UPDC

Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee Meeting Minutes

December 19, 2023

Chair: Ellen Fee

Committee Attendance: Jerry Clendenin, Kirsten Fryer, Jenny Keyser

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

Visitors: Katrina from Merriam Lane, Siri K. from Merriam Park.

1. **Introductions/Approval of Minutes**

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

**The November Meeting Was Canceled**

The Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee (NSVC) meeting was scheduled for November 21. However, NSVC Members and staff were preoccupied with preparing for the Union Park District Council Annual Meeting on November 15. Members were also preoccupied with the Thanksgiving Holiday of November 23.

**Assign Note Taker**

Jerry Clendenin will take notes and type the minutes.

**Staff Report and Announcements**

**Neighborhood STAR Board Rejects a 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.

Leah reported that the Neighborhood STAR Board declined to award a grant. In fact, the Board ranked the bicycle rack project as third from the bottom out of 67 grant proposals.

However, Leah believes that there is still citizen interest in the Union Park bike racks. Recently, a snow plow hit and wrecked a Union Park bike rack. The people who work near the bike rack would like a similar replacement bike rack that identifies Union Park.

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.

Leah said that we might see if we can press ahead for bike racks without a STAR grant. Leah said that we might look around and see how many places might use a bicycle rack that identifies the Union Park Area. We can see if we can place a large order with a bike rack manufacturer. The idea is to see if a volume order will encourage the company to make racks with a custom design at a reasonable price. Then the Union Park District Council will have to organize funding.

**Lessons Learned from a Successful Public Forum**

Leah Timberlake Sullivan reported on results from a forum on a proposed sales tax.

On September 18 there was a public forum on the City of Saint Paul ballot initiative to raise the sales tax by 1%. The extra 1% is intended to fund street repair and repair of park property. The Committee on Land Use and Economic Development (CLUED) from the Union Park District Council (UPDC) helped to organized the event. CLUED worked with the League of Women Voters. Several City officials as well as outside experts held a panel discussion.

The Neighborhood Sustainability and Vitality Committee (NSVC) worked to encourage attendance. Leah said that NSVC learned lessons on how to promote attendance at this type of meeting.

There was real public engagement with the forum of September 18. In person or by electronic connection, 98 people attended the event. The public submitted 58 questions by electronic means in advance of the event.

Leah said the forum was carried over the internet and it received over 500 views. At the same time, the cost for the Union Park District Council was only $700. The forum project was a cost-effective way to get public engagement.

**How to Set Up Future Events**

Jenny Keyser noted that UPDC collaborated with the League of Woman Voters to set up the sales tax forum. For the future, we could consider collaborating with Russ Stark, the City of Saint Paul Chief Resilience Officer. We might set up a forum on climate change.

Ellen Fee said that we should considering adding projects to create neighborhood forums to our 2024 Work Plan.

Leah suggested that we consider organizing other forums on topics of interest. For some projects we could work with other UPDC Committees. She suggested three possible topics:

* A forum on improving the quality of the ride on Metro Transit Light Rail trains.
* A meeting to educate people on how property tax assessments work and how a real estate owner can appeal an assessment.
* A forum on the idea of paying reparations to descendants of enslaved people.

We discussed ideas for forums on lawn maintenance:

* A program to encourage lawn care without gasoline-powered mowers.
* A program to explain how to have natural yard covering (no-mow lawns).
* Discussion on the idea of recognizing outstanding alley gardens.
* A workshop on reducing the volume of salt used to control snow and ice.

We discussed ideas related to the environment:

* Projects and methods to improve the tree canopy in Saint Paul.
* A program on what individuals can do to combat climate change.
* A program on composting.

Some other ideas:

* A workshop on urban foraging for food.
* A program on composting.

**Midway Peace Park Update**

Leah reported on some good news about Midway Peace Park. The Park has been nominated for a water conservation award from the Capitol Region Watershed District!

