

MINUTES

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION CALLED TO ORDER

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner called the meeting to order at 8:41 PM.

ROLL CALL

Present: Member Parisian, Member Murphy, Member Greenberg, Mayor Blonigan, Mayor Pro Tem Wagner

Absent: None

Staff: Tim Sandvik, City Manager; Heather Rand, Community Development Director; Rachel Leen, Communications Coordinator

DISCUSSION

A. Review Parks and Facilities Naming Proposal Form

Sandvik provided a recap on recent Council discussions and actions regarding the Parks Naming Policy. He shared that the policy received two submissions for the renaming of Sanborn Park, and that those submissions were initially reviewed at the September 17, 2024, Council meeting. He stated that one submission was not approved after a vote, and the second submission was not acted upon. Sandvik noted that a common piece of feedback from residents is that there was a lack of engagement and outreach to the community for the renaming of Sanborn Park.

Member Murphy expressed that his main concern is that the limited number of applications came from members of the Council and members of the Human Rights Commission. He supported getting more members of the community involved with the process through a potential engagement plan in the policy. Member Greenberg agreed that concerns about conflict of interest should be addressed in the policy. He also suggested that Council discuss how to collect community engagement. Member Greenberg expressed support for moving away from naming parks after people.

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner suggested a new pathway for the process, where folks start by petitioning the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Commission or the Council to open up a park for renaming, and then the City would solicit community feedback on names for the specific park within a certain timeframe. Member Murphy and Member Greenberg agreed.

Member Parisian agreed and expressed that if there is a desire for more community engagement, then there should more than five signatures required on an application. She also shared her opinion that Council members who submit a renaming application should not be allowed to vote, but she does not think that the same rule should apply to volunteer-based commission members. She agreed that changes need to be made to the policy, but she expressed feeling uncomfortable with reworking a policy after a very reactive public hearing was held.

Jonathan Hansen, Human Rights Commissioner, provided revisions of the Parks Naming Policy for Council's consideration. He highlighted a revision that states that if a park is renamed, it cannot be renamed again for 10 years. Hansen stressed that the item where Council is only required to receive 2 submissions per year should remain so that Council is not inundated with submissions. He explained that the proposed policy revisions set a timeframe for renaming a park, as well as a timeframe for public engagement for names.

Mayor Blonigan supported the idea of a renaming process having a timeframe, the idea of limiting Council members from voting on a petition that Council members submit, and the idea of narrowing submissions to the top choices and then putting it to a community vote.

Member Greenberg expressed that more history about current City park names should be posted on to the website. Member Murphy suggested that staff reach out to the Historical Society for further history on current Parks names.

Sandvik recognized that Council's intent to rename the park is a great first step, and that sometimes a policy has to be fine-tuned to move forward. He proposed pausing the current policy in order to rewrite a new version of the Parks Naming Policy. Member Greenberg commended Council for the great work that has been done to get us to the point of the policy, and acknowledged that it is great that everyone is working towards the same goal of changing the name of Sanborn Park.

B. Snow Emergency - Parking Regulations

Sandvik explained that the City's current method of approaching snow emergencies is not working. Under City Code, a snow emergency is in effect when snow accumulates 2+ inches, and it remains in effect until the roads are plowed from curb-to-curb. Sandvik explained that residents have become very reliant on waiting for a Facebook post from the City that declares that there is a snow emergency. Sandvik proposed that the City directly interpret code and have a snow emergency be automatically in effect as soon as there is a snowfall of 2+ inches, which means that the City will not declare emergencies. Sandvik expressed that he is looking for permission from Council to start sending out information on this operational change. He shared that staff would still reserve the right to send out emergency notices for various weather events, if needed.

Member Greenberg expressed concern that residents will argue over what 2+ inches looks like since there may be drifts or various depths of snowfall across the City. Sandvik responded that the City is primarily looking to ticket and tow blatant abusers of the policy, and that there are going to be community complaints no matter what. He expressed that this operational change would help Public Safety and Police.

Member Murphy asked if there would still be any notifications sent out. Sandvik explained that in all the places that snow emergency declarations used to be posted, there will now be reminders sent out about the new procedure and about incoming snow events. Sandvik shared that for the first snow emergency of the season, cars in violation of the rule would receive a warning notice, then a ticket the next time, and then they would be towed the next times. Sandvik expressed his hopes that putting out an information tag warning would inform most people of the operational change, and that a \$40 ticket would encourage most people to stop breaking the policy before they get towed.

Mayor Blonigan wondered if a part of the issue is that the City has not been ticketing cars in violation enough in the past. Sandvik confirmed, and stated that increases in ticketing enforcement will occur this winter.

C. Update on Organized Collection Request for Proposals (RFPs)

Sandvik shared that six bids are in from the Request for Proposals (RFP) for organized haulers. He expressed that he wants to walk away with guidance on how Council wants staff to score the RFP submissions. He asked for clarification on how Council prioritizes the criteria of pricing, customer service, contractual reassurance and language, sustainability, and reliability.

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner emphasized that continued alleyway service is a high priority for him, even though it might increase the cost of service. Sandvik confirmed that alleyway service is being considered. Mayor Blonigan asked if there is a staff group created to look through these submissions and score them. Sandvik confirmed.

