is May 7 from 6 – 7:30 p.m. at WHNC and that the meeting is in lieu of the May Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission meeting.

7. Staff communication

Mr. West advised that Larry Umphrey is the new City of St. Louis Park, Parks Superintendent. He comes from the Minneapolis Park Board with many years of experience in park maintenance. Mr. West will invite him to attend the April 10th meeting.

Mr. West advised that ShamROC Ice Bowling was successful. The numbers were a little low compared to the previous year.

Mr. West advised that the boards and commissions final council report will be sent out on Friday. He added that there are no decisions in the report.

Mr. West presented the new Spring/Summer Parks and Recreation activities catalog that is now available.

Commissioners agreed to meet at the Rec Center programming office for the April 10 meeting at Mr. West's request. Mr. West will send out more information. Mr. West advised that the Commissioners park on the ROC side of the building for that meeting.

8. Member communication

Commissioner Jaffee commended Prakshi Malik, Multimedia Producer, and Savannah Byers, Social Media Specialist, for posting the up-close view of nature as it recycled the remains of a roadkill beaver for the public to see. He advised that this was part of a trail camera initiative at WHNC. He advised that the initiative began several years ago when he and another volunteer faithfully set up cameras and viewed the pictures. Naturalist Becky McConnell, and the WHNC volunteer coordinator, directed Commissioner Jaffee to meet with Ms. Malik and now many of the trail camera pictures and videos are on social media on a regular basis. Mr. Jaffee added that wildlife interactions that are not normally seen, from fawns, to raccoons and turkeys, can be viewed in these pictures and videos. Commissioner Cantor commented that it is amazing how much nature we have in the city and added that the pictures support and educate the public. Mr. West expressed appreciation for the hours of video Commissioner Jaffee viewed. Mr. West acknowledged the additional number of services that the city can provide due to the dedication of volunteers.

Commissioner Yakes advised that he is now a representative on the Met Council, Parks and Open Space Commission and attends the meetings in St. Paul once a month.

Mr. West reminded Commissioners to look at the highlighted event dates that are listed on the agenda. Commissioner Rippe added a reminder for the Arbor Day event on May 11 at Birchwood Park.

9. Adjournment

It was moved by Commissioner Yakes, seconded by Commissioner Cantor, to adjourn the meeting at 7:45 p.m. The motion passed 4 – 0.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carrie Mandler

Recording Secretary