PARKS AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
MEETING MARCH 17, 2026
MINUTES

The March 17, 2026, meeting of the Parks and Natural Resources Committee was called to order in city hall at 6:30 p.m.

Attendees: Committee Members Zachary Michalk, Mary Sue Simmons, Amy Hulett, Margaret Ford, and Alan Mitchell. Council Members Kathy Weier and Bridget Sperl. Mayor Jennifer Arsenault. City Engineer Marcus Johnson. Lori Tella of the Washington Conservation District ((WCD) by phone). Resident Barton Winter.

Agenda. The proposed agenda was unanimously approved.

Public Forum. Barton Winter reported that it had been a good season with the hockey rink and the skating rink. Winter said he flooded the rink 56 times over the season. He indicated that there had been some issues with snow blowing and that he would like the City to get a new or at least more reliable equipment for clearing the ice next year. Winter said there are still a couple more corner posts and boards that he would like to replace and also some vertical boards; Winter said he was willing to use his own money for these repairs. He added that two of the light pods had been out this year and he would like to have them replaced. He also mentioned that the center of the hockey rink needs work and will be painted later this year. Winter stated that he would like to flood again next year.

Minutes. The draft February 3 Minutes were approved unanimously.

Project Updates. Chair Michalk introduced the next agenda item, which was an update on various upcoming projects. (Note that the Committee discussion sometimes moved from one project to another and then back again but for purposes of expediency and clarity, the Minutes include the complete discussion for each project under one reporting.)

- **Tighe-Schmitz Park.** Simmons provided a brief overview of the project. Marcus Johnson, city engineer, stated that he talked to the contractor regarding the start time for the project later this spring. Lori Tella of the Washington Conservation District reported that she had sent a maintenance plan to the City and that the plan would be presented to the City Council at its April meeting. Tella said the maintenance plan could be worked into a general maintenance plan for the city and would require de-weeding a couple times a year.

Tella said that nothing was needed from the Parks Committee at this point, and wouldn't be until the digging started, but that it would be important to keep the communication channels open in case any issues developed regarding other uses of the park during construction. The Committee discussed that the City expected the kids soccer club to rent the soccer field again this year and that would have to be taken into consideration during construction. The Sunday night concerts in the hockey rink over the summer would also have to be able to go forward. Johnson informed the Committee that no fencing around the project areas was anticipated.

Tella mentioned that she is moving out-of-state but will work remotely until her replacement is hired, and that in the meantime, Rebecca Nestingen, district engineer for the WCD, would be the contact person. Tella stated that the WCD likes working with the City of Birchwood and would keep the City advised of other grant opportunities as they become available

Councilwoman Sperl mentioned that the contractor should allow for the pouring of the concrete pads for the benches that were going to be installed along the Lake Links Trail in Birchwood. She said the City was hoping that these benches could be installed in early fall. Engineer Johnson responded to a question about the completion of the project and said the contract required a completion date of October 16, 2026.

- **Hall's Marsh.** The subject of restoring Hall's Marsh came up during discussion of the Tighe-Schmitz projects. Tella reported that there might be significant grant money available for restoring the upland areas, not just the water. The Committee was advised that Tara Kelly, Landscape Restoration Specialist for WCD, would be the contact person for such work. The Committee discussed the fact that the City had not heard from the Rice Creek Watershed District about grant funding for dealing with the water quality issue. The Committee also discussed the matter of the importance of maintenance regarding any improvements to Hall's Marsh. Mayor Arsenault stated that the City had budgeted $40,000 for maintenance in 2026 and that perhaps the City might be able to hire out maintenance for certain aspects of the city parks. The Committee recognized that volunteers might be able to complete some maintenance activities, such as de-weeding.

