

Official minutes
Environment & sustainability commission

Members present: Chair Jessie Hendrix, Vice Chair Bennett Myhran, Marisa Bayer, Ryan Griffin, Tatiana Giraldo, Kati Helseth, Ethan Kehrberg, Avery Kuehl, Avital Krebs, Adam Oien, Sasha Shahidi, Natalie Wagner

Members absent: Shaina Ashare

Staff present: Emily Ziring, sustainability manager; Deb Heiser, engineering director; Jack Sullivan, deputy engineering director; Mark Elgaard, engineering project manager

Guests: Jason Staebell, Hennepin County principal project engineer

1. Call to order
 - A. Roll call
 - B. Introduction of guests

2. Approval of minutes

Moved by Commissioner Bayer, seconded by Commissioner Griffin, to approve the February minutes. The motion passed with Commissioner Wagner and Commissioner Shahidi abstaining.

3. Business
 - A. Presentations

Hennepin County staff presentation on Minnetonka Blvd. West project

Deputy engineering director Jack Sullivan introduced the presentation team including Jason Staebell from Hennepin County, engineering director Deb Heiser, and project manager Mark Elgaard. Mr. Sullivan explained that the commission was asked to provide feedback on the county-led Minnetonka Boulevard Phase 2 project as an additional check-in point to check for alignment with city goals.

Jason Staebell presented an overview of the project, explaining that the corridor is beyond its useful life and requires a complete rebuild rather than mill and overlay. The project extends from Highway 100 west to Aquila Avenue, with anticipated construction starting in 2027 for utility work and main construction in 2028-2029. The project will likely require closing through traffic during construction while maintaining local access via gravel roads.

Mr. Staebell outlined the project goals including improved comfort for all roadway users, connecting regional multimodal networks, slowing traffic speeds, complementing local businesses, improving transit access, and maintaining a greener streetscape with better drainage through more pervious surfaces.

The county conducted extensive public engagement in two phases. Phase 1 gathered information about problems and experiences on the corridor. Phase 2 presented three design concepts and collected feedback from over 400 online responses, 100 people at an in-person event, focus groups, and pop-up events.

Mark Elgaard presented the three design concepts that emerged from the engagement process: Concept A features one-way bike facilities on each side, similar to Cedar Lake Road, with sidewalks running adjacent or split around trees. This option has the fewest tree impacts but creates operational challenges including snow removal difficulties, garbage collection issues, and the potential for vehicles to use bike facilities for parking or deliveries. The back-of-curb design can create a wider feeling road that may encourage faster speeds.

Concept B includes two shared-use paths, one on each side of the street. This provides the best all-ages accessibility without requiring users to cross the road, offers the largest separation from vehicle traffic, and avoids back-of-curb facility issues. While it has the most tree removals, these are primarily smaller 2-3 inch plantings rather than mature trees. The design allows for efficient snow removal with existing staff and equipment.

Concept C features one shared-use path on one side and one sidewalk on the other. This has similar tree impacts to Concept A and manageable snow maintenance, but forces cyclists to cross the road to access the two-way facility and may result in unintended bicycle use of the six-foot sidewalk.

The city and county are recommending Concept B based on all-ages accessibility, separation from traffic, operational efficiency, and the ability to create larger boulevards for healthier tree growth. Natural Resources manager Michael Bahe supports this recommendation, noting that the larger boulevard spaces would provide room for trees to grow more quickly despite some initial removals.

Commissioners asked detailed questions about intersection safety, roundabout considerations, traffic calming measures, and comparisons between the concepts. Mr. Staebell explained that roundabouts were initially considered at several locations but eliminated due to space constraints and truck traffic needs. The project will include medians with rectangular rapid flashing beacons at strategic crossing locations, and the design team will explore the installation of continuous (raised) sidewalks across side streets.

Commissioner Giraldo emphasized the critical importance of making the Highway 100 intersection safer for pedestrians and cyclists, describing it as the scariest intersection that prevents east-west connectivity for non-motorists. She noted significant improvements already seen on the completed Phase 1 section, including more children biking to school and families using e-bikes.

Commissioner Griffin stressed that traffic calming should be the top priority, allowing e-bikes to safely operate in traffic rather than on shared trails. He also emphasized intersection safety as the most critical concern for preventing fatalities.

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Commissioner Shahidi asked about shade considerations and the feasibility of potentially striping shared-use paths in the future if usage increases significantly.

The county's next public engagement event is scheduled for mid-April. There will be a city council discussion about the project on March 23 and a public hearing and approval process will be held in early to mid-May.

B. New business

Discuss canceling April monthly meeting or rescheduling to April 7

Chair Hendrix noted that the April meeting is currently scheduled for a holiday and asked whether to cancel or reschedule. Ms. Ziring explained that there are no required agenda items for April since the commission is awaiting council approval of the work plan before beginning new initiatives.

