

MINUTES
COMMITTEE-OF-THE-WHOLE WORK SESSION
February 02, 2026
City Council Chambers

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

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Paul Fischer

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Police Chief David McKichan, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace, Parks, Recreation, & Forestry Director Jason Schon, Library Director Julie Clinefelter, Human Resource Director Trish Wiechmann, Finance Director Emily Burns and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Nature Center Director Luke Reese

Mayor Steve King opened the meeting at 6:16 p.m.

Item #1 Jay C. Hormel Center Long Term Planning Discussion – Luke Reese & Jason Schon

Nature Center Director Luke Reese gave a presentation providing an overview of the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center and its value to the City of Austin, particularly in response to questions raised during 2026 budget discussions about funding.

Mr. Reese stated the Nature Center is a unique and significant asset for a city of Austin's size. He stated funding is roughly split 50/50 between city tax levy dollars and outside sources, including the Friends of the Nature Center, the Hormel Foundation, the State of Minnesota, grants, and other community partners. City funding is leveraged to secure substantial outside investment, allowing the Nature Center to expand programs and facilities without placing the full financial burden on local taxpayers.

Mr. Reese emphasized environmental education as one of the Nature Center's core functions, serving approximately 6,000 students annually. He stated their programs align with state science standards and are developed in collaboration with local teachers. While the focus historically has been Austin Public Schools, recent state grant funding has allowed expansion to regional students, with those additional costs fully covered by grants. In 2019, the Nature Center received

regional significance designation from the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission, opening additional state funding opportunities.

Mr. Reese also discussed accessibility and inclusion as major priorities. Through partnerships and fundraising, the Nature Center has added all-terrain track chairs, improved paved trails (1.4 additional miles), and continued golf cart tours to ensure people of all mobility levels can access the grounds. He stated the recent trail improvements were largely funded through regional and partner support.

Mr. Reese noted the Nature Center promotes outdoor recreation and healthy lifestyles through canoeing, skiing, snowshoeing, races, and other activities. It serves as a community gathering place for life events, photography, celebrations, and tourism. It provides an important indoor and outdoor destination year-round. He stated habitat restoration and preservation are another core function. The Nature Center began as a 123-acre private arboretum established by Jay C. Hormel has grown to over 530 acres of restored forest and prairie.

Mr. Reese acknowledged the Nature Center requires city investment, but it delivers significant returns in environmental education, regional impact, accessibility, tourism, recreation, habitat preservation, and community identity. He emphasized the Nature Center is a valued and well-leveraged public asset that provides broad benefits to Austin residents and the region.

Council Member Oballa thanked Mr. Reese for the presentation. He lives by the Nature Center and would like to see a walking path to connect his neighborhood with the Nature Center so he would be able to better access this area with his children. He would like to see this done with no cost to the City.

Council Member-at-Large Austin thanked Mr. Reese for the presentation. He acknowledged the work he is doing and the partnerships he is building and thanked him for this. He would like to look at exploring other partnerships in the future to assist with maintaining the Nature Center.

Council Member Postma expressed his appreciation to Mr. Reese for the presentation. He acknowledged the valuable work being done at the Nature Center but noted that last year was a challenging year for funding, and he anticipated that this situation may not improve in the coming years. He emphasized the need to explore alternative methods for supporting funding and staffing at the Nature Center. He recognized that the County might not prioritize support for the Nature Center at this moment. Council Member Postma suggested considering a model where the County would own the park or building and lease it to a nonprofit organization, similar to Quarry Hill in Rochester, MN. While he understands this may not be feasible at the current time or this year, he stressed the importance of looking for ways to secure funding for the Nature Center in the future.

Mr. Reese stated, at this time, he does not believe the Friends of the Nature Center would be interested in this model, as their mission is to enhance and encourage. He is open to exploring different ideas and noted that Rochester has a significantly larger budget than Austin. They may need to consider partnering with the Hormel Foundation. Ultimately, he wants to ensure that the Nature Center continues its important work and secures its future in Austin.