- **Elm Beach.** Mayor Arsenault mentioned that work at Elm Beach was coming together. Tella advised that that there was a site visit to Elm Beach scheduled for March 30 and she was going to be there. Simmons added that she would also be there, along with Mayor Arsenault, Rebecca Nestingen from WCD, Molly Nelson from Rice Creek, some Elm Beach neighbors, and hopefully members of the Birchwood Dock Association.
- **Curt Feistner Memorial Park.** Mayor Arsenault reported that improving the area to actually provide beach access would be very difficult. The Committee discussed that notwithstanding the difficulty with the beach, that some improvements should be made. The Committee discussed the possibility of constructing an observation platform near the top of the park. Engineer Johnson said he would ask the Tighe-Schmitz contractor to take a look at it and get back to us. Councilwoman Sperl stated that she would check with the Lake Links Task Force to learn whether some of that money might be available since the Park is near the bike trail.
- **Polly's Park.** The Committee was advised that grant funding for replacing trees in Polly's Park had dried up for this year, but it would be worthwhile to check into it again next year. It was mentioned that while grant funding for tree replacement was not available, perhaps some grant funding might become available for dealing with runoff into the park. The Committee also discussed whether improving Curt Feistner Memorial Park might be pursued as a runoff concern since it was on White Bear Lake.
- **Miscellaneous Park Issues**. Mayor Arsenault mentioned that if the Parks Committee needed to get information to the maintenance staff, it should go through Deputy City Clerk Therese Bellinger. Sperl added that the city had a new staff person who would be researching the possibility of obtaining grant funding for new playground equipment. Simmons stated that it might be worthwhile to check with the City's representative to the Washington County Parks and Open Space Commission (Michael Kraemer, who appeared before the Committee at its April 22, 2025 meeting) and see whether that Commission might be of any help with obtaining new playground equipment.

Selection of Dead Tree for Removal. The Committee had notified the community that the Parks Committee would pay to remove one dead tree somewhere in the public right-of-way in Birchwood. There were three trees nominated by residents – one on Park Avenue near the hockey rink, one at the east end of Wildwood Park, and one along Birchwood Avenue near Ash Path. Council

members Sperl and Weier were not present for the discussion. The Committee reviewed photographs of all three trees taken in the summertime and discussed whether any of the trees might impact power lines if it were to go down. The Committee also focused on potential danger to the public that might result if it went down at an inopportune time. The Committee wondered whether the tree near the hockey rink might be taken down as part of the work in Tighe-Schmitz Park. There was no clear winner but after discussion, the consensus was that the tree on Birchwood Avenue was the choice because it was near the road and near power lines. Simmons moved and Ford seconded a motion to select the tree on Birchwood Avenue as the one to be removed at city expense, up to $2500, with the money to come from the Special Revenue Fund. The motion carried unanimously.

Clean-Up Day Projects. Clean-up day is scheduled for April 25, 2026. Several potential projects were identified as ones that volunteers might undertake, including: removing buckthorn near city hall, cleaning the tennis courts, removing debris on the hockey rink, installing wood chips on ash path, and picking up street litter. The Committee agreed to discuss this further at its April meeting and have a list ready for April 25.

Adopt-a-Park Initiative. The Committee discussed that no residents had volunteered to adopt a park. The Committee thought that one reason no one volunteered might be that there is not enough information available describing what is exactly required with the adoption of a park. The Committee was of the view that the City needs more than volunteers to do much of the regular maintenance work that is required of its parks and that, as discussed frequently by the Committee, the City really needs to pay professionals to complete the more significant tasks for proper maintenance, particularly with those projects that are funded by grant awards. The Committee thought that volunteers would be appropriate for such routine tasks as pulling weeds and picking up litter. The Committee thought that it would hold off seeking volunteers to adopt a park until a better description of what is required can be developed and more specific maintenance plans for the City to complete can be prepared. Chair Michalk volunteered to ask engineer Johnson to prepare a maintenance plan for the Tighe-Schmitz projects.

2026 Action Plan. Given the previous discussion, the Committee was of the view that there was nothing further to talk about with regard to the 2026 Action Plan.

Bulletin Board. The Committee was happy with the manner in which the staff was maintaining the bulletin board.

Next Meeting. April 21 2026

Adjourn. 8:02

Respectfully submitted,

Alan Mitchell
Secretary