Leah also reported on other improvements:

* Saint Paul Parks & Recreation and Saint Paul Regional Water Services are working on a way to provide water for the Midway Peace Park beginning in the spring of 2024. The new service will provide water for plants and also a water fountain in the park.
* The project to plant new trees was completed on November 1. A total of 32 trees have been planted in Midway Peace Park. The new trees are to replace trees that died because of the 2023 drought.

Construction on Midway Peace Park was completed in 2021. The Park will be three years old in June of 2024.

However, Kirsten Fryer pointed out that the park is not shown on many maps. For example, in early December a Google search for “400 Griggs Street N.” displayed a map that did not include the Midway Peace Park.

Jenny Keyser is active as a volunteer for Friends of Midway Peace Park.

**City of Saint Paul Rules for Boulevards**

The City of Saint Paul website has a section with rules for what plants and what items can be placed in boulevards. The rules are often not enforced.

However, recently the rules were enforced. A home owner will be required to remove items from the boulevard. The home is in Ward 1.

We had a discussion about what are appropriate rules:

* What rules should be set to allow for snow removal?
* What rules allow for unobstructed vision for drivers and pedestrians?
* What rules are necessary to maintain clear and safe walking pathways?

Leah said that it is desirable to allow boulevard planting or rock gardens for community expression.

We considered the idea of talking to the City Council Member for Ward 1. However, no action was taken.

**Strategy for Midway Peace Park**

**Fall Fun Day 2024**

In past years the Midway Peace Park Fall Fun Day was funded by a grant from the Merriam Park Cell Tower Fund. However, Leah said that it will be desirable to find additional sources of funds to make for more reliable support. Additional funds will also permit us to create a better event.

We discussed the idea of getting help from Minnesota State Legislature. Midway Peace Park is in House District 65A. Representative Samakab Hussein serves the district.

We began planning for a visit to Representative Hussein at his office. Kirsten Fryer and Jenny Keyser both said that they were willing to go. Jenny suggested that we request some others to come along. She is thinking of people with connections to Midway Peace Park and to Skyline Tower.

**Air Defenses for the Merriam Park**

**No-Mow Area**

**The Problem of 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 trees that we call 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!

**The Problem with the Plan to Use Goats**

Jerry Clendenin has been thinking about new ideas to control weed trees. He reported on his research on the idea of using goats. The idea is to work with an industry that provides grazing animals. The plan was 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.

Jerry researched the goat idea and he concluded that the goats won’t work.

A major obstacle is water. We have to set up water for the goats. Jerry does not see a practical way to provide gallons of water.

There are other problems:

* Goats are “escape artists.” The No-Mow is a small and it hard to keep goats in a small area.
* The slope of the No-Mow Area makes it easier for goats to jump the fence.
* The electric fence is a hazard for children.

**Stopping Seeds on the Wing**

Jerry Clendenin reported on another idea to stop the flying seeds. Some trees send tiny natural “air planes” or “helicopters” that carry seeds. He suggested using the concept of providing “air defenses” for the No-Mow Area.

Jerry said that step one is to Identify what trees are within range to launch “air raids” on the No-Mow Area. We need to determine what tree species are close to the No-Mow Area. Then we need to determine when seed will fall from those species. The chart below says when different trees drop seeds.

He said that we should prepare defenses to intercept seeds when they are likely to fall. He said that we can activate defenses when the seeds begin to fall.

Our defense can be a sheet or a net placed over part of the No-Mow Area. He suggests a small area to test out the idea. The idea is for the airborne seeds to land on the sheet or in the net. After some seeds have accumulated, we will pick up the seeds from the sheet. We will dispose of the seeds.

**The Critical Month of May**

For example, Jerry said he plans to watch Elms during April. During May, we should see seeds falling from Elms. Jerry plans to be monitoring the No-Mow Area frequently when seeds are falling. When we see seeds falling, we can place a sheet or a net on the ground. A few stakes can hold the net in place on the ground. At the end of May, the seed should stop falling. Then we can take away the sheet or net.

