

Official minutes
Parks & recreation advisory commission

Members present: Amy Brandli, Bruce Cantor, Jay Jaffee, Adrienne Krill, Sonya Rippe and David Yakes

Members absent: None

Staff present: Mike Bahe, natural resources manager, Erick Francis, water resources manager, Mark Oestreich, westwood hills nature center manager and Jason West, parks and recreation director

Guests present: Michael Hayman, Minnehaha Creek watershed district and Jessie Hendrix, environment and sustainability commission chair

1. Call to order – roll call

The meeting was called to order at 6 p.m. by Chair Yakes. Roll call was conducted.

2. Approval of minutes – March 18, 2026

Commissioner Jaffee noted a minor error in the body of the minutes where Commissioner Rippe's name appeared incorrectly under item one. Commissioner Jaffee also flagged a discrepancy between the minutes and subsequent communication from staff regarding the start time listed for the June 1 PRAC annual meeting with council, noting the minutes reflected 6:15 p.m. while a later email from staff indicated 6:30 p.m. Mr. West acknowledged the discrepancy for clarification.

It was moved by Commissioner Jaffee, seconded by Commissioner Cantor, to approve the minutes of the March 18, 2026 meeting as amended. The motion passed unanimously.

3. Presentations

a. Environment and Sustainability Commission Update

Jessie Hendrix, Environment and Sustainability Commission chair, presented the commission's proposed 2026 work plan. She noted the commission comprises 13 members including two youth members and that the city liaison is Emily Ziring.

The first work plan item is a carryover from 2025: a review and update of the city's 2018 Climate Action Plan. The commission has been providing feedback to city staff on what is working, what is not and where measurements are unavailable. Sections covering building

efficiency and transportation were addressed in 2025 with remaining sections to be completed in the coming months. The updated plan is intended to be integrated into the city's comprehensive plan.

Work plan items two and three remain to be determined pending direction from the city council, which Chair Hendrix noted they would not meet with until June. The commission has proposed that the council direct them to provide feedback on a project or policy related to buildings, energy, transportation or mobility and to research a topic related to planning, zoning or transportation, culminating in a report to the council.

Item four is a collaborative "Walk in the Park" event planned for July 11 at Louisiana Oaks and Oak Hill Parks, in partnership with the city's recreation division and Recreation Superintendent Nikki Friederich. The event will be open to the public and is expected to include litter pickup and educational programming focused on pollinators and sustainability topics.

Item five is being led by the commission's two youth commissioners, Avery and Avital, both of whom conclude their terms at the end of August. Their project aims to connect youth with existing volunteer opportunities related to sustainability, with a particular focus on outdoor activities that qualify for graduation or National Honor Society service hour requirements. The platform for publishing this information is still being determined.

Item six involves hands-on volunteer work at Ainsworth Park's food forest, where approximately a dozen fruit trees were planted by Natural Resources staff and nearby residents approximately three years ago. Commission members recently completed pruning training and mulching at the site. Planned future activities include buckthorn removal along the fence line and native plantings in the fall.

Commission members engaged in discussion regarding the food forest. Commissioner Jaffee asked how many fruit trees were present and whether more were planned. Chair Hendrix confirmed approximately a dozen trees are established and that additional plantings are envisioned, with the sledding hill limiting placement options. Mike Bahe noted that sledding activity has damaged some trees over the years. Chair Hendrix suggested lower-growing plantings such as berry shrubs as a more suitable alternative in high-traffic areas.

Commissioner Yakes inquired whether there had been community engagement to identify sustainability priorities. Chair Hendrix referenced results from the city's vision planning process, noting that residents expressed strong interest in green space and transportation. She acknowledged that the breadth of sustainability topics makes it difficult to synthesize community interest into specific actions.

Mr. West raised the upcoming April 25 Minnehaha Creek cleanup and encouraged commission members to attend. Michael Hayman noted that his organization could help promote the event through Minnehaha Creek Watershed District outreach channels and offered to share flyer materials. Commissioner Krill noted that reminders had already been

sent out, particularly targeting students who need last-minute volunteer hours or group projects.

Commissioner Jaffee asked whether there would be a way to balance volunteer attendance between the two cleanup locations. Mike Bahe noted that voluntary registration had been opened for the first time this year to help gauge attendance but that actual turnout typically exceeds registration numbers. Michael Hayman noted that a prior creek cleanup in Minneapolis had grown so large it became unmanageable and encouraged thoughtful outreach.

b. Minnehaha Creek Watershed District Update

Michael Hayman, Director of Project Planning for the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, provided an overview of the district's mission, geographic scope and current project work, with a focus on initiatives relevant to St. Louis Park and the lower watershed.

