

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: Nikki Friederich, recreation superintendent and Cindy Walsh, deputy city manager/acting parks and recreation director

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 – None

3. Presentations – None

4. Business

a. Webster Park purchase and potential LAWCON grant transfer of property (Cindy Walsh)

Deputy City Manager Cindy Walsh presented an overview of two interrelated property matters involving the LAWCON grant and the acquisition of Webster Park.

Ms. Walsh explained that the city has been pursuing the purchase of Webster Park from MnDOT for many years and recently received confirmation that MnDOT is willing to release the property. A complicating factor is that MnDOT does not hold underlying fee title to the land as the property was likely condemned during highway construction in the 1950's and was never formally purchased. The city's next step will involve working with the city attorney to pursue a quiet title action and potentially a condemnation proceeding in order to establish clear ownership before the city can complete the purchase.

Ms. Walsh then described the LAWCON grant issue. A portion of the eastern side of the Westwood Hills Nature Center was originally acquired using a federal LAWCON grant from the 1970's. Properties acquired through LAWCON grants carry a permanent restriction prohibiting sale or conversion to non-park use. The restricted parcel contains two vacant residential homes. The city's auditor has advised against renting city-owned residential properties, and the homes have fallen into disrepair. Ms. Walsh noted that the DNR was

unaware that homes existed on the parcel at the time the grant was awarded as the city did not disclose this when the grant was accepted.

Ms. Walsh contacted the DNR to inquire about a process to transfer the LAWCON restrictions from the Westwood Hills Nature Center parcel to another property. She explained that the federal program allows such transfers provided the receiving parcel is not already city owned. This requirement led staff to consider pausing the Webster Park acquisition briefly to allow the DNR to evaluate whether the MnDOT parcel could serve as the replacement LAWCON property. Ms. Walsh confirmed that the DNR has agreed to sponsor the city's request to the National Park Service. The transfer would require National Park Service approval, and the total market value of the replacement parcel must be equivalent to that of the restricted Westwood Hills parcel. Based on current valuations this is estimated to support up to two single-family lots on the Westwood Hills parcel once restrictions are lifted though Ms. Walsh noted the council may ultimately choose to retain the land as park property.

Ms. Walsh emphasized that the purpose of the meeting was to inform the commission before bringing the matter to the city council and to solicit questions the commission members might anticipate from the public.

Commissioner Jaffee noted that he has spent considerable time at one of the houses on the Westwood Hills parcel and described the access road as long winding and underdeveloped.

Commissioners observed that one of the homes on the parcel was previously used for archery programming and that the police department has used the structures for training purposes.

Commissioner Yakes also raised the point that the Westwood Hills parcel sits at the highest elevation in St. Louis Park and suggested the city should think carefully about long-term uses for the site given how rare additional land is in the community.

Commissioner Jaffee asked about the public notice requirements for the proposed transfer. Ms. Walsh indicated she had not yet reviewed the specific DNR requirements but anticipated that public notice would be required and would not be surprised if it was stipulated in the grant transfer documents.

Commissioner Yakes expressed concern about potential delays due to reduced federal staffing at the National Park Service. Ms. Walsh noted that the DNR contact already has an active relationship with a specific National Park Service contact and has begun communications on this request.

Commissioner Jaffee raised the possibility that a new federal administration could affect the pace or willingness to process the transfer. Ms. Walsh agreed this was a reason to continue moving the process forward without delay.

Commissioner Brandli asked about the timeline for resolving the fee title issue for Webster Park. Ms. Walsh acknowledged the timeline was uncertain and indicated she intended to speak with the city attorney following the meeting to discuss next steps.

Commissioner Jaffee asked what the commission's role would be once the Webster Park transfer is completed. Ms. Walsh anticipated that commissioners would be involved in neighborhood engagement meetings and that a landscape architect would be hired to facilitate a community input process around park programming and design.

Commissioner Cantor expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of a new neighborhood park and noted the density of residential development in the surrounding area. He observed that it had been a very long time since the city last developed a new park parcel.

Ms. Walsh confirmed that the last comparable park development was Louisiana Oaks Park in the early 2000s, which involved a remediated site.

Commissioner Yakes mentioned that a dog park is likely to come up in community discussions about Webster Park and suggested the commission would need to think carefully about how limited land is used.

Commissioner Jaffee noted that Groves School is adjacent to the Webster Park parcel and suggested the school may have interest in the development of the site.

Ms. Walsh confirmed she would be preparing a written report to the city council outlining both matters and asked commissioners not to raise the details publicly before that report is delivered so that the council could receive the full context together.

It was moved by Commissioner Rippe seconded by Commissioner Cantor to approve the LAWCON grant transfer of the parcel at Westwood Hills Nature Center to the MnDOT / Webster Park property. The motion passed unanimously.

5. Communication

a. Staff

None.

b. Community Education / School District

None.

c. Commissioner members

None.

6. Adjournment

It was moved by Commissioner Brandli seconded by Commissioner Cantor, to adjourn the meeting at 6:25 p.m. The motion passed unanimously.