UPDC

Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee Meeting Minutes

October 17, 2023

Chair: Ellen Fee

Committee Attendance: Jerry Clendenin, Barb Deming, Kirsten Fryer, Jenny Keyser, David Tierney, Ginny

Staff: Leah Timberlake Sullivan, Executive Director, Union Park District Council

Visitors: Alice Messer, Design & Construction Manager for Saint Paul Parks & Recreation, Katrina from Merriam Lane

1. **Introductions/Approval of Minutes**

An agenda was sent out in advance of the meeting. The agenda was accepted without changes. The September, 2023, Minutes were accepted without changes.

**Assign Note Taker**

Jerry Clendenin will take notes and type the minutes.

**Staff Report and Announcements**

**Midway Peace Park Fall Fun Event**

The Midway Peace Park event was held on Saturday, September 30, from noon to 4 p.m.

Leah Timberlake Sullivan said that we had some problems setting up a water supply for the event. However, we should have a reliable water supply for the 2024 Midway Peace Park event. The Parks & Recreation Department and the Water Department are working on new water connections.

She noted that many people came to the event, had some food, and then left. She thought that this was Okay. The idea of short food stops encouraged more people to come. At the same time, people making short visits prevented overcrowding.

Leah said that Demetrius Shaw did some intelligent recruiting for the volunteer staff at the inflatable “bouncy houses.” He found mature men to supervise the children playing on the inflatables. The adult men did a good job of maintaining safe play conditions. No one was injured.

Some candidates for the Saint Paul City Council and for the Minnesota Legislature came to the Peace Park event.

**November Board of Directors Meeting**

Leah said the November Union Park District Council Board (UPDC) meeting will not be on the usual date which is the first Wednesday of the month. Instead, the meeting will be on November 15. This special meeting will be for the election of new Board members. The meeting location is not yet determined. She is still working to set up the location.

Anyone interested in running for a Board seat should contact Leah. She will get you on the ballot.

There is more information available on the UPDC Newsletter.

**Star Grant for Bicycle Racks**

Leah Timberlake Sullivan and Demetrius Shaw made a presentation to request a STAR grant to pay for new bicycle racks. The racks will have a design to identify that the racks are in the Union Park Area.

The STAR grant program provides funds for neighborhood improvement projects, including landscape projects.

Leah and Demetrius spoke to the Neighborhood STAR Board. The board reviews applications and makes awards. The Board has 21 members from all parts of Saint Paul. STAR stands for Sales Tax Revitalization.

**The Status of the No-Mow Sign Project**

On March 22, we requested the Parks & Recreation Department to create a sign. Then on March 29 City officials said that it is possible for the City of Saint Paul to provide a sign. On August 2, Leah followed up and reminded City officials that we are still waiting for a sign.

Leah contacted the Parks & Recreation Department again in September. She is waiting for an answer.

**Rethinking I-94**

The UPDC Transportation Committee will host a Community Conversation on Rethinking I-94. The event is a chance for Union Park residents to learn about the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s “new” ideas for redesigning and rebuilding Interstate 94 in Saint Paul. Residents can also state their opinions on how to change the highway.

Location: Bethlehem Lutheran Church in the Midway at 436 Roy Street

Date: October 26, 2023

Time: 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The Church is close to the Minnesota United Soccer Stadium and a block west of Snelling in Saint Paul.

The event is open to UPDC members and guests invited by UPDC members. Families and children are welcome. Food will be served.

Leah Timberlake Sullivan invited Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee

members to volunteer. We need volunteers to set up tables and chairs, set up for food service, and then take everything down after the meeting.

We also need volunteer facilitators to organize the conversations.

Contact Leah to volunteer.

**A Report from Alice Messer: Midway Peace Park Update and Park Advocacy**

Alice Messer attended meeting. She is Design & Construction Manager for Saint Paul Parks & Recreation.

**Midway Peace Park Trees and Plants**

She reported on the good news that 32 trees have been planted in Midway Peace Park. The new trees are to replace trees that died because of the 2023 drought. A contractor transplanted trees that are taller than an average person. There is a variety of species including Oaks, Elms, and Aspens.

Also, a group of volunteers got together and planted hundreds of native plants in the lower rain garden in the park.

She said that the grass in the park is in rough shape. She said that it is expensive to remove the grass and put in new sod. Instead, Parks & Rec will work on a way to improve the grass that we have by irrigating it.

**Peace Park Water Supply**

Parks & Rec and Saint Paul Area Water Services are working on a way to provide water for the Midway Peace Park trees beginning in the spring of 2024.

Alice Messer said that Parks & Recreation is also working on setting up a water line to the drinking fountain. The fountain was put in when the Midway Peace Park was built. However, it is a water fountain without water!

She said another project is to define a space for placing temporary bathrooms.

Parks & Rec is maintaining features to drain rain water from the park.

Parks & Rec intends to install lighting for the basketball court.

