

CITY OF MENDOTA HEIGHTS, DAKOTA COUNTY, MINNESOTA

**PARKS AND RECREATION MEETING MINUTES**

MAY 13, 2025

The May meeting of the Mendota Heights Parks and Recreation Commission was held on Tuesday, May 13, 2025, at Mendota Heights City Hall, 1101 Victoria Curve.

**1. Call to Order** – Chair Jaffrey Blanks called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

**2. Roll Call** – The following Commissioners were present: Chair Jaffrey Blanks, Commissioners: Jennifer Weichert, Jo Schifsky, Michelle Muller (arrived at 6:31 p.m.), Daniel Van Lith, and Michael Toth; absent: Commissioner Dan Sherer and Student Representative Evangeline Fuentes. Staff present: Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence, Recreation Program Coordinator Willow Eisfeldt, Recreation Facilities Coordinator Trey Carlson, and Public Works Director Ryan Ruzek.

**3. Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**4. Approval of Agenda**

*Motion Schifsky/second Weichert, to approve the agenda.*

AYES 5: NAYS 0

Commissioner Muller arrived.

**5.a Approval of Minutes from March 11, 2025, Regular Meeting**

*Motion Weichert/second Muller, to approve the minutes of the March 11, 2025, Parks and Recreation Commission Regular Meeting.*

AYES 6: NAYS 0

**6. Citizen Comment Period (for items not on the agenda)**

None.

**7. Acknowledgement of Reports**

Chair Blanks read the titles of the three updates (Par 3, Park Improvement, Recreation, Park System Master Plan, and Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan Updates) and polled the Commissioners for questions.

**7.a Parks Improvement Project Update**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence reviewed the parks improvement projects that were approved as part of the 2025 budget and provided a status update on each project.

**7.b Recreation Update**

Recreation Program Coordinator Willow Eisfeldt provided the recreation update, highlighting recent and upcoming events and activities. She noted that the Parks Celebration event has been rebranded as Heights Fest and provided an overview of the planned activities.

Commissioner Toth asked for more information on the name change.

Ms. Eisfeldt provided additional information on the rebranding of the event to better reflect Mendota Heights.

Commissioner Weichert stated that many young families in her neighborhood enjoyed the Touch a Truck event this past weekend.

### **7.c Par 3 Update**

Recreation Facilities Coordinator Trey Carlson reviewed the Par 3 update, noting the soft opening at the end of March for a few days, which was very popular. He stated that the season officially opened on April 10 and provided statistics on the course so far this season. The implementation of the new software has been successful. He provided an update on course conditions, maintenance, summer programs, and leagues.

Commissioner Weichert asked how the rounds from March and April compare to the previous year.

Mr. Carlson replied that there was a slightly higher number of rounds in 2025.

Ms. Lawrence replied that in 2024, they were open eight more days than in 2025. She believed that the increase in rounds was due to the software, which allows customers to book a tee time online. It was estimated that about 50 percent of the tee times are being made online. She commended Mr. Carlson and his staff for making the software implementation a success, as this was a big step for the City and staff.

Commissioner Schifsky asked how the new software is being advertised to users.

Mr. Carlson commented that they made customers aware of the new software at the soft opening in March, used social media and the City website, and have brochures available at the clubhouse.

Commissioner Muller commented that the system is very user-friendly and is the same system used by another course. She was impressed by the number of schools that are golfing at the Par 3 and asked how they coordinate with the school groups.

Mr. Carlson replied that the school groups call, and he works with them to schedule times. He estimated 12 schools that use the course. He stated that they have hosted a JV exhibition tournament and have another school tournament coming up.

Commissioner Muller asked about Youth on Course and whether they would be implementing that.

Ms. Lawrence commented that the goal for this year is to get the online tee time software up and running well, and Youth on Course is a goal for next year.

Chair Blanks commented that it is great to see the continued growth of the course.

### **7.d Commission Work Plan Update**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence stated that the Commission Work Plan, approved at the March meeting, was included in the packet. She provided an update on the status of items within the plan.

Commissioner Weichert stated that she would like to work with Mr. Carlson to provide input on the desires of the senior community for programming opportunities. She asked if there has been progress on seeking grant opportunities.

Ms. Lawrence identified grants that the City routinely applies for in the parks system. She noted a new staff member has joined the city's team and can assist with grant writing. She stated that the Master Plan consultant also identified park grant opportunities that the City can pursue.

Commissioner Schifsky suggested looking at opportunities that could combine both teen and senior programming.