Commissioners voted on the options. Five commissioners voted to cancel the April meeting, while eight voted to reschedule. Of those favoring rescheduling, seven preferred April 8 over April 7. Ms. Ziring agreed to check room availability and confirm the rescheduled date.

C. Unfinished business

Commenting on draft amendments to parking regulations

Commissioner Bayer presented the draft comments to the Planning Commission regarding the proposed parking regulation amendments. The memo supports the overall reductions in minimum parking requirements across zoning districts and elimination of requirements in the Walker Lake historical district.

Commissioner Shahidi suggested adding language emphasizing that the long-term goal of parking reductions should remain to increase multimodal transportation options including transit, biking, and walking consistent with the city's Climate Action Plan and comprehensive plan goals. She recommended this be added as a separate paragraph after the bold recommendation section.

Commissioners also discussed breaking up the longer paragraph for better readability and ensuring the language clearly connects to established city goals and policies.

It was moved by Commissioner Wagner, seconded by Commissioner Kehrberg, to approve the memo and send it to the Planning Commission. The motion passed unanimously.

2026 ESC workplan adoption

Ms. Ziring presented the draft work plan incorporating ideas from previous commission discussions. The plan includes four main initiatives:

- Prepare for climate action plan update - continuation from 2025 work
- Policy/project feedback - a placeholder for council to assign the commission feedback tasks on transportation, mobility, buildings, or energy topics

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- Research project - another council-directed placeholder for independent research on similar topics
- Walk the Park event - scheduled for July 11 at Louisiana Oaks and Oak Hill parks, focusing on pollinator habitat and potentially litter cleanup

A fifth item involves creating a database of sustainability-related volunteer opportunities for youth, particularly high school students facing new community service requirements. Youth Commissioners Krebs and Kuehl will lead this effort, noting that St. Louis Park High School is adding 15 hours of required community service for incoming freshmen.

A sixth item focuses on establishing and maintaining the food forest at Ainsworth Park through multiple volunteer events including buckthorn removal, path laying, tree planting, mulching, and ongoing maintenance. Commissioner Griffin volunteered to lead this initiative along with Commissioner Wagner and others.

Commissioners discussed the format and emphasized making the TBD items clear for council consideration. The work plan provides flexibility for council to direct commission efforts while maintaining ongoing Climate Action Plan work and community engagement activities.

It was moved by Commissioner Wagner, seconded by Commissioner Griffin, to send the work plan to council. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Staff reports

Ms. Ziring reported on several ongoing initiatives including the demolition waste reduction work group, input on Xcel Energy and CenterPoint triennial plans for energy efficiency programs, and planning for the environmental stewardship strategic priority council study sessions scheduled for May 11 and June 8. The commission will likely present their work plan to council on May 11.

The annual contractor breakfast was held on March 2 with over 60 contractors attending to learn about city cost-share programs. Panel upgrades were a frequently discussed topic with limited current rebate availability but future state rebates anticipated.

Staff are completing annual GreenStep Cities reporting and participating in the expanded pod program for inter-city collaboration.

Ms. Ziring encouraged commissioners to review and comment on the Safe Streets Action Plan going to council soon.

5. Work plan update

No updates were provided as the 2026 workplan was just adopted.

6. Sustainability issues

Ms. Ziring announced that Commissioners Bayer and Kehrberg will be stepping down at the end of their terms in May after six years and two years of service respectively. The city will be accepting applications for new commissioners to join beginning in June.

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Commissioners expressed appreciation for their colleagues' service and discussed planning a sendoff celebration at the May meeting.

7. Items to discuss at a future meeting

No items were identified for future discussion.

8. Upcoming/proposed events

Ms. Ziring announced several upcoming events:

- Minnehaha Creek Cleanup - April 25 from 9 a.m. to noon at Municipal Service Center and Knollwood locations, hosted by the Park and Recreation Advisory Commission
- Arbor Day celebration - Thursday evening May 14 from 5-8 p.m. at Carpenter Park featuring Tree Trust, food trucks, entertainment by the Arborators band, and tree planting activities
- Walk the Park with ESC - July 11 from 9:30-10:30 a.m. at Louisiana Oaks and Oak Hill parks
- Earth Day tabling - April 22 at the library

Commissioner Oien announced a community-led Earth Day event on April 26 from 1-4 p.m. at Weber Park, expecting 500 attendees with opportunities for commission involvement.

Commissioner Shahidi emphasized that early spring is the most critical time for volunteer litter pickup as winter accumulation creates the worst conditions in parks.

9. Adjournment

Chair Hendrix adjourned the meeting.

These minutes were created with the assistance of a generative AI transcript service, then edited and finalized by a staff person.

Emily Ziring, liaison

Jessie Hendrix, chair member