

M I N U T E S
CITY COUNCIL MEETING
February 17, 2026
5:30 PM
Council Chambers

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor King, Council Members Michael Postma, Oballa Oballa (5:38 p.m.), Laura Helle and Council Member-at-Large Jeff Austin

MEMBERS ABSENT: Council Member Jason Baskin and Council Member Rebecca Waller

STAFF PRESENT: City Administrator Craig Clark, Police Chief David McKichan, Human Resources Director Tricia Wiechmann, Fire Chief Jim McCoy, City Attorney Craig Byram, Public Works Director Steven Lang, Planning and Zoning Director Holly Wallace, Park, Recreation and Forestry Director Jason Sehon, Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson, Finance Director Emily Burns and City Clerk Brianne Wolf

APPEARING IN PERSON: Honorary Council Member Lindsey Compton, Austin Daily Herald

Mayor King called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Postma, approving the agenda as amended. Carried.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Fischer, approving Council minutes from February 2, 2026. Carried.

CONSENT AGENDA

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Helle, approving the consent agenda.

Licenses:

Temporary Liquor: LIFE Mower County on May 2, 2026
Exempt Gambling (raffle): Austin Junior All Star Baseball Inc. on June 14, 2026
Tobacco License (transfer): Jolly LLC, dba Cheers Liquor, Austin, MN
Tree Service: Ted Janning Tree Service, Blooming Prairie, MN
Tree Service: Carstens Properties Tree Service, LLC, Austin, MN
Massage Therapist: Melissa Offner Mandler, Austin, MN
Right of Way: S&S Contractor's LLC, Good Thunder, MN
Right of Way: Jordan Drilling Solutions, LLC, Inver Grove Heights, MN

Claims:

- a. Pre-list of Bills
- b. Credit Card Reports

Carried.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson spoke about the 8th Street SE project. He stated this project would be a full reconstruction of the street, sidewalk, curb and storm and sanitary sewer. The cost of this project is estimated at \$1,275,000.

No comments from the public.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Helle, adopting a resolution ordering improvement, approving plans and specifications, and ordering advertisement for bids on Project 25104. Carried 4-0.

Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson spoke about the 7th Avenue SW, 8th Avenue SW, and 26th Street SW project. He stated this project would be a mill and overlay. There will be some sanitary sewer repairs with this project as well. The cost of this project is estimated at \$130,000.

No comments from the public.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution ordering improvement, approving plans and specifications, and ordering advertisement for bids on Project 26101. Carried 4-0.

Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson spoke about the 9th Avenue NW project. He stated this project would be a full reconstruction of the street, and storm and sanitary sewer. There would also be a complete sidewalk replacement for this project. The cost of this project is estimated at \$825,000.

No comments from the public.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution ordering improvement, approving plans and specifications, and ordering advertisement for bids on Project 26102. Carried 4-0.

Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson spoke about the 5th Street NW and 7th Street NW project. He stated this project would be a full reconstruction of the street, and storm and sanitary sewer. There would also be sidewalk and curb replacements. The cost of this project is estimated at \$1,100,000.

No comments from the public.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Fischer, adopting a resolution ordering improvement, approving plans and specifications, and ordering advertisement for bids on Project 26103. Carried 5-0.

Assistant City Engineer Andrew Sorenson spoke about the 14th Street NW project. He stated this project would be a mill and overlay. They are currently evaluating the need for sidewalks at this time and may need to assess costs for these at the final hearing. The cost of this project is estimated at \$300,000.

No comments from the public.

Moved by Council Member-at-Large-Austin, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution ordering improvement, approving plans and specifications, and ordering advertisement for bids on Project 26104. Carried 5-0.

PETITIONS AND REQUESTS

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution setting the public hearings for the street improvement project assessments to March 16, 2026. Carried 5-0.

