

Official minutes
Environment & sustainability commission

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

Members absent: Shaina Ashare, Ryan Griffin

Staff present: Emily Ziring, sustainability manager

Guests: David Yakes, Chair, Parks & Recreation Advisory Commission

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

David Yakes, Chair of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission (PRAC), introduced himself. He noted he has been a resident of St. Louis Park for over 20 years and has served on city commission work for several years. He also serves as the District D representative on the Metropolitan Council's Parks and Open Space Commission, which includes St. Louis Park and surrounding areas.

2. Approval of minutes

Ms. Ziring noted no edits had been received prior to the meeting. The April minutes were brief due to the nature of that meeting, which involved a tree pruning activity.

It was moved by Commissioner Kehrberg, seconded by Commissioner Helseth, to approve the April 8, 2026 meeting minutes. Four commissioners abstained. The motion passed.

3. Business
 - A. Presentations
Presentation on Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission activities from David Yakes, PRAC Chair

David Yakes, Chair of the PRAC, presented the commission's 2025 work plan. Staff prepared the slides on his behalf. He highlighted nine work plan items.

Information sharing between commissions: Yakes noted the joint ESC-PRAC meeting held in April 2025 as a positive step toward inter-commission collaboration, observing significant overlap between parks, recreation and environmental work.

Youth Association Presidents' Roundtables: Rather than individual association president presentations, the PRAC now hosts joint sessions twice annually focused on inclusion, accessibility and outreach to non-English-speaking families. The next session will feature a mental health professional to help association presidents and coaches identify warning signs of mental health challenges in youth athletes, a topic raised by the PRAC's youth member.

Environment & sustainability commission meeting
April 8, 2026

Commissioner Shahidi asked how these sessions are publicized and whether they are open to the public. Yakes indicated he would follow up on that. Shahidi also asked whether club and private school sports are included, and Yakes confirmed the sessions are limited to public school sports. Shahidi suggested the commission's youth members could help spread the word about these sessions.

Vision 4.0 support: The PRAC participated in the citywide visioning process by attending sessions on a rotating basis.

Minnehaha Creek cleanup events: The PRAC co-hosted a cleanup event at two locations this year, at the MSC and near Target along the creek. Several ESC members participated.

Naming policy: The PRAC developed guidance for how community members can request recognition in park spaces, including how long plaques should stay in place and a review process to avoid community controversy. This work was informed in part by discussions at the Metropolitan Council's Parks and Open Space Commission regarding Native American recognition. Yakes indicated the policy went to city council for adoption. Ms. Ziring asked whether council had formally adopted it, and Yakes said he would confirm.

Webster Park master plan: A triangular parcel along Highway 100 near Highway 7 currently owned by the Minnesota Department of Transportation is expected to be transferred to the City of St. Louis Park. The PRAC has been considering potential amenities for the space. Commissioner Bayer noted that state-owned land is typically offered to government entities before being offered for sale. Yakes confirmed that is his understanding.

Park staff appreciation breakfast: The PRAC hosts an annual drive-through breakfast for park maintenance staff, which Yakes described as well-received and a tradition the crew looks forward to each year.

Community group presentations: The PRAC regularly hears from internal and external organizations including recreation coordinators, aquatics staff and Westopolis, a St. Louis Park and Golden Valley organization promoting the area for conferences and events.

Support for city-organized events: The PRAC volunteers at city events such as roller skating, disco ice skating, ROctoBERfest and the Halloween event at the nature center.

Commissioner Shahidi raised the topic of wild or unmanicured park spaces as distinct from traditional maintained parkland, referencing the loss of the Minikahda Vista woods area. She suggested that future green space acquisitions, such as the Webster Park parcel, could be oriented toward wilder habitats rather than manicured turf. Yakes acknowledged this was a valuable point and that both commissions have discussed the topic in the past. He added that because the parks are in defined areas, it is challenging to add more wild space. He noted some awareness around the wooded area near Park Spanish Immersion on Cedar Lake Road currently undergoing invasive species removal.