We can reduce the amount of work required by studying the trees in the area and refining our plan. Most of the weed seeds appear to be from Elms with a few more from Maples. These trees drop seeds in May. We can concentrate our work in May and control most of the weed tree invasion.

Jerry said that after the month of May, we may be done defending the No-Mow Area. That is because there appear to be no tree species near the No-Mow that release seeds during June and later months.

**Working with Parks & Rec**

The next step for this plan should be completed before spring. Before seeds start to form, we need to determine if this No-Mow plan is okay with Saint Paul Parks & Recreation.

**When to Watch for Falling Seeds**

From the book *Growing Trees from Seed*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Late May | Elms, red maple, silver maple |
| Early June | Cottonwood |
| Early August | Alternate-leaved dogwood |
| Mid-August | Choke cherry |
| Early September | Ash |
| Early October | Hackberry |
| November | Catalpa |

**Work Plan Discussion:**

**2023 Review and 2024 Vision**

The Annual Workplan is a document required by the City of Saint Paul. The Workplan should state what the NSVC plans to do during the year and how we will do it.

**Updating The 2023 Workplan for Submission to the City of Saint Paul**

In early 2023 we stated many goals on our 2023 Workplan. Now that 2023 has ended, we need to update the Workplan to show what we actually accomplished for each of the goals in 2023.

Ellen Fee said that all committee members can retrieve the 2023 Workplan and we can all make comments on Google Docs. The comments should be notes on how to describe what we accomplished so that we can update the Workplan.

Ellen said that at January NSVC meeting we will revise our Workplan to get it in shape for presentation to City of Saint Paul officials. We will review the comments posted on Google Docs. We will discuss how to put each comment in final form and edit the Workplan.

Leah Timberlake Sullivan said that we need to turn in the updated Workplan for 2023 to Saint Paul City officials in February, 2024.

The 2023 Workplan had a statement for the committee’s goal:

*“Use a community engagement process to make improvements in current and potential future parks and recreation spaces.”*

This was the goal for the Environment & Parks Committee, the committee that became the Neighborhood Sustainability & Vitality Committee (NSVC). In February, 2023, we discussed revising the mission statement, however, we kept the same committee goal.

**The 2024 Workplan**

We also have to get started soon on the 2024 Workplan. The 2024 Workplan should state what the NSVC plans to do in 2024 and how we will do it.

We discussed a few ideas to include in the 2024 Workplan.

Some ideas about Merriam Park:

* Improve the children’s play equipment at Merriam Park. We can lobby the Parks & Recreation Department to place Merriam Park at a higher position on the priority list of parks waiting for new equipment.
* Renovate the Merriam Park Recreation Center building. The building has problems. There was water on the floor during the Ice Cream Peanut Butter & Jam event. We can lobby Parks & Rec to improve the building to meet current standards.
* Work to get other improvements to Merriam Park. Advocate for more community support for the park.
* Arrange for more public and private funding for Merriam Park maintenance and improvements.
* Explore the idea of setting up a Merriam Park Association similar to Desnoyer Park Improvement Association.

Other possible projects:

* Work on some ideas to improve Iris Park. Contact the two nursing homes that are near the park. See if the care home managers will support a project.
* Strengthen the Union Park Brand. Develop ideas that tell people when they are in Union Park territory. Co-operate with the UPDC transportation committee as appropriate.
* Organize some in-person meetings or hybrid meetings of the NSVC in 2024.

**Open Forum**

We discussed ideas for setting up in-person meetings or hybrid meetings. A hybrid meeting has some people physically coming to a meeting place and others connecting to the meeting place by Zoom.

One possible meeting place is the Merriam Park Public Library. We can use a meeting room at no charge if we leave by 8 p.m. There is a fee if we stay later than 8 p.m.

There are other possible venues. Some of them have a rental charge.

* St Mary’s Episcopal Church on Laurel Avenue at Howell Street.
* Central Baptist church at 420 Roy Street
* On of several local coffee shops. Lex Ham meets at a coffee shop. Snacks would be nice

**Adjourn**

We adjourned at 8:31 p.m.