Mr. Hayman described the watershed district as a unique local government unit serving 29 communities, all connected by water resources ranging from Lake Minnetonka and its tributaries to Minnehaha Creek and Minnehaha Falls. He explained that over the past decade the district has shifted toward a "balanced urban ecology" approach, layering water quality goals with infrastructure needs, land use, parks and open space and community priorities to produce outcomes that benefit both the environment and the communities in which they work.

Mr. Hayman identified the district's four current focal geographies for capital project planning: Painter Creek, Six Mile Creek, Long Lake and the Minnehaha Creek sub-watershed. The 44-square-mile lower watershed, or Minnehaha Creek sub-watershed, was the primary focus of his presentation.

He explained that the lower watershed, particularly the area between Highway 169 and Highway 100, historically generated the highest nutrient load per unit area anywhere along the creek, largely due to post-World War II industrialization, stream ditching, wetland filling and the absence of environmental regulation. The district's response over the past decade has been to invest in stormwater treatment in St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Edina and Richfield, treating nearly 2,300 acres of runoff in partnership with state, regional and private partners.

Mr. Hayman summarized several complete projects. The work at Methodist Hospital involved creek remeandering and floodplain restoration through two separate project phases approximately 10 years apart, reducing flooding impacts and creating a healing outdoor environment that contributed to measurably shorter patient stays. The Minnehaha Preserve, located upstream, treats over 80 acres of regional runoff from Excelsior Boulevard by removing a large stormwater pipe that had discharged directly to the creek. It also created pedestrian connections linking affordable housing units to the future light rail corridor.

Cottageville Park in Hopkins was developed through targeted property acquisition and community-engaged design, adding community gardens and gathering spaces. Mr. Hayman noted that the local police chief identified it as one of the lowest crime response areas following completion. Adjacent to Cottageville Park, the district owns 325 Blake Road, which is planned as a regional stormwater treatment site handling runoff from St. Louis Park, Hopkins and portions of Edina as redevelopment of the site continues.

In Edina, the Arden Park project re-naturalized Minnehaha Creek by removing one of only two remaining dams on the creek, treating 80 acres of regional stormwater and transforming a previously underused park dominated by buckthorn into a recognized open space. The project received a National Engineering Excellence Award and was named Project of the Year by the Minnesota Watershed Association.

Mr. Hayman reported that the district has recently begun working in Minneapolis for the first time since the 1990s, focusing on Minnehaha Creek rather than the chain of lakes. The first project, sited along Cedar Avenue on currently unusable parkland, is moving into design and is anticipated to include stormwater treatment, public art and new trail access.

Regarding upcoming work in St. Louis Park specifically, Mr. Hayman highlighted several near-term initiatives. A gateway parcel across the creek from Cottageville Park has been separated from the larger 325 Blake Road project, was recently awarded for bid and is expected to begin construction in summer 2026. Features include a pergola shelter, swing benches and native pollinator plantings with stamped watershed maps.

Mr. Hayman also described a long-planned trail connection that would stitch together the greenway from the Minnehaha Preserve to the Three Rivers Cedar Lake Regional Trail, running from Oxford to the light rail station area. The project has been in planning since approximately 2013 - 2014 when the light rail line was under development, at which time the district advocated for preservation of bridge abutments to enable a future trail. The project is a joint effort involving the city, the watershed district, Hennepin County (which contributed \$200,000 in funding), Three Rivers Park District, Met Council and Professional Instruments. Design is approximately 90 percent complete, and the project is expected to be bid within the next few months for construction later in summer 2026. Commissioners confirmed the trail would accommodate both hiking and biking.

Mr. Hayman noted ongoing partnership conversations with the city related to the Oxford-Louisiana area reconstruction, the old rail corridor adjacent to Meadowbrook Golf Course and opportunities related to Bass Lake and settlement dollars.

Mr. West sought updates regarding the Knollwood canoe access and the Bremer Bank area sites. Mr. Hayman responded that while they are considering floodplain restoration within this region, financial challenges present notable obstacles. He acknowledged that the current state of the canoe access is satisfactory.

A commissioner asked about water quality metrics. Mr. Hayman explained that phosphorus is the primary measurement used to assess freshwater quality, as elevated phosphorus leads to algal blooms, reduced oxygen and impaired recreation. He referenced the concept of a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) as the threshold above which reductions are sought.

