

UPDC  
Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality  
Committee Meeting Minutes

January 17, 2023

Chair: Ellen Fee

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

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

### **Assign Note Taker**

Jerry Clendenin will take notes and type minutes.

### **Introductions/Approval of Agenda**

An agenda was sent out in advance of the meeting. The agenda was accepted without changes.

### **Desnoyer Park Fire & Ice Event Debrief & Future Planning**

The Desnoyer Park “Fire and Ice” outdoor ice rink and winter skating party was held on December 30, 2022. Leah Timberlake Sullivan attended and she said it was a wonderful event. An e-mail from Allen Saunders said that approximately 150 people attended.

Allen said that eight volunteers worked to put on the event. They were from the Desnoyer Park Improvement Association, a part of Union Park District Council (UPDC).

The Desnoyer Park ice rink was the center of activity. There was an area of the ice rink for playing hockey. There was a track around the hockey area for skaters who were not hockey players. There was also an area of ice set aside for small child skaters.

People who are not skaters were also welcome.

It was evident that the volunteers did a good job of clearing away snow and grooming the ice. At the November 2022 Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee (NSVC) meeting, we voted in favor of funding for new Ice cleaning equipment. Leah said that volunteers at the event were aware that the Union Park District Council provided cell tower funds for the ice grooming equipment.

The volunteers organized a medallion hunt, similar to the Saint Paul Winter Carnival event. Participants got a list of clues. By following the list of clues, the winner was the first person to successfully follow the trail of clues and find the hidden medallion.

Volunteers served hot dogs, hot chocolate, and hot apple cider.

There was also a popular outdoor camp fire for warming up.

Allen Saunders suggested that we make the Fire and Ice party an annual event. Some other NSVC members expressed interest in sponsoring other outdoor winter events.

### **A Template for Plans for Events**

The Fire and Ice debriefing lead to a discussion about creating a template for plans for organizing Union Park District Council (UPDC) events. The e-mail from Andy Saunders had an attachment which was suggested as a possible template. The Andy Saunders template is attached at the end of these minutes.

Jerry Clendenin suggested that the NSVC minutes from October 2022 could be adapted to create a template. The October minutes have a detailed account of the Midway Peace Park Fall Fun Event. The October minutes are available on the UPDC website.

All members present agreed to start a project to create a template for organizing events. We will add to a project to create a template to the 2023 NSVC Work Plan.

## **Midway Peace Park Update & Future Planning**

The Midway Peace Park opened in June of 2021. The park was intended to provide green space and add to the tree canopy in a low-income urban area. The design of the park called for planting 73 large trees. Unfortunately, many trees were never planted and most of the trees that were planted died. The trees died during the drought because of lack of water.

Jenny Keyser is working toward the goal of planting replacement trees.

Jenny Keyser met with Russel Balenger, the Interim Member of the Saint Paul City Council. He replaced a Council Member who resigned. He represents Ward 1. Leah Timberlake Sullivan and a representative from Skyline Tower also attended the meeting.

Council Member Russel Balenger said that we need a way to water the trees before he can support planting replacement trees.

### **The Water Problem**

There is a serious water problem in Midway Peace Park. No water comes from the drinking fountain. That is because there is no connection to a water source. Also, there is no connection for watering plants. There is no water line to the park.

Jenny has met with Allison Messer, the Parks & Recreation Department Design and Construction Manager. Jenny understands that installing a water line is a priority project for Midway Peace Park.

Jenny has also met with Rachel Coyle, the Saint Paul Urban Forestry Supervisor. Rachel Coyle suggested a temporary solution for the water problem. It is possible to attach a temporary water meter to a fire hydrant. The City of Saint Paul can also help us to arrange for payment for water taken from the hydrant.

Jenny understands from Rachel Coyle that we will need volunteers to carry water in containers from the hydrant to any trees that are planted. The staff at Skyline Tower has experience in organizing children and teenagers as volunteers. Possibly the Skyline young people can water the trees.

Rachel Coyle also discussed what tree species might work in the park. She also brought up the problem of poor soil.

### **Money for Trees**

After we solve the problems of water and soil, we will need funds to plant replacement trees. We received a total cost estimate of \$23,000 to replace 33 trees that have died plus planting 3 additional trees.

Jenny has been working on possible sources of funds.

The City of Saint Paul has arranged to sell a parking lot near the Midway Peace Park to Concordia University. After the sale is finalized, the city will get \$170,000. The sale funds might be a source of money for planting new trees

Jenny and others have been in touch with possible funding sources

- The Saint Paul Parks Conservancy. Jenny said the organization is something like a “go Fund Me for Parks.” We have been in touch with Michael-jon Pease, Executive Director.
- Minnesota United Foot Ball Club. Their website says that they donate to the Saint Paul Parks Conservancy.
- The Friends of Parks and Trails of Saint Paul and Ramsey County.
- The Trust for Public Land.

Jenny and others have met with the Friends of Midway Peace Park. However, Leah said that the Friends of Midway Peace Park does not have ability to receive funds. The Friends of Midway Peace Park have limited ability to help with funding.

## **The Future of the Cell Tower Fund Program**

We discussed major problems with the Cell Tower Fund.

There is a tower in Merriam Park that supports telephone equipment. The communication companies pay rent to keep their equipment on the cell tower. The Union Park District Council receives the rent money for an account that is called the Cell Tower Fund. The fund is also called the Park Improvement Fund. Money from the fund can be used to pay for improvements to parks in the Union Park area. The funds can also be used for public gatherings and events that are held in the parks.

We go through the procedures to get money from the Cell Tower Fund. However, many of the projects are not completed or even started.