Member Murphy asked how the submissions compare to the current pricing that we offer to residents. Sandvik shared that he was pleasantly surprised with the pricing of most of the submissions.

D. Robbinsdale Fire Relief Association Presentation

Sandvik introduced the group representing the Robbinsdale Fire Relief Association, which included Scott Eid, Fire Relief Association President; Jesse Hoestrka, Trustee; and Darren Olsen, Trustee.

Olsen shared that they hope to discuss the retirement benefit allowed to members tonight. He explained that Minnesota recently changed the maximum allowable benefit amount from \$10,000 to \$15,000, which can be paid to a person who is fully vested and at least 50 years of age. He expressed that the Robbinsdale Fire Relief Association is looking to increase the retirement benefit from \$11,500 to \$15,000. He shared that this increase would help to retain and recruit firefighters, since Robbinsdale Fire Department staff are all paid-on-call and must live within two miles of the station.

Hoekstra added that surrounding communities have already hit the \$15,000 benefit allotment, and that other nearby communities are on their way towards that number. He explained that before the allotment maximum was recently increased by the state, it stayed at a \$10,000 maximum from 2008 to 2023, so he believes the cap will remain at \$15,000 for many years.

Member Murphy asked if they are looking to increase their charter to allow for more than 30 members on staff. Olsen indicated that they have not discussed that, but as call volumes go up, the department might discuss adding more members.

Mayor Blonigan asked how long it had been since the firefighters received a benefit increase. The Fire Relief Association representatives answered that it had been about a year. Mayor Blonigan expressed that he generally supports the idea of an increase. Mayor Blonigan and the Fire Relief Association representatives discussed return on investments and how to ensure that City contributions are not impacted by investment choices.

Sandvik provided background that the last benefit increase was requested in the spring of 2023 for adjustments to be effective in 2024, which all occurred before the preliminary budget was set. He explained that this year, the preliminary budget has already been set, so the money would need to come from somewhere else in the 2025 budget to accommodate this request. Sandvik shared his opinion that it would be more palatable to slowly increase the contribution amount over the next 2-3 years, instead of all at once. He reiterated that it is a big challenge to make this change when it has not been built into the preliminary budget. He concluded that staff do not support the full request to increase the benefit to \$15,000 in 2025.

Mayor Blonigan asked how it would work if the benefit went from \$11,500 to \$13,000 in 2025. Sandvik explained that any increase to the benefit would still need to come from somewhere else in the budget, but it would be more manageable compared to an increase to a \$15,000 benefit. Olsen expressed that the Trustees from the Fire Relief Association are not willing to entertain pulling any funds from the operational budget of the Fire Department to pay for contribution increases.

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner expressed support for starting with an increase to \$13,000 in 2025. Member Murphy expressed generally supporting an increase, but he wants to further discuss how it would impact next year's budget. Sandvik requested that the Fire Relief Association re-run reports showing increases to \$12,000, \$12,500, and \$13,000, instead of \$15,000 in 2025. Member Parisian expressed that she would like a presentation from the Fire Relief Association next April or May to reevaluate the phase-in approach to eventually reaching the \$15,000 mark after a few years.

STAFF UPDATES

A. Staff Updates

Sandvik asked for Council support to continue Yellow Ribbon efforts, which is an awareness campaign offering services for veterans. Council confirmed their support.

Rand shared some cannabis regulation updates. She explained that adult-use cannabis, retail, and cultivation is coming to Minnesota. She shared that the Minnesota Office of Cannabis Management will adopt the new rules and serve as the licensing agency, but individual cities or counties can create registries of cannabis entities. She expressed that Community Development will plan to bring some ordinance changes to Council in November and December. She explained that Council will be able to decide where these facilities can be zoned, and staff will recommend somewhere downtown. She shared that Minnesota Statute requires that each community authorize at least one facility for every 12,500 people in population, so Robbinsdale must make two facilities available in our zoning. She also explained that Council will need to decide on buffer zones, which are distances between cannabis facilities and schools, rehab centers, and parks, so that cannabis stays out of the hands of minors. Member Greenberg asked if a municipal cannabis store would count as one of the two facilities that we are required to zone for, and Rand explained that we would still have to allow for two other sellers in zoning code. Rand shared her concern about buffer zone distances since it does not leave a lot of room for development in Robbinsdale.

Sandvik provided an update on the nuisance code committee that had been discussed at the last work session. He shared that the Human Rights Commission may come to speak on a recommended committee or policy at the work session in November, or they may wait until January to bring a new policy forward to the new Council.

Sandvik provided an update on the Class and Compensation Study, and shared that Council will see a presentation at next week's Council meeting. He reminded Council that this study supports the City's goals of recruitment and retention, and it helps align staff salaries with averages in surrounding communities. He shared that these changes would require union representatives to come to the table to negotiate contracts before the end of the year. He provided his opinion that the price tag was not bad for the last two months of the year, since adjustments would likely stay under \$100,000. Sandvik explained that Council will be able to accept the plan at the presentation, but formal action can be pushed further back if Council has more questions.

COUNCIL UPDATES

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner provided staff with a resident's letter asking for help with a penalty fee.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Pro Tem Wagner adjourned the meeting at 10:31 PM.


Rachel Leen, Communications Coordinator
Aaron Wagner, Mayor Pro Tem