A commissioner raised the issue of road salt and chloride impairment. Mr. Francis acknowledged chlorides as a growing concern, noting that Brownie Lake is already listed as impaired for chloride and that additional water bodies are likely to follow. He described the difficulty of balancing public safety needs in winter with long-term natural resource protection and noted the state legislature has made attempts to address the issue.

Commissioner Jaffee offered a personal recollection of the area around 26th Street between Highway 100 and France Avenue from approximately 60 years ago, noting that the area between Monterey and Highway 100 was entirely wetlands, and that areas were historically used as informal dump sites for automotive waste. Mr. Hayman affirmed this history was consistent with what the district has documented, drawing a parallel to Lake Minnetonka, where municipal sewer systems once discharged directly to the lake.

Water Resources Manager Erick Francis described several stormwater infrastructure projects completed in coordination with the watershed district, including a large underground infiltration system at Willow Park serving the Cedar Lake Road and Louisiana Avenue corridor, an underground system beneath Carpenter Park's skate park constructed during the Beltline development project and a filtration system at Northside Park funded by Lifetime Fitness as mitigation for their parking garage stormwater requirements. Mr. Francis noted that St. Louis Park's challenge is largely one of retrofit, as the city was developed before modern stormwater regulations existed.

A commissioner expressed appreciation for the breadth of work described and suggested that more residents should have access to this information.

c. Natural Resources update

Mike Bahe, natural resources manager, presented updates on urban forestry, Arbor Day programming, active grants and the city's brush site.

Mr. Bahe highlighted that St. Louis Park has achieved Tree City USA recognition for 46 consecutive years, which he noted is the second-longest streak in the state. He reported that the city planted approximately 1,000 trees in 2025, reflecting a continued response to emerald ash borer losses. He noted this figure covers only city-managed trees in streets and parks and does not include seedlings planted at the nature center or Bass Lake Park. A commissioner asked whether the planting numbers would eventually decrease as available spaces fill; Mr. Bahe confirmed this is anticipated as the program matures toward canopy goals set by council for 2035.

Mr. Bahe announced that Arbor Day 2026 will be held on May 14 at Carpenter Park from 5 to 8 p.m. He explained the decision to shift the event from a Saturday to a Thursday evening was made to better accommodate the city's Jewish population, as Carpenter Park is within the Eruv boundary. The event will include food trucks, remarks from Mayor Mohamed and council members present. Mr. Bahe noted that the climbing band, The Arborators, were unable to participate this year due to scheduling conflicts. An Arbor Day Art pre-event will be held on May 5 from 5 to 8 p.m. at The Rec Center, where participants can create paper lantern luminaries to be displayed at the Arbor Day event.

Mr. Bahe reviewed the department's current active grant portfolio, noting that a significant portion of his time is now dedicated to grant management. Two grants providing direct-to-resident funding for ash tree management totaling \$471,000 covered costs for removal, replanting, injections and pruning for property owners. A \$475,000 CPL Ecological Restoration grant for Westwood Hills Nature Center, currently in the signature phase, will fund comprehensive buckthorn removal and native restoration over three years. Mr. Bahe explained that an advantage of the city applying directly for this grant is that it allows the same state funds to be used in areas where a partner organization such as Great River Greening cannot. Following initial buckthorn removal, restoration plantings will begin with native grasses such as Virginia wild rye and Canadian wild rye to allow for selective broadleaf control before forbs and trees are reintroduced. Chair Hendrix asked what would replace the buckthorn; Mr. Bahe confirmed the restoration would follow the nature center's management plan, with dozens of native species across prairie and forest areas.

Mr. Bahe reported that the city has taken over management of the brush site, which was previously operated by Waste Management following a period of management by Mulch Store. A contractor bid for the same scope of services had approached \$1,000,000, prompting the city to manage the site directly at approximately one-tenth of that cost. A contract with SMSC Dakota Prairie Composting was being finalized for grinding services. The site is open to residents on the same days and times as previously and had already received over 100 visits in its first two weeks of operation. Wood chips remain available for residents. Mr. Bahe confirmed that mulch delivery is no longer offered. Commissioner Rippe, who works for the City of Plymouth in parks and recreation project management, inquired about the contractor used; Mr. Bahe confirmed discussions with multiple vendors yielded significant savings over the previous contract.

Mr. Bahe closed with a reminder of the April 25 Minnehaha Creek cleanup at two locations: the Municipal Service Center and Knollwood canoe landing from 9 a.m. to noon. He encouraged commissioners and the public to attend, noting that only good weather was experienced at this event.

d. Westwood Hills Nature Center update

Mark Oestreich, Westwood Hills Nature Center manager, presented an update covering staffing, programming, summer camps and several partnership initiatives. He noted that the

nature center is located within the Bassett Creek watershed rather than the Minnehaha Creek watershed.

