

MINUTES
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
June 16, 2025
City Council Chambers

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor King. Council Members Paul Fischer, Rebecca Waller, Laura Helle, Jason Baskin, Oballa Oballa and Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Michael Postma

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McKoy, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Park and Rec Director Jason Sehon, Library Director Julie Clinefelter, Director of Human Resources Trish Wiechmann, and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Austin Daily Herald

Mayor Steve King opened the meeting at 6:04 p.m.

Item #1 Forestry Discussion – Jason Sehon

Director of Parks, Recreation & Forestry Jason Sehon gave an update to Council on the current efforts of the Forestry program. He stated the AmeriCorps program will no longer be available to the City after July 1, 2025. Mr. Sehon stated in the 2025 budget, City Council budgeted \$1 million for the removal of ash trees. The City also received a generous grant from the Hormel Foundation for \$250,000 for the removal of trees as well as treatment and replanting efforts. By the end of 2025, they estimate spending 100% of Hormel Foundation grant funds and approximately \$200,000 in City funds. He would like to use some of the \$1 million in funding allocated by the City for tree treatment and restoration as well.

He stated the following.

- The City's first tree removal contract was for 325 trees. This contract was completed on June 11, 2025.
- The second tree removal contract is for 400-600 trees, and work is scheduled to begin in mid-August 2025. They are working to finalize the additional 200 trees to make the total contract for 600 trees. They anticipate the project to be completed within 8 weeks of the start date.
- The Street Department removed nearly 100 trees along Cedar River during the winter of 2024/25.
- They contracted for the removal of 20 hazardous trees in parks in preparation for upcoming summer community-wide events. This work is expected to be completed by mid-June 2025.
- They are in the process of bidding for the contract removal of 100 trees throughout our park system.
- Between the City tree crew and contract tree removal, they estimate approximately 1,200-1,300 ash trees will be removed in 2025 alone.
- They estimate 500-800 more ash trees on publicly maintained lands that will need to be removed in the next 1-2 years.

Mr. Sehon stated there are ash trees that have been tagged. The colored tags have a meaning.

Silver tags: The tree was treated in 2024.

Green tags: Tree was/will be treated in 2025.

Blue tags: The tree will be removed via contract tree removal.

NOTE: Jay C. Hormel Nature Center has more than 500 trees that are tagged with silver tags. These are, in fact, dead/infested ash trees slated for removal, funded by a state grant.

Mr. Sehon stated the City's replanting efforts are underway, and they are focusing on tree diversity by planting a variety of trees to replace those being removed. They are encouraging residents to plant trees by creating an "Adopt a Boulevard Tree Program," where property owners will be responsible for maintaining a tree planted by the City on their boulevard. Additionally, tree-planting workshops will be hosted. The City will also be replanting 250-300 trees in 2025.

Mr. Sehon stated they would be able to purchase trees in bulk at the price of \$147.00 per tree. He stated each tree needs to be tended to for approximately three years and maintained and trimmed throughout its entire lifetime. He explained how planting trees will impact the City.

Below is an example of what planting 300 trees each year looks like.

- Beginning year three and every year thereafter, the City would be responsible for 900 trees to water and care for.

- On average, it is estimated to take ten minutes to water each tree. This includes transportation from tree to tree, filling watering bags, and returning the water truck to be re-filled multiple times daily. Watering bags should be filled once a week during dry weather events.

900 trees x 10 minutes per tree: = 9,000 minutes

9,000 minutes equates to: = 150 hours

Fill watering bags once weekly = (4) seasonal positions at 40+ hours per week

Another way to look at it is we add (1) seasonal position to water each summer with our (1) existing watering truck (1 staff, one watering truck):

an average of 10 minutes for each tree

- 6 trees per hour
- 48 trees per day
- 240 trees per work week

This equates to only having the resources to plant 80 trees annually.

He stated they will do their best to replant trees throughout our boulevards and parks. The reality is with only (1) one watering truck, they can only water about 250 trees weekly in the summer and fall. This means they would need to limit the tree planting to about 80 trees annually to ensure that they have the resources to water and care for the trees. This would require adding a minimum of (1) additional 40 hours per week to seasonal parks employee each summer and fall to accomplish this. He stated it would take more than 15 years to replace just the number of infested ash trees removed in 2025 alone, given the current planting rate of 80 trees per year. If they were to add a second watering truck and a seasonal employee to the budget, they could double the number of trees planted annually to 160. He will request that the Council consider increasing the seasonal budget by one or two positions for 2026. He thanked the AmeriCorp employees for all the work they have done over the past year and thanked the employees of the Parks and Recreation Department and the Street Department for the removal of all the trees thus far.

City Administrator Craig Clark asked Mr. Sehon to clarify where contractors removing trees are taking the trees to dispose of them. He stated he understands it is not the City's responsibility, as it is written into the agreement for the contractor to remove them. However, he expressed concern that citizens are worried something productive is not happening with the trees being taken down. He also asked Mr. Sehon to elaborate on what the person who is receiving the trees may be doing with them?