Commissioner Shahidi described a grassroots effort in her community where residents gather regularly to pick up trash at Wolfe Park. She suggested the city could encourage similar neighbor-led programs rather than relying solely on city staff. Yakes expressed support for a low-level campaign encouraging residents to take personal ownership of park cleanliness. Commissioner Wagner noted that the city does have an Adopt-a-Park program administered by Parks Superintendent Larry Umphrey.

Commissioner Bayer noted that the ESC has expressed frustration about the lack of direction from city council and has placed two items on their work plan items seeking clearer direction from council on what they want the commission to advise on. Commissioner Bayer asked whether the PRAC has experienced similar frustration. Yakes confirmed that this is a shared frustration and has been a topic of discussion at the PRAC as well. He pointed to the new check-in meetings with council that began last June as a positive first step. Both commissions expressed a shared sense that the council engagement process is improving but remains an area of ongoing need.

B. New business

a. Review and Approve ESC purpose statement

Ms. Ziring provided background on the purpose statement. Community engagement specialist Pat Coleman led an effort to standardize official language for all city boards and commissions, prompted by a council discussion about reducing inconsistencies. As part of that effort, Coleman drafted purpose statements for all commissions. Ms. Ziring revised the ESC's draft and brought it forward for commission review and approval.

The proposed statement read: "The Environment and Sustainability Commission advises the city council on policies and programs designed to reach the goals of the climate action plan with a primary focus on building emissions, renewable energy and low carbon transportation. It collaborates with staff and council, engages residents and businesses and builds partnerships to strengthen education and increase participation in climate action. Through outreach, community input and work groups, the commission promotes a more sustainable and resilient community."

Commissioner Shahidi raised a concern that the phrase "building emissions" could be misread as constructing emissions rather than emissions from buildings and suggested "greenhouse gas emission reduction" as clearer language.

Commissioner Myhran raised a broader concern that the statement emphasized sustainability heavily but lacked language reflecting the commission's environmental mission. He noted that the PRAC's work plan did not include any natural resources or ecological items, creating a gap in coverage that the ESC has informally filled. He asked whether the purpose statement could reflect that environmental protection role more explicitly.

Commissioner Shahidi proposed adding "natural systems" as an additional area of focus alongside the existing three areas. There was general agreement on this addition.

Commissioners discussed whether the second and third sentences should be retained or removed for conciseness. Commissioner Bayer and Commissioner Giraldo expressed support for cutting the latter two sentences and keeping only a single, clear purpose sentence. Commissioner Shahidi noted the appropriate length may depend on how the statement is ultimately used, whether in official documents or promotional materials.

A concern was raised that stating the commission "advises the city council" alone understates its actual role. The commission agreed to add "and supports city staff" to that phrase to more accurately reflect how the commission has been used.

The final approved statement reads: "The Environment and Sustainability Commission advises the city council and supports city staff on policies and programs designed to reach the goals of

the climate action plan with a primary focus on greenhouse gas emissions reduction, renewable energy, low carbon transportation and natural systems.”

It was moved by Commissioner Bayer, seconded by Commissioner Kehrberg, to approve the revised ESC purpose statement as amended. The motion passed.

b. Discuss Advanced Strategies Section of Climate Action Plan

Ms. Ziring presented an overview of the Advanced Strategies section of the Climate Action Plan. These strategies address the period from 2030 to 2040 and represent approximately 62 percent of the emissions reductions still needed after the midterm 2030 goals are met. Ms. Ziring noted this range of work creates significant challenges and sought commission guidance on her recommended revisions.

Strategy A – Thermal Energy Grids: The original strategy calls for identifying locations to pair waste heat with large thermal loads. Ms. Ziring noted uncertainty around implementation and indicated the city was not selected for a CenterPoint thermal energy network pilot. She recommended shifting focus toward geothermal networks in future redevelopment areas and exploring incentive structures such as TIF district conditions. Commissioner Bayer asked whether any active TIF districts still have development sites available, suggesting the West End as a possibility. Commissioner Giraldo raised that the high school and middle school are planning to replace 70-year-old gas furnaces with new gas equipment, presenting a potential opportunity to advocate for geothermal instead. The commission noted this would require long-range planning and a longer timeline than current replacement schedules may allow, though it could be addressed through the school district's upcoming \$50 million levy request. The commission agreed to reframe this strategy around geothermal rather than industrial waste heat transfer, and to classify it as an “influence” role for the city.