Council Member Postma would like to know if the school district is paying for the programming they are utilizing at the Nature Center.

Mr. Reese confirmed they are paying for the children to attend these classes.

Council Member Baskin expressed his interest in exploring alternative funding options. He recognizes that this is not a shift that will occur overnight; it may take three, five, or even ten years to implement. He believes that now is the right time to begin these discussions, as this initiative represents a significant asset to the community.

Council Member Helle congratulated Mr. Reese for his efforts in writing grants to support the Nature Center. She emphasized that the size and scope of the Nature Center have implications that extend throughout the County and the region, highlighting the need to start building connections with the County. She expressed her support for establishing an endowment fund for the Nature Center and requested that the Council engage in this initiative, leveraging its influence in discussions with the County. While she believes that Mr. Reese and the Parks Board could present this idea to the County Board, they need to be assured of the Council's backing. She sees this as a community assessment and stresses the importance of embarking on a collaborative funding transition.

Item #2 – Administrative Report

None

Item #3 – Open Discussion

Council Member Helle stated the Council is to meet on February 21st for a retreat to discuss their mission, vision, and strategic values with City staff; however, she would really like to challenge the Council to look at a couple of items. As she read the Dave Unmacht report, it made it very clear that staff are ready for less talk and more action. She stated the items in the report that are repeatedly raised are trust, transparency, and communication. She asks the Council to reconvene to review the City Administrator. She feels the Unmacht report has many examples of lack of trust in leadership, lack of trust between leaders, and conflict between department heads and the City Administrator. Staff have been asking for transparency, staff have been asking to be

included in the decision-making process and they have been asking to be consulted on changes before they happen. Council Member Helle doesn't believe they have the right City Administrator in place to move the City forward in its efforts to improve employee engagement. She would like to have the Council in a closed session to discuss this again. She does not feel positive about going into a meeting with City employees to discuss trust, transparency, and communication when they are ineffective on the City Administrator side.

Mayor King stated there are a lot of moving parts and there is a plan to review the City Administrator in May and he would like to stick to the plan. He feels like Mr. Clark is doing an outstanding job and he would like to stay the course.

Council Member Baskin stated this is not an unreasonable request. He believes Council Member Helle has legitimate concerns. He thinks it would be better for the Council to discuss this sooner rather than later so this doesn't manifest as they need resolution one way or the other. He does not believe this would be healthy to complete this three months down the road.

Council Member-at-Large Austin agrees with Council Member Baskin. He does not believe this is unreasonable to move the review up to a sooner date.

Council Member Helle asked for the closed session review to be done on March 2nd.

Council Member Baskin and Council Member-at-Large Austin were in agreement.

Council Member Postma stated he doesn't understand the point of having a February 21st meeting if they are going to then move into a closed session meeting on March 2nd.

Council Member Helle asked if February 17th would work for Council and Council Member Waller and Council Member Baskin stated that would not work for them.

Council Member Helle stated they could postpone the joint meeting until after March 2nd.

Council Member Oballa stated if February 17th does not work, he would ok with pushing it out but would not like to push it too far away.

Council Member Baskin asked if a different date would work. He can be flexible; he just has some dates he is traveling for work.

Mayor King stated this all feels rushed and he would prefer to keep the schedule as is.

Council Member-at-Large Austin questioned if they can still have the February 21st meeting as this is more about Council working with department heads and have the evaluation on March 2nd.

Council Member Helle is in support of this.

Council Member-at-Large Austin stated they are committed to this engagement and committed to getting these items done as they talked about this with Mr. Unmacht.

Council Member Baskin is in support of this.

Moved by Council Member Helle seconded by Council Member Baskin to move forward with the February 21st Council and Department Head meeting and to hold a closed session meeting on March 2nd for the evaluation of the City Administrator Craig Clark. Carried. 5-1. (Council Member Postma Nay)

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Oballa, to adjourn the meeting at 7:03 PM. Carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Brianne D. Wolf, City Clerk