### **7.e Parks System Master Plan Update**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence stated that staff continues to work with the consultant to complete the Parks System Master Plan, which will be finalized, adopted, and implemented. She stated that a draft was provided to the Commission tonight to review prior to the release to the public. She noted that a presentation of the final plan will be made at the June 17 City Council meeting, and the Commission is invited to attend.

## **8. New Business**

### **8.a Ivy Hills Playground Replacement Recommendation**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence provided background information on the playground at Ivy Hills, the existing conditions, and why the playground is planned for replacement. She stated that the Commission provided consensus to staff to move forward with the RFP and provided additional comments on the changes the City Council made to the RFP in a desire to have more creativity in the proposals received. She stated that six proposals were received from five qualified vendors, which were reviewed by the subcommittee, which narrowed the proposals to four for community engagement. She presented the four proposals.

Commissioner Weichert commented that woodchips are not accessible for people in wheelchairs.

Ms. Lawrence agreed and noted that although woodchips are considered accessible, they are not easy to traverse through.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that accessibility is not just related to wheelchairs, but can also include people who have an unsteady gait, people with walkers, seniors, and parents with strollers. She agreed that it is challenging and also had input related to the merry-go-round being an accessible feature.

Ms. Lawrence reviewed the tactics for community engagement, the engagement that occurred for this project, and the input received on the different proposals. She stated that the 2025 budget for this project included \$160,000 from the general fund for the project, along with \$20,000 for the increased size of the playground from the special park fund, for a total of \$180,000. She asked that the Commission make a recommendation on this project tonight in order to move forward to the Council. She commented that because of the delays at the Council level, it would be anticipated that this project would take place in September.

Chair Blanks invited residents to provide input.

Adina Overbee, 1200 Sylvandale Rd, commented that they are frequent users of the parks with their grandchildren. She stated that the park is not just for children, but for everyone. She stated that she likes option three because of the colors, as she found that more attractive to the eye and in scale with the remainder of the park. She understood that some people like bright colors, but asked if the rubber surface could be a lesser tone, such as green. She stated that she would not put a lot of value in the online survey, as that encouraged people to vote multiple times. She stated that people voted many times, which skewed the results, and believed the survey should have restricted users to only one vote. She thanked the Commission and staff for their work and looked forward to the updated playground.

Ms. Lawrence commented that any of the proposed colors can be changed if desired, but acknowledged that people may have voted for a playground proposal because of the colors. She asked the Commission to focus on the features rather than the colors, as the colors could be changed.

Commissioner Toth stated that the Commission has been asked to recommend one of these proposals. He commented that it appears the engagement system in place has failed them. He stated that if there were residents who could consistently vote, that would seem to have been a waste of time.

Commissioner Muller commented that the residents who attended in person voted only one time.

Commissioner Toth asked how they could fix the system going forward and what the Commission should base its decision on.

Ms. Lawrence provided background information on the system used to complete previous park surveys and the negative input received from residents related to that system. She stated that for this survey, they used the same process as Valley View Heights. She stated that when she completed the survey, to get a better understanding of the user experience, she did not notice something that encouraged users to take the survey again. She commented that there may be data available that shows the IP address of the user, but she did not pull that data for tonight's meeting. She stated that she would be open to using another platform.

Commissioner Weichert suggested allowing only one vote per household.

Chair Blanks commented that many households have more than one person, and they should each be allowed to vote.

Ms. Lawrence commented that there were children from the same household who were both allowed to vote for their choice. She asked the Commission to look at the features and consider the input of the residents. She commented that these are locked in prices, and if they start over, they may not receive the same quality.

Chair Blanks commented that they are basing this conversation on assumptions and fear that people were voting multiple times. He stated that could have happened, but it is not a fact that occurred. He stated that for his household, there could have been five responses because he would have voted, and he would have allowed each of his children to vote.

Commissioner Weichert asked why children are being allowed to vote.

Chair Blanks replied that the children are the ones using the playground and, therefore, should have a voice.

Commissioner Weichert commented that the playground should be for more than just children.

Commissioner Muller commented that people on the Commission have children and grandchildren and will make a recommendation using the resources that have been provided.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that the subcommittee had strong feelings about this playground being accessible and multigenerational, with equipment that many different ages can use. She commented that language was removed from the RFP by the Council, which is frustrating. She stated that there is a high senior population in this area, and they do not want to spin around, which is the accessible feature that has been proposed.

Commissioner Muller commented that there are many options for color tones, and agreed there are more natural tones that could be chosen.