In addition to Union Park District Council, other groups are supporting improvements to Midway Peace Park:

* Common Bond Communities, the owners of Skyline Tower
* The Trust for Public Land.
* Friends of The Parks & Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County
* The Saint Paul Parks Conservancy

**Merriam Park Play Equipment**

Alice Messer said that Parks & Recreation is working on getting new playground equipment for children. Merriam Park is on the list of parks that they are considering for new equipment.

There are 77 play areas in Saint Paul Parks. She said that about 10 years ago, Parks & Rec replaced 3 or 4 sets of play equipment each year. However, in recent years the cost of play stuff has gone up. In recent years, fewer play sets were replaced.

She said that the play equipment at Merriam Park is getting old and worn. This fact tends to push Merriam Park higher up on the list of parks to get new equipment.

However, the City of Saint Paul also considers funding sources when they decide on which parks get new equipment. The demographics of the population near Merriam Park tend to move Merriam Park to a lower priority. In general, the people living near Merriam Park have higher incomes than many other neighborhoods. She said that many sources of funds tend to go to lower income areas. In addition, some funds are intended for certain designated areas.

Alice Messer said that the Union Park District Council and Parks & Rec might work to get funds from some other sources:

* Saint Paul Parks Conservancy
* The Trust for Public Land
* The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources provides some funds for parks, but the DNR usually requires funds that match the state contribution.

Jenny Keyser suggested that we contact C. Michael-jon Pease and ask him for advice on how of raise playground funds.

**Time Line for 2024 Micro-Grants**

A problem with the Micro-Grant is that we are slow to award funds to grant recipients.

The Micro-Grants provide funds for small projects that bring residents together through activities in their community. Other goals for the Micro-Grant Program are described on the UPDC website.

Micro-Grants are for $400 or less. The Union Park District Council provides a total of $1600 for Micro-Grants. The UPDC website has guidelines for Micro-Grant projects. The website describes projects that are acceptable and it lists the kind of projects that do not qualify.

Many things about the Micro-Grant program work well. Ellen Fee said that the total Micro-Grant budget of $1600 closely matches the demand for this type of funding.

Leah said that she thinks the Union Park District Council Board likes the Micro-Grant program.

**The Slow Award Process**

Ellen Fee said that in past years, we started talking in January about the process of awarding grants. We finished the process and awarded the funds in June. She said that June is too late for many projects. June is especially late for the projects that involving planting and gardening. Gardeners need funds to purchase supplies in time for spring planting.

Jenny Keyser wanted to know if the funds can be made available earlier in the year.

Leah Timberlake Sullivan said that money for Micro-Grants comes from UPDC general budget. The UPDC budget must be approved before we can give out grants. She said that she will try to get the budget approved earlier in the year.

Leah said that administratively it is possible to set a deadline of March 15 for applying for Micro-Grants.

**Making the Program More Efficient**

Leah Timberlake Sullivan will also work on ways to distribute the Micro-Grant funds in a more efficient manner.

She said that a practical problem is how to make out a check for a grant. We are often not sure of how to fill out the line that says “Pay to the Order of . . . “ Leah thinks that we should add a question to the Micro-Grant application form. The question should ask how do we name the payee on the check if a Micro-Grant is awarded. Should the check be made out to an individual or an organization? Simply Knowing how to make out the checks will speed up the funding process.

A bookkeeper in the City of Saint Paul organization is assigned to handle funds for the Union Park District Council. Leah will work with our bookkeeper to find ways to speed up the process for delivering the checks.

After some discussion, the Neighborhood Sustainability and Vitality Committee decided on a time line. If everything works well, we will hold to the following time table.

**A Schedule for Awarding 2024 Micro-Grants**

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| --- | --- |
| UPDC Board approves budget & provides funds. | January or February, 2024 |
| Announce Micro-Grant program. Encourage people to apply. | February |
| Begin to accept applications. | March 1 |
| Deadline for submitting Micro-Grant requests. | March 15 |
| NSVC members review grant requests. | March and early April. |
| Approve Micro-Grants. | NSVC Meeting of April 17 |

**Cell Tower Fund Time Line**

**and Process for 2024**

There is a tower in Merriam Park that supports telephone equipment. The communication companies pay rent to keep their equipment on the cell tower. Every year a City of Saint Paul account that is called the City’s Special Funds Budget receives the rent money. Money from the Cell Tower Fund can be used to pay for improvements to parks and events in the parks in the Union Park area.

If an individual or group wants funds for an event or project, they should fill out a form called the Park Improvement Fund Application.

**How to Find the Park Improvement Fund Application**

To use the form, find the Union Park District Council website. Look at the banner near the top.