Strategy B – Combined Heat and Power (CHP): Ms. Ziring noted CHP systems are technically complex and typically require very large energy loads such as a major university or heavy manufacturing facility. The most relevant local candidate might be Methodist Hospital. The commission agreed to classify this as an influence role, meaning the city would encourage rather than lead CHP adoption.

Strategy C – Anaerobic Digesters: The strategy calls for coordinating with regional partners on organics collection and exploring purchase of compressed natural gas from methane capture at closed landfills. Ms. Ziring noted that Hennepin County shelved a planned anaerobic digester project and that renewable natural gas is not yet widely available for purchase. The commission discussed reframing this strategy around ongoing advocacy for methane capture and participation in CenterPoint renewable natural gas pilots when available.

Strategy D – Fuel Switching / Heat Pumps: Ms. Ziring recommended retaining this strategy and establishing specific target goals for heat pump installations. Commissioner Shahidi asked that the strategy also address barriers to heat pump adoption, including inconsistent information among inspectors and installers in St. Louis Park about backup heating requirements. Ms. Ziring agreed this was important to include.

Strategy E – Carbon Offsets: The original strategy proposed purchasing renewable energy certificates. Ms. Ziring noted the city attorney has advised against using taxpayer funds for this purpose and that building local renewable capacity is a more effective approach. The commission agreed to remove this strategy.

Strategy F – Emerging Technologies: The commission discussed how to make this strategy more measurable. Commissioner Shahidi suggested an annual review of emerging technologies to assess fit for city pilots. Ms. Ziring noted the city’s existing involvement with Grid Catalyst as a relevant example of this work.

Strategy G – Scope 3 Emissions: The strategy proposes studying the city’s impact on scope 3 emissions, which include travel outside city boundaries and goods brought into the community. Commissioner Shahidi noted that it's not easy to calculate scope 3 emissions for a city as small as St. Louis Park because the available data is not yet that granular. Also, it's challenging to determine solutions for scope 3 emissions within a city boundary because, by definition, scope 3 includes emissions outside city boundaries (value-chain emissions). One way SLP could address scope 3 is by choosing to purchase goods and services from entities that prioritize decreasing emissions and sustainability. Commissioner Bayer added that scope 3 is not included in the city’s baseline emissions inventory, making it inconsistent to include a reduction strategy tied to it. The commission agreed to remove or significantly revise this strategy.

New Ideas: Ms. Ziring introduced two additional concepts for consideration. First, a superblock pilot modeled on Barcelona’s approach, where internal streets within a defined area are closed to car traffic while pedestrian and bicycle circulation continues, reducing vehicle miles traveled and improving walkability. The West End was noted as a potentially suitable location given its district parking and commercial character. Second, the commission discussed incentivizing transit use, noting the upcoming light rail opening as an opportunity to build new ridership habits. Discussion touched on the importance of youth transit education, the perception of transit safety among parents and the potential for a local circulator service connecting neighborhoods to transit stations. The Clover Ride circulator in Edina was cited as a comparable model. Commissioner Giraldo noted the difficulty of getting around St. Louis Park without a car based on personal experience and described a neighborhood circulator as a potential solution for car-independent mobility. Commissioner Kehrberg suggested school busing reductions as a related issue, noting the connection between reduced busing and increased car trips to schools and the corresponding importance of biking and walking infrastructure.

C. Unfinished business
None.

4. Staff updates

Ms. Ziring provided the following updates.

A demolition waste reduction working group of internal city staff has been meeting to develop policies and programs aimed at reducing construction and demolition waste sent to landfill. Ms. Ziring and several commission members have been attending Xcel Energy and CenterPoint Energy triennial rate case meetings. Cities have been coordinating comments to the Public Utilities Commission ahead of a comment period opening June 1.