Ms. Lawrence stated that if there are specific color tones, she can work with the vendor to have new renderings made before the Council meeting. She stated that the vendors have not received any funds from the City to provide descriptions and renderings, and therefore wants to be fair in stating that any of the options could have different colors.

Commissioner Van Lith recognized that this playground is in full sun and therefore would be interested in the recommendation of the vendor on what colors will be best to not be too hot in the sun.

Ms. Lawrence stated that in the future, if they want specifics, it is best to provide that in the RFP.

Chair Blanks suggested that the discussion be narrowed to options two and three, and they received all the votes from the in-person survey and also scored highly in the online survey. He stated that personally, he likes option three as he felt that was the closest to the requirement of accessibility.

Commissioner Van Lith asked how the poured rubber holds up over time.

Ms. Lawrence replied that there is currently a dual surface of poured-in-place and woodchips at Mendakota, noting that has held up pretty well. She recognized that the extreme temperature swings of Minnesota are tough on materials. She noted that material is still in good shape 12 years after installation.

Commissioner Weichert suggested taking dollars away from a feature to provide the poured-in-place surfacing to the swings, which a senior may use.

Ms. Lawrence stated that she did ask all the vendors if it would be possible to change out the spinner with an accessible swing and reviewed the input she received from the vendors. She noted that some vendors would need to redesign their proposal because of the required fall zone, or additional cost would be added to add more poured-in-place surfacing. She noted that the swing does have a higher cost than the spinner. She explained that it is not as easy as it sounds to remove a piece and add a piece in that spot. She noted that shade was also something highly discussed, but was not required as part of the RFP. She did not believe that

any of the playgrounds provide a sufficient amount of shade, which would push them forward for that reason.

Commissioner Weichert stated that perhaps some trees could be planted.

Ms. Lawrence commented that they could plant trees, but recognized that it will take time for them to provide shade.

Commissioner Muller commented that she had heavily used the Ivy Hills Park when her kids were younger. She believed that option three is a similar design to the current playground and commented that younger children do like to spin. She stated that option two does have monkey bars/climbing feature, which is a feature that users requested. She stated that while she does not love the height of option two, that feature does seem to provide some shade within. She did not believe that the survey results should be disregarded, as she only took the survey once.

Commissioner Toth commented that during the subcommittee, they thoroughly discussed the proposals, noting that it was not an easy process. He stated that they attempted to find the best fit for all. He stated that for option two, the tall tower was a feature people liked, while options one and two provide features for everyone. He liked the gameboard feature, as that is something all users could enjoy.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that kids voted from the schools as well, noting that her teenagers all liked the tall tower feature. She commented that the miracle machines are cool but often become broken. She stated that she thinks the music pieces provide a multigenerational feature that will also hold up well. She was frustrated as she did not believe the proper information was relayed to vendors to get the results they wanted based on the City Council's change in scope.

Ms. Lawrence agreed that option two was very popular with students. She stated that she spoke with Webber Recreation, and there is a warranty on the feature. She commented that while the City has not used all the vendors, she has received positive input from cities that have used them in terms of warranty. She believed that each option has components for each age group and includes a warranty.

Commissioner Toth asked if two proposals could be selected and sent to the City Council, allowing the City Council to make the final choice.

Ms. Lawrence stated that she is asking the Commission to make a recommendation, and the recommendation the Commission makes is its choice. She stated that she would like to bring this to the Council next week to ensure they could complete a 2025 installation.

Commissioner Weichert stated that perhaps they could narrow it to two vendors and communicate their concerns, which would allow them to adjust their proposals in order to provide the desired outcome.

Chair Blanks stated that there was a subcommittee that had already narrowed down to these options.

Ms. Lawrence stated that she sent the RFP to nine vendors, and they received six proposals from five vendors, which were narrowed to four proposals. She stated that she then spoke with each vendor to ensure they met the requirements of the RFP. She noted that public

engagement was then completed, and she followed up with the vendors to ask about switching pieces or adding poured-in-place surfacing. She stated that if additional work is wanted, she would need very clear direction as to what they would want done. She reminded the Commission that the budget is set for this project, and if there are additional delays, this would not be installed in 2025.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that she felt there were clear expectations for the RFP, and the Council made different choices.

