

UPDC

Environment & Parks and Neighborhood Involvement Committee Meeting Minutes

April 19, 2022

Chair: Ellen Fee

Committee Attendance: Jerry Clendenin, Ellen Fee, Barb Deming, Kirsten Fryer, Jenny Keyser, Harmony Neal

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

Guests: Sophie Greene from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Jose Luis Villasenor from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Mary Henke-Haney from the Saint Paul Parks & Recreation Department

Assign Note Taker

Jerry Clendenin will take notes and type minutes.

Approval of Agenda

An agenda was sent out in advance of the meeting.

We agreed to add to the agenda some time for discussion on updating the work plan.

We approved the revised agenda.

Workplan Update

Abdulrahman Wako said that he sent two work plans to the City of Saint Paul.

He submitted the Environment & Parks Committee Work Plan for fiscal year 2021.

He sent a separate work plan for the Neighborhood Involvement Committee.

He said that combining the two plans to make one plan would require a lot of work plus a complicated approval process. He said that it made more sense to send the two separate plans.

The two workplans satisfy our reporting obligations to the City for the fiscal year.

Co-operative Plating MPCA License Renewal

Two employees of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) gave a presentation at the meeting.

Wako said that Union Park District Council members are most interested in the status of Co-operative Plating Company's application to renew an Air Emission Permit.

Co-operative Plating Company has an industrial plant that is located at 1605 Iglehart Avenue, between Snelling Avenue and the Canadian Pacific rail tracks. The company has an Air Emission Permit issued by the MPCA. The Air Emissions Permit puts limits on the amount of air pollution the company's plant can release.

Jose Luis Villasenor said that the MPCA is continuing to work on a draft for a new Air Emission permit. The MPCA has been doing a review of the company's operations to determine if the permit should be renewed and what restrictions should be imposed by the new permit.

An Area of Environmental Justice Concern

The Co-Operative Plating plant is located in an area of Environment Justice concern. The plant is in U. S. Census Tract 334. In this tract, 54.91% percent of households have income less than 185% of the federal poverty level. A census tract with more than 40% of households with income less than 185% of poverty makes the tract an area of Environment Justice concern.

Potential Problems from PFAS “Forever Chemicals”

While considering the Air Emission Permit, the MPCA is also watching Co-Operative Plating for possible releases of PFAS chemicals.

Sophie Greene said PFAS chemicals are often called “forever chemicals.” The PFAS substances have strong chemical bonds. They take a long time to break down.

PFAS chemicals are released to the environment by industrial processes. Humans can take in the chemicals from contaminated water and contaminated soil. We can take in PFAS chemicals faster than we expel them. The chemicals accumulate in the bodies of humans and animals.

Sophie Greene said that PFAS chemicals have been linked to many health problems. Many scientific studies have found adverse health effects.

The MPCA has asked Co-operative Plating to monitor waste water that comes out of the plant for PFAS chemicals. The MPCA is asking for voluntary co-operation. If necessary, The MPCA has authority to compel production of PFAS data.

Questions About PFAS Chemicals

Wako and Jerry Clendenin asked about the risks for human health and the health of the environment in the Union Park neighborhoods.

Sophie Green said that there are risks to both human health and the environment. However, at this time the MPCA does not have a way to estimate risk in the neighborhood.

The Minnesota Department of Health, the U. S Environmental Protection Agency, and other scientific groups are working on estimating the risks from PFAS chemicals.

Sophia Green presented results from some scientific studies:

- Studies show that PFAS are present in pregnant woman and fetuses.
- Studies show that PFAS chemicals are carried in human breast milk.
- Studies that show PFAS in water are concentrated in the tissues of fish.
- As far as we know, PFAS chemicals are more toxic than plastics.

Harmony Neal wanted to know when the MPCA will ban industrial uses of PFAS chemicals.

Sophie Green said that the MPCA does not have the legal authority to ban chemicals. The Minnesota Legislature or the Federal government can ban PFAS chemicals.

Other Chemicals of Concern and a Disturbing Shower

Co-Operative Plating has an Air Emission permit that was issued in 2009. The 2009 permit says that the Pollutants of Concern are “Particulate Matter, Particulate Matter less than 10 microns, metal HAPs, and nitric acid.”

Metal HAPs means metal “Hazardous Air Pollutants.”

People who live close to the Co-Operative Plating plant described a disturbing incident that happened on Sunday, October 17, 2021. Some people who witnessed the event attended the Environment & Parks meeting of October 20, 2021.

At the Environment & Parks meeting, the eye witnesses said that a shower of some liquid flew out of a vent on the Co-Operative Plating plant roof. The fluid landed on motor vehicles. Two vehicles required washing. The fluid also landed on one or more residential yards.

Low Mow at Merriam Park

Barb Deming gave a brief review of the history of the Low Mow Area.

The idea of the Low Mow Area came from a 2008 plan for the park that we call Merriam Park. The Low Mow Area was established in 2012. The area has not been mowed since 2012.

A key goal for the Low Mow Area plan is to reduce compaction of the soil. Mowing machines press down on the soil. Soil compaction discourages the growth of small oak trees. A goal is to allow small oak trees to grow up in the Low Mow Area.

Accomplishments from Volunteer Work

Volunteers from Union Park District Council have worked at events to maintain the Low Mow Area.

At these events we:

- Removed brush
- Pulled weeds
- Planted new grass seed in areas after weeds have been removed.

