

MINUTES
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
August 18, 2025
City Council Chambers

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

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Jason Baskin (Attended Meeting at 6:48 p.m.)

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace, Library Director Julie Clinefelter, Parks, Recreation, & Forestry Director Jason Schon, City Attorney Craig Byram and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Staff Members from Parks, Recreation & Forestry Department, Parks, Recreation & Forestry Board Member Cece Kroc, Nick Novotany, Sara Steinhoff

Parks, Recreation & Forestry Director Jason Schon relayed to Council all the different projects the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry department has been working on throughout the year. He stated they would like to look at different ideas on how to utilize Packer Arena more efficiently to bring in more revenue. He would like to look at increasing fees for Park and Recreation activities.

Mr. Schon stated many of the playgrounds in the City are more than 25 years old and are not up to industry standards, and they are not able to find replacement parts. They will look at getting an employee Playground Inspector Certified to assist with a plan for playground replacement.

Mr. Schon would like to continue to support the High Water Music Festival Events for 2026.

Mr. Schon stated he has identified twenty-one capital items he would like to request for the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry department.

Council Member Postma asked what the total cost would be for the capital items requested.

Director of Administrative Services Tom Dankert stated it would be \$2.1 million.

Mr. Schon stated they are requesting two new positions in the Parks, Recreation & Forestry department. A Forestry Coordinator and an Assistant Parks Supervisor/Park Lead.

Council Member Postma asked about the Forestry Coordinator position and how this position would be funded. He wanted to know if the request for \$85,000 was a realistic estimate for the wage cost, and if it included insurance and benefits.

Mr. Dankert stated this is a low estimate.

Mayor King asked Mr. Sehon to explain how the cuts to the AmeriCorps program affected the department.

Mr. Sehon stated with the loss of AmeriCorps, the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Supervisor is now performing the tree inspections, and when Mr. Sehon can find time, he will try to assist.

Mr. Sehon stated he would like to increase fees for rentals of park pavilions and sports fields.

Council Member Postma asked if there was a way to rent pavilions for half days vs full days.

Mr. Sehon stated it would be difficult, as a person would need to be on staff to clean in between rentals.

Council Member Postma is surprised they do not have staff working on the weekend during the summer to monitor these pavilions, as they are rented out at full capacity, and they can get trashed.

City Administrator Craig Clark asked how much security cameras would cost.

Mr. Sehon stated they would have to look into this, and he is open to further discussion.

Mr. Sehon stated they would like to make improvements to the flower watering carts to assist with watering, saving time, and saving money. He would also like to ask the community for volunteers to help with watering flowers.

Council Member Postma asked if the donations to the flower program are covering the cost of the flowers.

Mr. Dankert stated no, it is covering a little more than 50% of the program.

Council Member Postma asked why the City is maintaining the ballfields at Riverland Community College.

Mr. Dankert stated they have an agreement with Riverland because this is State-owned land that the City is not allowed to own. The City built a \$900,000 complex on this land and agreed to maintain it.

Mr. Sehon spoke about increasing the hourly rental rates by 5% for ice time, and for private hourly rentals, they would increase the fee by 10%. Mr. Sehon stated they will also raise the rates for rentals during public skate.

Mr. Sehon spoke about the other programs the Park and Recreation department offers and stated they have increased the fees in this area as well.

Council Member Postma would like to know if there is a different rate for a resident of Austin vs a nonresident if they are participating in these activities.

Mr. Sehon stated there is not.

Mr. Sehon stated they are in the process of assessing community programs and offerings to ensure they are not duplicating programs offered by other organizations. They do not want to compete with others.

Mr. Sehon stated the community gardens sell out yearly. They did increase the fees this year with no issue. They are looking at requiring a deposit for people to clean up their plots at the end of the season, which would be refundable.

Mr. Sehon spoke about the disc golf clubs and how they are self-sufficient and do not require any funding.

Council Member Postma asked what the cost for mowing would be for all of the disc golf courses.

Mr. Sehon stated he would have to look into this. They would have different options if they did not want to mow as much. They could mow just the fairways, they could let the land return to prairie grass, but it would be something they would have to look into.

Council Member Postma apologized if Mr. Sehon feels he is under fire with questions. He has a few more questions and a couple of innovative ideas. He stated the pool season is at best eight weeks long. Would it be viable to look at having the YMCA manage the pool, or would they be open to this idea?

Mr. Sehon stated he has spoken with the YMCA about sharing the lifeguards and having them under one umbrella. Mr. Sehon noted that most of the lifeguard staff are college students, so they do not stay around the community for an entire year. The issue with staffing the City pool is that it is such a large body of water they need to have seven to eight lifeguards on staff to be open. Mr. Sehon will schedule a meeting with the YMCA in the next couple of weeks to discuss further ideas.

Mayor King asked if they were to close parks, which ones they would consider closing.

Mr. Sehon stated if a park has not been dedicated to the City, they would like to look at selling it for development. But some parks have been dedicated to the City, and they are not able to sell this land because of this.

Mr. Sehon would also like to discontinue utilizing parks that are not connected by trails or have no equipment to use.

Council Member Helle would like to take a slower approach to this and not announce any parks would be closed. She would like to create an action plan and approach this thoughtfully.

Mr. Sehon agreed.

Council Member Baskin asked if the City needed two arenas. He stated if they were to build a Parks, Recreation, and Forestry budget from scratch today, would they include two arenas in it?

Mr. Sehon did not have an answer to that this evening.

Council Member Baskin stated as the City looks at budgeting for the future, they can explore this idea.

Council Member Helle is also interested in this and the cost of owning and operating the building, even if it wasn't an arena.

Council Member Baskin asked about the Nature Center and whether the City is the right owner or operator for this facility. Would the friends of the Nature Center be better suited to run this?

Mr. Sehon stated he is unsure; he knows it is not a significant source of revenue.

Council Member Postma agrees and stated this is just the City stating we need help funding these amenities.

Council Member Helle stated she knows the City spends a lot on recreation and library services, but they have a much lower debt load.

Council Member Baskin stated they know health insurance, vehicles, and everything else are going to cost more. They are going to have to make tough choices, and he is open to making those now.

Council Member Postma stated Mr. Sehon has done a great job looking into the budget and working on the master plan in the short time he has been here.

Mayor King asked how many outdoor ice rinks the City is maintaining.

Council Member Sehon stated they have three ice rinks and five land rinks.

Council Member Oballa asked about cane ball and would like to know the status of the conversation regarding inclusion in the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry master plan.

Mr. Sehon stated they have had those conversations, and the groups interested in this sport have stated they have money to fund courts, but no one has approached Mr. Sehon to start the process.

Council Member Oballa stated this group has ideas, but they do need assistance getting the resources. He will check back with them.

Council Member Helle stated the City created a very effective model for assisting in the creation of the pickleball courts and allotting funding, and they can utilize this throughout different organizations.

Mr. Dankert asked the Council if they would like to conduct three additional meetings or two to discuss the budget.

Council Member Postma stated he would like to have an Excel spreadsheet to help with the budget. He requests that Mr. Dankert create this and email it out.

Council Member Helle stated she is ok with two meetings. She would like to digest the information.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Oballa, to adjourn the meeting at 7:51 p.m. Carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Brianne D. Wolf, City Clerk