The environmental stewardship strategic priority has continued under the new strategic priorities as Climate Leadership and Natural Spaces. Related council reports from Ms. Ziring, Michael Bahe, Kala Fisher and water resources manager Erick Francis are scheduled for May 18 and June 8, 2026.

Environment & sustainability commission meeting
April 8, 2026

Work on an EPA-funded climate survey focused on the Aquila and Texa-Tonka neighborhoods is underway. Approximately 50 responses have been received against a goal of 500. Commission members were encouraged to share the survey with contacts in those neighborhoods. Outreach has included tabling events and engagement with Aquila Elementary families. A \$40,000 grant from the MPCA was awarded for the Climate Action Plan amendment, requiring a 50 percent match. Ms. Ziring indicated she will request the \$20,000 match during the budget cycle.

The Climate Champions for Homes program receives two to three new participants per week. Increased multifamily outreach is planned for summer including mailers and phone outreach given difficulty accessing buildings without common entry areas.

Shade structures funded by last year's climate resilience grant have been installed at Aquila Park (bleacher shades) and Ainsworth Park (playground shades).

A first draft of an electric vehicle road map has been completed, providing a five-year internal plan for EV charger placement and fee structures.

A new economic development business specialist has been partnering with sustainability staff on business outreach for the Climate Champions program, resulting in a noticeable increase in assessments and leads.

5. Work plan update

Youth commissioners reported completing a spreadsheet of volunteer opportunities and distributing it to organizations including the National Honor Society at their school, which agreed to post it. Flyers with QR codes linking to the Google Sheet are planned for distribution. The commission noted the approaching end of the school year as a timely moment to promote service hour opportunities to students.

Chair Hendrix noted that a Walk the Park planning meeting is scheduled for the end of May. Ms. Ziring noted the food forest project has received approval from Parks and Recreation Director Jason West to move forward, pending council approval. Volunteer events for summer and fall are being organized.

6. Sustainability issues
A. Group share-out

Commissioner Bayer described an article reporting that a data center being constructed in Utah will consume twice the energy of the entire state of Utah once operational. She noted concerns about the strain this places on regional power grids particularly in the context of drought in the Southwest. Chair Hendrix added that a Midwest Reliability Organization presenter had recently noted that EV charger energy demand is projected to eclipse data center demand and that grid reliability across the Midwest is a growing concern.

Discussion touched on the anticipated El Niño weather pattern expected to bring a milder winter to Minnesota but more extreme weather around the globe. Commissioner Giraldo

connected this to the importance of resilience planning including cooling centers and emergency preparedness.

B. Kudos

Commissioner Shahidi acknowledged outgoing commissioners Marisa Bayer and Ethan Kehrberg for their service to the commission. The commission watched a short video clip featuring Commissioner Kehrberg participating in a seed ball-making activity, which generated enthusiastic response from the group.

7. Items to Discuss at a Future Meeting

Commissioner Bayer suggested the commission begin discussing involvement in the city's comprehensive plan update process. She noted the plan must be adopted by 2028 and that climate-related requirements will be part of the next plan. The commission agreed this should be placed on a future agenda.

8. Upcoming/Proposed Events

Ms. Ziring noted the following upcoming events.

Arbor Day is scheduled for May 14, 2026. Commission members were reminded to sign up on Sign Up Genius for tabling slots.

The next ESC meeting is scheduled for June 3, 2026.

The commission's meeting with city council is scheduled for the June 8, 2026 study session. As it is a study session, the council will not be able to take a formal vote at that meeting and will vote on the work plan at a subsequent meeting. All commissioners were encouraged to attend.

Ms. Ziring announced that Ecotacular has been sunsetted due to high cost, weather challenges and inconsistent engagement. City staff from various departments will still be represented at Parktacular, but there will no longer be a standalone Ecotacular booth or event.

9. Adjournment and Optional Meet-Up at Steel Toe Brewing, 4848 W. 35th St.

Chair Hendrix adjourned the meeting. Commissioners were invited to continue informally at Steel Toe Brewing, 4848 W. 35th Street, in honor of the departing commissioners.

Emily Ziring, liaison

Jessie Hendrix, chair member