Removing purslane weeds was a major achievement at the October, 2021, maintenance event. We pulled the ugly purslane weeds from a strip next to the sidewalk along Merriam Lane. The strip is about one block long but only one foot wide.

We planted grass seed in the cleared ground. Much more attractive!

We also removed thistles. Now all of the Low Mow Area is largely free from thistles. No one likes thistles.

Controlling Weeds

Mary Henke-Haney said the original idea for the Low Mow Area was to have it covered with fescue grass with oak trees. Fescue grows to be 8 to 12 inches tall. The Low Mow Area is intended to be something like a savanna landscape.

However, other plant species have moved to the area to compete with the fescue grass:

- Wild flowers.
- Trees that we call “weed trees.”
- Weed plants like thistles and common ragweed.

Mary Henke-Haney said that it will take a lot of work to remove all plants other than the fescue grass. It is not practical to have the entire area covered in 100% fescue. She favors a plan to control the invading plant species so that most of the ground is covered with fescue.

Thistles and other weeds can be pulled out by volunteers.

Mary Henke-Haney said that wild flowers may appear to be desirable; however, they are hard to maintain. Some wild flowers need fire to be healthy. A “controlled burn” is not practical.

A practical compromise for the wild flowers is to thin out the flowers. We should pull out some of the flowers by hand to keep them under control.

Controlling Weed Trees

Weed trees are the worst problem. We want oaks to grow in the low mow area. Mary Henke-Haney said that a weed tree is a species of tree that we don't want in the Low Mow Area. Seeds from other types of trees fall in the Low Mow Area and small trees start growing. Most of the weed trees are small ash trees.

Controlling the weed trees is difficult.

We can pull out very small trees with a hand device that grips the tree seedling. We have this device that applies leverage for pulling.

We cannot pull out larger seedling trees. We cannot pull out a tree that is more than about 1/8-inch diameter.

We can cut or saw these trees close to the ground. However, they grow back. We can cut back the trees again and again, but the trees always resume growing.

Mary Henke-Haney said that Park & Recreation employees need to apply herbicide to the cut trees so that they don't grow again.

Short Term and Long-Term Plans

We discussed plans for maintenance events in 2022. We discussed a possible summer event to pull out wild flowers. Then we discussed a fall event to control weed trees and remove brush.

Barb Deming said that we need a new long-term plan for maintaining the Low Mow Area. She said that we need a process for Union Park volunteers to work with the Parks & Recreation Department

Mary Henke-Haney from the Saint Paul Parks & Recreation Department said that she can put together a plan. She is thinking of a plan typed out on one piece of paper. She will send Union Park people copies of her plan.

Jenny Keyser suggested a sign to educate the public about the Low Mow Area.

Barb Deming discussed the idea of a sign. The sign could educate park visitors on the nature and purpose of the Low Mow Area. The sign could also inform visitors about the work of volunteers to maintain the Low Mow Area.

Micro-grants

The Environment & Parks and Neighborhood Involvement Committee will now accept applications for Union Park District Council (UPDC) micro-grants.

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. The grants are for \$400 or less.

Ellen Fee said that for years Neighborhood Involvement has been the Committee that processed the grant applications.

An example of a micro-grant project is a garden near Dayton Avenue and Fairview. It was set up by a Girl Scout troop. A UPDC micro-grant provided funds for garden supplies.

May 15 Due Date for First Round Applications

After some discussion, we set May 15 as the due date of for the first round of applications.

Environment & Parks and Neighborhood Involvement Committee will review the applications at the May 17 committee meeting. All Committee members can take part in reviewing the grant requests. The proposals will be ranked in order of priority as the committee members see it.

The Committee will make recommendations on the these “first round” proposals to the UPDC Board of Directors. The UPDC Board will vote to fund the projects that they like at the meeting of Wednesday June 1.

Proposals submitted after May 15 will be approved on a “rolling basis.” Residents of the Union Park area can submit micro-grant application after May 15. However, the UPDC board will not approve funding until the July meeting or a later meeting. For 2022, the last day to submit request for micro-grants is September 1.

We had a discussion about encouraging proposals for new ideas. We don’t want to automatically commit all funds to funding old ideas for another year.

Wako and Jenny Keyser suggested changing the micro-grant application form. The change will ask each applicant if the proposal is for a new idea or a repeat of a project from earlier years.

Micro-grant Application Form on the UPDC Website

In earlier years we requested proposals for micro-grants one month before the due date for the first round of grants. This year we don’t have much time, so Wako said that he will put requests for applications on our social media platforms as soon as possible.

Jenny Keyser suggested a special outreach effort to get people from Skyline Tower to put in requests for micro-grants.

Wako said that he will put in a note in the newsletter for Skyline residents.

People who wish to put in requests for micro-grants can find the application form on the UPDC website. They can submit the completed forms to Leah Timberlake Sullivan. Her email address is “leah at unionparkdc.org.”

Storm Water Control Project at Bethlehem Lutheran

The Capitol Region Watershed District is providing funds and assistance for a project to control water that runs off the property of Bethlehem Lutheran.

The Church is on Roy Street near the soccer stadium.

Spring Clean Up at Midway Peace Park

We have organized a clean-up event at Midway Peace Park. It will be on

- Saturday, April 23
- 9 a.m. to 12 noon

Wako said that the event will be held “rain or shine.”

Everyone is invited. Wear appropriate cloths.

Adjournment

We adjourned at 8:45 p.m.