Police Chief McKichan stated Mower County created a hazard mitigation plan to address the potential for disasters. The County engaged with cities and townships throughout Mower County to create this. Mower County has asked us to pass this resolution, which will make us one of the participating jurisdictions eligible to apply for FEMA hazard mitigation assistance grants if we were to need them.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution approving the 2025 Mower County Hazard Mitigation Plan. Carried 5-0.

Public Works Director Steven Lang stated the City of Austin has been working with SEH for the engineering, planning and design related to the WWTP levee project since 2020. The project has now moved into the construction phases of work planned for 2025-2026. Recently there was a request to SEH to review the possibility of upsizing the industrial force main from 20-inch to 24-inch. Ultimately the upsizing was not approved, but SEH incurred extra design costs to evaluate and incorporate the design changes.

Mr. Lang stated the amount of the design costs was \$19,000. The costs for this work will be covered 100% through the Industrial Budget. These costs have been reviewed by Hormel Foods and are included in the overall budget for Engineering Services reimbursements. They would recommend Council approval of amendment No. 5.

Moved by Council Member Oballa, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution approving amendment No. 5 for engineering services with SEH. Carried 5-0.

Public Works Director Steven Lang stated the Cook Farm lift station pumps wastewater south along Hwy 218, where it discharges just north of the Oak Park lift station. Every time the Cook Farm lift station pumps, it then forces the Oak Park lift station to pump. This is inefficient and shortens the service life of the Oak Park lift station. They have received a proposal from WHKS for \$10,900 to complete engineering design services for this project. They will conduct a study in this area to determine their options. This project is also identified in the Capital Improvement Program and is proposed to be funded through the Domestic Fund Budget. They would recommend approval to extend the contract with WHKS to complete the sanitary sewer analysis.

Moved by Council Member Oballa, seconded by Council Member Postma, adopting a resolution approving a contract with WHKS for sanitary sewer analysis. Carried 5-0.

Finance Director Emily Burns requested Council approve an audit engagement letter with CliftonLarsonAllen LLP in the amount of \$67,670.00. This would include an audit of financial statements, federal, single audit fee per program, Minnesota Legal Compliance, assistance implementing new accounting standards, and an option for CLA to prepare financial statements.

Council Member Postma would like the Finance Director to look at other firms for quotes for the audit for the next year as costs are increasing and he would like to see what others are charging.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Oballa, approving a contract with CliftonLarsonAllen LLP for the 2025 financial audit. Carried.

Fire Chief Jim McCoy stated in the 2026 budget, Council approved an increase of \$250 for each part-time firefighter's yearly pension. This money is paid to the City as part of the State Fire Aid program and distributed to the relief association members. State statute requires the City of Austin to have in place an Aid Allocation Agreement with the Part-time Firefighter Relief Association which allows the City of Austin to use fire aid dollars to offset the full-time pension. He is requesting Council approval of the agreement.

Moved by Council Member Oballa, seconded by Council Member Postma, approving a resolution for an aid allocation agreement to increase the pension contribution for the part-time firefighters. Carried. 5-0.

Fire Chief Jim McCoy requested Council approval for two new fees. The first would be to invoice property owners for structure fires, which would include businesses, residential homes and garages. The fee would be \$500 per occurrence. The second fee would be for fire extinguisher training. This would come at a cost of \$150.00 per hour and would be applicable to businesses within the community.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Fischer, approving a resolution for two new fire department fees. Carried. 5-0.

Fire Chief Jim McCoy requested Council approval of a \$5,000 donation awarded to the Fire Department from International Paper. The grant will be used to purchase firefighting equipment.

Moved by Council Member-at-Large Austin, seconded by Council Member Postma, approving a resolution accepting a donation to the Fire Department in the amount of \$5,000. Carried. 5-0.

Moved by Council Member Fischer, seconded by Council Member Helle, approving a resolution accepting donations to the City of Austin. Carried. 5-0.

CITIZENS ADDRESSING THE COUNCIL

Brittany Deyo, 118 Clinton St, Mapleview, MN expressed her feelings on the recent ICE activity in the community. She relayed families still feel uncertain about their safety, particularly after incidents involving individuals being followed into public service buildings. These situations raise concerns about safety in government spaces and the policies in place to protect residents.