Barb Deming described an example of a failed project. It is the fence along Prior Avenue at Merriam Park. The Union Park District approved Cell Tower Fund money for building a new fence to replace the old and ugly metal fence. However, the new fence has not been built.

## Why Project Fail

Leah said that money appropriated in 2022 must be spent in 2022. Project approved for funding in one year must be carried out in that year.

An example was a project for the Desnoyer Park Improvement Association. The Association received an appropriation in late 2022 to purchase snow removal equipment. They had to scramble to get the new equipment purchased before midnight on December 31, 2022. If they had purchased the machine in January, 2023, they would not have been reimbursed!

Leah said that Cell Tower Funds appropriated for a project that are not spent by the end of the year of approval “go away.” They go to a special account. Only City of Saint Paul officials can unlock the account and get the money out.

Projects fail because we approve the funds but the project is not completed before the time runs out.

Another reason that projects fail is because the Parks & Recreation Department has problems working with small projects. The problem is described in the Environment & Parks Committee Meeting Minutes of March 17, 2021:

Mike Robertson had a discussion with Andy Rodriguez from the Parks and Recreation Department. They reviewed the list of projects that are funded by the Merriam Park Cell Tower Fund.

Andy said that we have a problem with small park improvement projects. Vendors and contractors do not put in bids for small projects. The vendors cannot make a profit on a small project because there is not enough money connected with a small project. Another problem is that when vendors do put in bids for a small project, the bids are very high. The City of Saint Paul cannot accept the high bids.

The bidding problem makes it very hard to get small projects done. These are items like basketball hoops, and bike racks.

Problems with inflation cause some projects to fail. Costs rise after funds are appropriated. The appropriated amount will not cover the cost after inflation.

Leah said that the Parks & Recreation officials like to fund events because inflation is easy to handle. Union Park people know what the event will cost because it will happen only a few weeks in the future. The Union Park people appropriate funds large enough to cover the cost.

Some committee members said that they believed projects were not completed by Parks & Recreation because of safety issues. Other projects were rejected because of maintenance issues.

### **The Problem of Misleading People**

Jenny Keyser and others discussed the problem of misleading people.

The Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee says that any citizen can request funds for a park improvement project or event. But many of these projects will not get done because of City rules.

Any citizen can get the Park Improvement Fund Application form from the Union Park District Council website. The application can be submitted to the Neighborhood Sustainability and Vitality Committee. Then the NSVC uses the Cell Tower Funds Scorecard to evaluate the proposed project. Projects with good evaluations are sent to the Union Park District Council Board for approval.

Jenny said that the process is misleading. People expect that a project that goes through the process will be completed. However, many projects disappear.

Barb Deming agreed that there have been many projects that were approved but never built or never carried out.

### **How to Organize Project that Get Done**

The No Mow Area of Meriam Park is an example of a project that got done. Barb Deming said that when the No Mow Area was set up, Parks & Recreation used Cell Tower funds. They hired a contractor to plant fescue grass and do other tasks.

Leah Timberlake Sullivan and others suggested that we talk with Parks & Recreation officials before we vote to provide Cell Tower money. Do they see any problems with executing on a proposed project? Can we change the proposal to make it qualify for funding?

More than one committee member said that we should consider a more organized plan for requesting funds during the year.

We might also put priority on projects that are more likely to succeed. From the Environment & Parks Committee Meeting Minutes of March 17, 2021:

Mike Robertson said that it is easier to use funds from the Cell Tower Fund to finance events. Events like “Shakespeare in the Park” to not require bids from contractors.

### **A History of the Cell Tower Fund**

Leah is trying to put together a history of cell tower projects.



Barb Deming described how a committee for parks and the environment is intertwined with the Cell Tower Fund. When the cell telephone towers were built, other neighborhood organizations did not want to manage the Cell Tower Fund. A Union Park District Council committee on the environment and parks was set up when the Cell Tower Fund started. Barb Deming said that the new UPDC committee got the benefits and the problems of working with the Cell Tower Fund.

Barb Deming that the Merriam Park Master Plan was created so that we had an organized way to spend Cell Tower Funds.

### **Questions for Parks & Recreation Officials**

Leah Timberlake Sullivan said that she wants to invite the head of the Parks & Recreation Department, Andy Rodriquez, to attend the NSVC meeting for February.

Leah is compiling a list of questions for Andy Rodriquez.

She wants people to send her questions that we can put to Andy Rodriquez.

## **Annual Plan Overview & Preparation**

Ellen said that we plan to review the NSVC Work Plan at the February meeting.

### **Other Updates/Ideas**

The committee members briefly discuss possible signs for the No Mow Area.

One sign project is a sign that tells Merriam Park visitors that they are in the No Mow Area. It states the benefits provided by the No Mow Area. It also states the role of volunteers to maintain the No Mow Area.

We also discussed signs that acknowledge the indigenous people that lived on the land in the past.

Jerry Clendenin said that he has found at least three possible vendors that can provide signs.

## **Adjourn**

We adjourned at 8:43 p.m.

**An attachment to the minutes is on the next page.**

## Guide for Providing a Neighborhood Event Sponsored by UPDC

1. Identify a neighborhood non-profit organization to sponsor the event
2. Meet or communicate with the local organization about the idea for the community building event. Seek their approval.
3. Complete NSVC Park Improvement application form including a proposed budget.
4. Present event/activity plan to NSVC if approved by the committee at a monthly meeting
5. Recruit a group of volunteers willing to plan and implement the event.
6. Advertise the event two months in advance of the event through the UPDC website, posters at the park, and local organizations.
7. Conduct the event
8. Complete an event evaluation form to document success and to generate ideas to improve the event if held in the future.
9. Report the evaluation results to the NSVC Committee at a monthly meeting as requested by the committee chair.