Ms. Lawrence stated that the RFP from the Parks Commission required an accessible swing, and the City Council had concerns that was too narrow of a scope and that the swing would not fit. She stated that the Council wanted the proposals to be more open-ended, which is why, rather than requiring certain items, they were encouraged. She confirmed that it was the direction of the Council that changed the RFP. She stated that if there is a desire for the vendors to change the proposals, she would want to consult with the City Council to ensure the vendors are not wasting their time.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that the biggest reason for requiring the accessible swing was to provide a feature that would be multigenerational.

Ms. Lawrence replied that staff did due diligence in estimating which features could fit within the space, and the Council was aware that there was potential for the features to fit, but did not want to limit the creativity and scope of the vendors.

Commissioner Muller commented that this is the third playground she has been involved with and asked why this is different than the others.

Ms. Lawrence provided background information on the previous playground process and noted that Marie was the first playground they used the RFP process in 2020, and they did not require an accessible feature. She stated that Valley View Heights also did not require an accessible feature. She stated that this is the same process used for Valley View Heights and recognized that they began to bring in the accessible feature with this park, as that is a priority for the parks system. She stated that it is important that they provide a playground that everyone can use and that will be a part of the parks system going forward. She recognized that it might be a little more work, but she believes that every resident should have an opportunity to recreate.

Commissioner Van Lith stated that it sounds like the subcommittee came up with an idea, and the Council widened the scope. He stated that he would support asking for more options for accessibility rather than the spinning feature, as it appears they would be settling.

Chair Blanks commented that would impact the budget and therefore would most likely not be an option.

Commissioner Muller commented that it is frustrating when the Commission makes a recommendation, and that is changed by the City Council. She stated that she would be nervous to make the request and waste time for the Council not to change its mind.

Ms. Lawrence commented that the Council was not against a swing but did not want to limit the feature to only a swing. She confirmed that the spinning feature is more affordable and fits within the proposals, which is most likely why three vendors chose that option.

Commissioner Weichert referenced the price of option one, which would have additional space within the budget, which may allow them to rework the concept.

Chair Blanks noted that option only received three percent of the votes, so that is not the option the residents want.

Ms. Lawrence stated that the cost option one did not include installation, noting that once installation is added, that would not leave space in the budget for another feature. She stated that all proposals were within a few dollars of each other, with maintenance and installation.

Commissioner Muller stated that she has three children and not all children like all features. She stated that some kids do like spinning. She stated that a senior can spin their grandchildren on the feature.

Commissioner Weichert commented that seniors like the motion of swinging.

Commissioner Muller asked if there is a price point for the spinning feature from Weber.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that she could not find that.

Commissioner Muller commented that could be a similar add-on request to the shade feature in a previous playground proposal.

Commissioner Schifsky stated that in terms of accessibility, the poured-in-place surface provides accessibility to the feature.

Ms. Lawrence stated that the poured-in-place surface has a cost of about \$30,000. She stated that Webber submitted two proposals, as they could provide an inclusive feature and another without the feature.

Commissioner Muller commented that the poured-in-place is a good feature.

Ms. Lawrence stated that in reviewing the proposals pretty closely and in speaking with residents, option three provides the most accessible playground, as it is not just one feature that becomes accessible with the poured-in-place surface. She stated that option two provides the wow factor with the height and climbing features. She stated that while option four is great, it does not include an accessible feature. She stated that option one is great, but did not receive much support from the public. She stated that it seems that, based on the conversation of the Commission, the input of the public, and a staff perspective it seems that options two and three best fit the vision for this playground.

Commissioner Muller commented that she likes the net circle swing and the variety of the swing options provided in option three. She stated that option three also provides different options to get on and off for those playing tag.

*Motion Blanks/second Schifsky to recommend option three for the playground replacement at Ivy Hills Park.* AYES 6: NAYS 0

Chair Blanks asked if there is input on the color, noting that the City Council will ultimately choose the color, as they changed the colors during the last playground process.



Commissioner Schifsky stated that she likes the colors as proposed, as they look fresh, inviting, and match the benches already there.

The resident commented that she would change out the white color as it will become dirty quickly.

Ms. Lawrence commented that they can state they do not want white, but was unsure how specific they can be on the house feature.

Commissioner Schifsky noted that color options may not be a choice on the house feature.

Chair Blanks stated that he recommended leaving the choice of color for the City Council to decide, and the Commission agreed.