Mr. Oestreich announced the retirement of long-time staff member Carrie, who retired on March 25 after working through her final days without reducing her workload. Her replacement, Susan Bauer, came from the City of Fridley where she supported parks and recreation and also has a background as a middle school secretary. Susan has been described as a strong addition to the team.

For summer 2026, Mr. Oestreich confirmed all new seasonal staff have completed background checks. An intern with a D1 basketball background from NDSU, a graduate degree in biology from the University of Miami and experience in ocean-based education will join the team. Maintenance staff member Finn, a University of Minnesota student, is returning for his fourth year. A new junior naturalist coordinator was hired from outside the program after none of the existing junior naturalist alumni applied.

Mr. Oestreich highlighted the continued partnership with St. Louis Park Schools, noting that school programming now reaches students from preschool through eighth grade from January through May. He credited a rebuilt relationship with the school district's new assistant superintendent and curriculum staff, who reinstated district-wide support including bus funding to ensure all St. Louis Park students can participate regardless of school or PTO resources.

The maple syrup program produced nearly six gallons of syrup this season, which is distributed to program participants and volunteers. Puppet Storytime, a monthly program on Mondays and Fridays targeting families with infants through age five, is consistently at capacity with approximately 40 registered participants and a reliable walk-in waitlist. Staff are exploring options to expand available space. Birthday parties are booked through June, and families have begun creatively working around the formal party schedule by renting facilities and contracting naturalists independently.

Summer camps run for 10 weeks beginning June 15 and include 18 different camps for preschool through sixth grade with four new offerings. Two previously discontinued programs have been reinstated: bike camp, now in its third year, which partners with the city's police department for a bike rodeo and includes a bike mechanic for safety and maintenance instruction; and camping camp, which involves an overnight stay at the park. The Junior Naturalist program has recovered to 82 percent return participation following the significant disruption of the pandemic. The program runs from late May through August and connects youth volunteers with mentorship and job training opportunities. The program was first established in 1991.

The Trail of Small Wonders community art program, run in partnership with St. Louis Park Friends of the Arts, will return with a kickoff on July 13. The program invites community members to create and display miniature art structures along the paved trail for three

weeks. Last year the event drew approximately 16,000 additional building visits over three weeks. The nature center hosts five workshops in support of the program.

Mr. Oestreich provided an update on the Adopt-a-Plot program at Westwood Hills, which began following a partnership with the NFL and Great River Greening around the time of the 2018 Super Bowl. The program has grown to approximately 40 fenced 10-by-10 native planting plots at Westwood Hills and approximately eight additional plots at Bass Lake Park. Adoptees receive timely communications from staff about maintenance needs such as garlic mustard removal. The design of the plots, which are too small for deer to comfortably enter, has demonstrated measurable impact in reducing deer browse pressure on native plantings compared to surrounding areas.

Mr. Oestreich reported that Tree Trust, which was founded in 1976 in part in partnership with St. Louis Park and Edina during the Dutch Elm disease crisis, is celebrating its 50th anniversary. A commemorative video was filmed at Westwood Hills featuring individuals who have worked with the organization over the decades. The nature center will again have a Tree Trust crew in 2026.

Mr. Oestreich concluded by sharing two donated wildlife art prints by the Hautman Brothers, noted wildlife artists with roots in the neighborhood adjacent to Westwood Hills. The first print depicts a scene inspired by the canoe dock area at Westwood Hills and is number one of the artist edition. The second features swans. Both were donated by a long-time volunteer named Bob and will be framed and hung in the nature center's main gathering spaces once the artists have added personal inscriptions.

Commissioner Yakes mentioned that the trumpeter swans nesting at Westwood Hills have become a notable community attraction. Mr. Oestreich explained the history of the swan program, noting that Three Rivers Park District maintained a captive breeding program beginning in the 1970s and that Westwood Hills was an early host site. The program has transitioned over time to self-sustaining wild pairs, with Three Rivers discontinuing supplemental birds approximately 12 years ago as the Twin Cities population became self-sufficient.

Commissioner Jaffee asked about the osprey platforms previously installed at the west end of the lake and whether there were plans to attract nesting ospreys. Mr. Oestreich confirmed the platform remains in place and that pairs in Plymouth and elsewhere in the Twin Cities area are a potential source of future occupants, though nesting has not yet occurred at this location.