Mr. Sehon stated the contractor is in charge of all of the removal of the trees. There is a mill located south of town that utilizes the trees to turn them into chips, which will be used in landscaping and on animal farms. The trees are not hauled out of Mower County.

City Administrator Craig Clark asked City Attorney Craig Byram if they would be able to use City funding to purchase trees and work with landowners to place trees onto private property.

City Attorney Craig Byram stated that the City should avoid deriving private benefits from public funds.

Mr. Sehon stated one option for not using City funding would be to work with different organizations to conduct fundraising efforts to purchase the trees, which could then be given away to residents.

Mayor King inquired about the responsibility for a dead or hazardous tree in a backyard and the City's obligation to remove it.

Mr. Sehon stated they would send out a Certified Tree Inspector to inspect the tree. If it has the potential to fall or limbs that could fall or break, and those trees would impact public infrastructure, then the City would reach out to that resident and inform them that the tree needs to be removed, provided it is diseased or hazardous. If it weren't impeding public infrastructure or a hazard to the public right of way, it would be a dispute between two homeowners.

Council Member Baskin asked Mr. Sehon how tree replacement fits on his prioritization list. Is it a top priority, a second or third priority?

Mr. Sehon relayed it is a three-way tie for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place. It is not an easy answer, but trees have to be replanted. They don't necessarily need to plant as many trees as they remove. They don't need to replace all the trees that were removed within the park's system, but they do need to replant the boulevard trees.

Council Member Helle stated there is a lot of support within the community for trees. She appreciated the in-depth explanation Mr. Sehon provided regarding the progress the Park & Rec department has made over the past year. She would like to know if they can isolate this project into two or three projects and consider using fund balance to fund the staffing request. She also wants to explore the possibility of promoting the Adopt a Boulevard Tree program further.

No further action required.

Item #2 – 14th Street NW Permanent Signal Light Discussion at 4th Avenue & 8th Avenue – Steven Lang

Public Works Director Steven Lang requested the Council's input on the temporary stoplights located on 14th Street NW at the intersections of 4th Avenue NW and 8th Avenue NW. He gave an update on the planned construction timing of the 4th Street NW bridge and the 14th Street NW bridge. He stated the Council has two options. They can remove the stop lights and return to the four-way stop signs that were previously in place. He doesn't have any concerns about traffic issues as the 4th Street NW bridge will be open, and traffic will start to flow in that direction. The second option would be to install permanent stoplights at this location.

Council Member Fischer stated he has heard citizens like the stop lights and would like the lights to be placed there permanently.

Council Member Helle asked if they don't go to permanent lights at this time and later realize they would like to have them installed, how quickly can they get this completed?

Mr. Lang stated it would take a couple of months to get temporary lights set up again and it would take two years to get permanent lights installed.

Council Member Helle asked what the price would be.

Mr. Lang stated \$500,000 per intersection.

Council Member Helle stated she would be in favor of the intersections going back to four-way stop signs.

Council Member-at-Large Austin is also in favor of returning to stop signs at these intersections.

Council Member Fischer asked if there would be available grants or state funding for lights at these intersections.

Mr. Lang stated those types of grants are very competitive and at this time are currently five years out.

Mayor King stated he would be inclined to wait and asked if Mr. Lang is just looking for recommendations.

Mr. Lang stated yes, and he will install the stop signs once the bridge work is completed on 4th Street NW.

No action is required.

Item #3 Austin Police Department Uniform Change Discussion – Chief David McKichan

Police Chief David McKichan is requesting \$11,000 from contingency to assist with placing a bulk order for new police uniforms. He stated they are struggling to get their current uniforms ordered in the current colors they wear. He noted the vendor cannot produce their pants in the desired colors. He believes it would be in the best interest of the department to transition everyone to the new uniforms at once and maintain a consistent appearance.

Moved by Council Member Baskin, seconded by Council Member Helle, recommending approval of \$11,000 from the Contingency Fund for new police uniforms. Carried 6-0.

This will be added to the July 7, 2025 Council meeting.

Item #4 Administrative Report

None

Item #5 Open Discussion

None

Item #6 Closed Session

M I N U T E S
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION – CLOSED MEETING
June 16, 2025
7:08 PM
Conference Room A

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Steve King. Council Members Paul Fischer, Jason Baskin, Laura Helle, Rebecca Waller, Oballa Oballa, and Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT: Michael Postma

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Human Resources Director Trish Wiechmann, and City Attorney Craig Byram.

Motion by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council member Fischer to close the meeting pursuant to Minnesota Statute 13D.03 subdivision 1 (b) – Labor Negotiations at 7:08 PM. Roll call conducted with seven elected officials in attendance and voting Aye.

See Recording of closed meeting.

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Oballa, to open the meeting at 8:11 PM. Carried.

Moved by Council Member Baskin, seconded by Council Member Fischer to adjourn the meeting at 8:11 PM. Carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Brianne D. Wolf, City Clerk