Ms. Deyo requested clarification on several issues: how individuals, including federal agents, are required to identify themselves; what safety protocols exist in and around public service buildings; and what protections are in place to prevent racial profiling. She also ask how the City plans to rebuild trust so residents feel safe seeking help from local law enforcement and accessing public services.

Additionally, Ms. Deyo emphasized the importance of maintaining Austin's welcoming and diverse environment, noting the City's international presence and multicultural community. She acknowledged that many concerns involve multiple levels of government and may not have immediate local solutions. She stressed the need for continued transparency, communication, and leadership. She encouraged the City Council to review these concerns and consider future public discussions or policy evaluations. She thanked all for allowing her to speak and for their time.

DJ Ryther, Austin, MN, criticized a recent student walkout protesting ICE, arguing it was politically motivated and manipulated at the expense of children, public safety, and law enforcement. She expressed concern that students left school unsupervised for an extended period, engaged in unsafe behavior, used inappropriate language, displayed lewd signs, and allegedly caused property damage. Mrs. Ryther believes staff may have been involved and argued that such protests mock law enforcement and should not be permitted during school hours.

Ms. Ryther affirmed pride in Austin's cultural diversity and welcoming identity, she rejected accusations of racism and describes personal and professional relationships within the community's diverse populations. She called for greater parental awareness, changes in educational practices, and restoring moral and religious values. Ultimately, she urged leaders to address what they see as political agendas influencing youth, defend law enforcement, and prevent further incidents she believes harm the City's reputation and community fabric.

HONORARY COUNCIL MEMBER COMMENTS

Honorary Council Member Lindsey Compton thanked Council for the experience. She has lived in Austin her entire life and is an active community member and being able to learn more about local government will enable her to better serve the community.

REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public Works Director Steven Lang announced the Public Works department will collaborate with local plumbers to educate them about the upcoming point-of-sale ordinance. A meeting will be held on Thursday, February 19th, at the Austin Public Library for plumbers and real estate agents. This meeting aims to provide better information about the ordinance. The public is also invited to attend.

Council Member Postma expresses difficulty finding the right words amid ongoing challenges facing the community, state, and country. He appreciates those working to support residents, both publicly and behind the scenes and encourages continued efforts to help the community. He cautioned against growing division, noting that differing political opinions are valid but emphasizing the importance of discussing issues in the appropriate forums. He urge community members to keep asking questions while focusing on supporting one another and working together.

Council Member Helle stated the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry department is currently hiring for their seasonal positions. She stated the Nature Center has many great events coming up and encouraged all to visit their website to check out their offerings. She let the community know the P&R department will be planting over 125 boulevard trees this summer and is working as hard as they can to replace as many trees as possible. Council Member Helle also reflected on the broader challenges facing the community due to federal decisions that affect many aspects of daily life. She echoed Council Member Postma's appreciation for community members' support for one another and encouraged continued compassion. She urges residents to set aside partisanship and focus on common ground, treating each other with respect and recognizing shared values.

Council Member Oballa thanked those who shared their thoughts and acknowledged that recent events have been difficult for both the city and the state. Setting politics aside, he urges the community to focus on supporting one another and looking out for neighbors, which is what makes Austin special. He expressed concern and fear about what is happening, including personal worries about being pulled over and seeing families affected in ways that may not make the news. He encourages continued community involvement, mutual support, and vigilance to keep everyone safe during these uncertain times.

Mayor King recognized the new officer, J.J. Mueller, who was sworn in this morning. Mayor King stated Officer Mueller was previously with the Austin Police Department, had left, and is now returning. Mayor King is happy to have him back and is happy to see the police force coming up to full strength.

Moved by Council Member Postma, seconded by Council Member Oballa, adjourning the meeting to March 2, 2026. Carried.

Adjourned: 6:23 p.m.

Approved: March 2, 2026

Mayor: _____

City Clerk: _____