(Recreation Program Coordinator Willow Eisfeldt, Recreation Facilities Coordinator Trey Carlson, and Public Works Director Ryan Ruzek left)

### **8.b Preliminary Budget FY2026 Discussion**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence stated that staff have begun the budget discussions for the upcoming season. She explained that typically the budget discussion spans two meetings, with a recommendation from the Commission being made at the June meeting. She reviewed the budget timeline for the City and noted that the parks and Par 3 Capital Improvement Plans (CIPs) were included in the Commission packet. She recognized that not everything included in the CIP for each year will likely be included in the final budget, but explained that once the Parks System Master Plan is completed, they will be updating the Parks CIP to describe more accurately what can be done in each year. She noted that projects should be prioritized in the case that not all projects are accepted by the Council for the budget. She reviewed the projects that were included in the 2025 budget, which was a total of about \$318,000. She reviewed the projects that were proposed for 2026 within the CIP.

Commissioner Weichert asked how often the Valley picnic shelter is used, as she could only recall two events in 34 years. She noted that is a high cost for an item that is not often used.

Ms. Lawrence commented that she tends to think that shelter is not often used because of the poor condition and lack of power. She stated that with the greenway and trails, she believed that the picnic shelter would be used more.

Commissioner Muller commented that the Girl Scouts use that facility for their bridging ceremonies.

Commissioner Weichert commented that the seniors are being ignored, along with football, lacrosse, and soccer.

Chair Blanks asked that all Commissioners hold their comments until the presentation is completed.

Ms. Lawrence stated that the 2026 projects within the CIP have a total of \$580,000, which is similar to other cities of this size spend annually on Parks capital, but that is a large number compared to what the Council has approved in the past. She stated that it is the decision of the Commission as to how much discussion happens tonight, as this will continue to the next meeting as well. She provided a brief overview of the approved 2025 projects and proposed

projects for 2026 and future years for the Par 3, noting that those items are discussed separately. She confirmed that the 2025 and 2026 Par 3 projects are self-funded from the course revenue.

Chair Blanks stated that ideally, he would like to hold a meeting to discuss this in June.

Ms. Lawrence commented that she does not yet have any topics for the June meeting, and therefore the June meeting could be solely focused on this topic.

Commissioner Muller recognized that there were projects deferred from 2025 and suggested that at the June meeting, staff highlight the projects from 2025 that were deferred.

Ms. Lawrence reviewed the 2025 budget priorities of the Commission and highlighted the items that were deferred.

Commissioner Weichert stated that she would like information on how much the shelters are used, as that can help to determine whether shelters should be refurbished or removed.

Ms. Lawrence stated that she can bring forward that information, but not all people who use the shelters reserve them. She noted that Mendakota does not allow shelter rentals during tournaments, which also skews results.

Commissioner Weichert commented that she often has people approach her home for shelter from a storm because there is nothing available at the park.

Chair Blanks asked that all Commission members send a list of their questions to Ms. Lawrence prior to the June meeting. A deadline of May 25 was provided to the Commission to provide that input.

Commissioner Schifsky asked for input on whether the County would contribute to a shelter along the greenway.

Ms. Lawrence provided a brief update and noted that she can provide more information at the June meeting.

## **9. Old Business**

None.

## **10. Staff Announcements**

Parks and Recreation/Assistant Public Works Director Meredith Lawrence shared the following announcements:

- Thanked her staff as it has been a busy spring preparing for programming and the opening of the facilities. Touch-A-Truck was a big success, and she looked forward to the rebranded Heights Fest. She encouraged the Commission to check out the website and see the updates that have been made.
- Other events can be found on the City's website

## **11. Student Representative Update**

None.

## **12. Commission Comments and Park Updates**

Commissioner Weichert

- It is wonderful to see people picking up trash in the parks.

Commissioner Schifsky

- Thanked everyone for the attention to Ivy Hills. The park looks lovely as vegetation has begun to bloom.
- Civic Center has been active with ball games.

Commissioner Muller

- Rogers Lake and Kensington both look great.

Commissioner Van Lith

- Noticed a ball game at Victoria Highlands tonight.
- Marie is well-used by many different users and many different activities.

Commissioner Toth

- Asked if the portable bathroom at Valley View could be tucked back a bit, as it is an eyesore.

Ms. Lawrence commented that the bathroom was placed in that location because of the accessibility challenges at that park, but noted that they could review the location.

Chair Blanks

- Valley is getting lots of use.
- Excited to have Music in the Parks returning to Market Square.
- Appreciated the signs asking people to leave the ducks alone at Mendakota.

## **13. Adjourn**

*Motion Toth/second Schifsky to adjourn the meeting at 9:05 PM*

AYES 6: NAYS 0

Minutes drafted by:  
Amanda Staple  
*TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.*