* Toward the righthand side click on “Resources & Projects.” A menu will appear.
* Click on “Projects.” A page for “Programs and Projects” will appear. Scroll down the page and toward the bottom find “Park Improvement Fund.”
* Click on the statement “learn more.” The “Park Improvement Fund” page will appear. Find the line “Fill out this form to apply for funding . . .”
* Click on the under lined words “this form” and the Park Improvement Fund Application should appear.

The form is submitted to the Neighborhood Sustainable and Vitality Committee (NSVC). The Committee reviews and approves requests for funds.

**The Scorecard**

For each request for funds, the NSVC fills out and reviews the Environment & Parks Committee Cell Tower Fund – Scorecard. (The form is named for the Committee that was renamed the NSVC). Projects that get a good score and a favorable vote in the NSVC then go to the Union Park District Council Board of Directors for review and final approval.

* There is an electronic link to the Scorecard on the Park Improvement Fund Application. The link is below the line that says “View our Park Improvement Fund Scorecard.”

The funds can be used for any park in the UPDC area. However, Leah Timberlake Sullivan noted that the Scorecard is set up to give priority to projects connected to Merriam Park & Desnoyer Park.

Leah stressed that the Cell Tower Fund was intended for special projects that are not part of the usual City of Saint Paul budget. The fund should not be used to support ordinary obligations of City.

**Funds That Are Not Spent**

The Cell Tower Fund provides $17,000 per year. A chronic problem is that we don’t spend $17,000. Generally, projects must be completed before the end of the calendar year or they cannot be funded. The money not spent by the end of the year becomes “encumbered.” Encumbered means that funds are placed in a special City of Saint Paul account. The money still exists, but we cannot spend it. Making use of encumbered funds requires a bureaucratic process done by the City.

Leah said we should speed up the process of reviewing and approving projects for funding so that worthwhile projects are not left unfunded. She suggested reviewing some projects during each calendar quarter.

After some discussion, NSVC members present agreed that we should encourage people with ideas for using Cell Tower Funds to submit Park Improvement Applications early in the year 2024.

We agreed on quarterly deadlines for reviewing Park Improvement Fund Applications. The deadlines correspond to monthly NSVC meetings.

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| --- |
| **Deadlines for Reviewing/Approving Cell Tower Fund Applications** |
| March 19, 2024 First Quarter |
| June 18, 2024 Second Quarter |
| September 17, 2024 Third Quarter |

David Tierney brought up the topic of legacy events. These are events that have been funded each year for the past several years.

**Community (Legacy) Events and Their Costs for 2023**

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| --- | --- |
| Ice Cream Peanut Butter & Jam | $4,000 |
| Midway Peace Park Event | $3,500 |
| Desnoyer Park Picnic | $3,000 |
| Desnoyer Fire & Ice Winter Event | $600 |

As the above chart shows, the legacy events take up more than half of the annual Cell Tower Funds.

Leah suggested that we consider funding for all of the legacy events at the March NSVC meeting. If we approve the legacy events early in the year, then we will know how much we can spend on other projects.

Jenny Keyser reminded us of a remark by Andy Rodriguez, Director of Saint Paul Parks & Recreation. He said that community events such as the Desnoyer Park Picnic are easy to set up for funding. That is because these events do not require bidding from contractors.

Projects that require building and construction are harder to complete. We often fail to complete projects that require construction for a few different reasons:

* Contractors do not like to bid on small projects.
* The bidding process takes time.
* After the bidding process is done, there is not enough time left in the year to get the project done.

Leah suggested looking for new sources of funds for the annual Midway Peace Park event. She suggested working on a networking project to find new funding sources. We should be able to find people interested in providing funds because people are excited by the Peace Park event.

She also said that we should work on setting up a fund-raising infrastructure.

**Grazing Goats to Improve the No-Mow Area**

**Failure to Control Weed Trees**

A big problem with the No-Mow Area is the presence of “weed trees.” The plan for the No-Mow Area is to have Oak Trees and a few other tree species in a savannah. However, seeds from trees outside of the No-Mow Area fly on the wind and land in the No-Mow Area. The seeds start the growth of unwanted weed trees.

Once a year, UPDC volunteers work with the Parks & Recreation Department to remove weed trees. Parks & Rec employees cut down the many small weed trees. Then they treat the small stumps with herbicide. Volunteers remove the brush.

Then the weed trees grow back!

**A New Idea**

Jerry Clendenin has been thinking about new ideas to control weed trees. He is researching the idea of using goats. The idea is to work with an industry that provides grazing animals. The idea is to set up an electric fence in the part of the No-Mow Area with the most weed trees. Then we place goats in the fenced area. The goal is for the goats to eat the leaves from the weed trees so that we kill the trees or slow down their growth.

There is precedent for the idea. The Parks & Rec Department has used goats in the Crosby Farm Park.

There are two vendors who provide goat services in the Saint Paul Area.

There are some challenges to overcome in order to make the idea work. One is providing water for the goats.

Jerry will do more research on grazing animals and report back.

**Adjourn**

We adjourned at 8:47 p.m.