4. Business

a. Youth Association President Summit reminder, May 27

Mr. West reviewed the finalized agenda for the Youth Association President Summit scheduled for May 27. He confirmed that Claire, a mental health professional identified

These minutes were created with the assistance of a generative AI transcript service, then edited and finalized by a city staff person.

through a previous commission discussion, has agreed to present on the topic of mental health in youth athletes, specifically providing coaches with tools to identify challenges such as eating disorders and depression. Claire's presentation is planned for early in the agenda to set the tone for the meeting. Mr. West indicated he would add time estimates to the agenda to help keep the meeting on track, with the commission's agreement.

Mr. West noted that Commissioner Krill would be introduced at the summit in her capacity as vice chair of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission and suggested connecting her and Claire via email in advance. Commissioner Jaffee suggested that Commissioner Krill, offer brief opening remarks prior to Claire's presentation, sharing her perspective as a youth participant and the relevance of mental health awareness to her peers. Commissioner Krill expressed willingness to do so.

Commissioner Jaffee suggested introducing the item by inviting associations to share any changes or updates since the last summit rather than directing the question to individuals in sequence, to avoid any association feeling singled out or shamed for inaction.

Commissioner Brandli noted that a closed-ended question such as "has your association made any changes?" risks yes-or-no responses and may not yield meaningful discussion. She expressed a preference for open-ended framing.

Commissioner Cantor proposed changing the framing to ask whether associations can identify any new opportunities or needs, which would accommodate both associations that have acted and those that have not, without implying an expectation of change.

Commissioner Rippe and others indicated the existing wording was acceptable and that the group may be reading too much into the framing. Mr. West confirmed the question would remain as written, focused on changes since the last meeting and on efforts to increase participation among underrepresented youth. He also confirmed that time allotments would be added to the agenda at his discretion.

b. City Council Strategic Priorities

Mr. West presented the city's updated strategic priorities, developed through the city's comprehensive planning process with input from approximately 1,600 residents through small group meetings and public events. The five strategic priorities are: a welcoming and safe community, good governance, connected and safe infrastructure, diverse and affordable and dignified housing and climate leadership and natural spaces.

Mr. West noted that Parks and Recreation can now identify its work across four to five of the five priorities, a marked expansion from prior planning cycles when the department aligned with only one or one-and-a-half priorities. He highlighted the particular relevance of the climate leadership and natural spaces priority as well as connected and safe infrastructure, given the department's responsibility for seven municipal facilities. He

emphasized that equity has been explicitly integrated across all priorities as a key update from previous versions.

He described how the strategic priorities flow through a departmental planning process to produce three to five specific goals per priority and then into day-to-day work.

c. City Values Discussion

Mr. West presented the results of a city staff values survey completed by 230 of the city's approximately 304 full-time employees. He noted that more than 60 focus group sessions were held and that 91 percent of respondents felt very connected to their work while 83 percent reported a sense of belonging at work. The four city values identified through this process are integrity, belonging, collaboration and public stewardship.

Mr. West noted that these values align closely with the existing nine-word value framework developed by the Parks and Recreation Department, and that the two systems can be overlaid on one another. He indicated the city values will be incorporated into hiring practices, professional development and annual performance reviews.

5. Communication

a. Staff

Mr. West reminded commissioners that the Three Rivers Park District State of the Parks event is scheduled for April 22 at 9:30 a.m. He encouraged commissioners to attend and to wear their name tags to identify themselves as PRAC members. He noted that the activities catalog had recently been distributed.

Mr. West also noted that the park reservation and permit policy had been included in the meeting packet in response to prior commissioner questions about reservation priority order and field booking processes.

b. Community Education / School District

Community Education representative Patrice Howard was not present. No update was provided.

c. Commissioner members

Commissioner Cantor noted that a local street artist known as "Phone Banksy" had received significant media attention during the week, including coverage on KARE 11 and a national syndicated radio program. He described the artist's work on a sound wall and noted the city had reached an agreement with the artist to continue. Commissioner Cantor suggested that the abundance of available wall space on sound walls throughout the city could present an

opportunity for a formal mural program involving local artists, which could simultaneously beautify the spaces and reduce graffiti.

Mr. West noted that Webster Park, when completed, will also have a sound wall with similar potential. Commissioner Cantor expressed interest in exploring a partnership with the city and the state, which owns the sound walls.

Commissioner Rippe shared that the City of Plymouth has had success commissioning murals in tunnels through a staff member who is both a tree inspector and a muralist. She reported that the murals have effectively eliminated graffiti in those locations and that the muralist is deeply engaged with the community. She offered to share information about the experience.

6. Adjournment

It was moved by Commissioner Cantor seconded by Commissioner Brandli, to adjourn the meeting at 7:50 p.m. The motion passed unanimously.