

Union Park District Council

Board Meeting: minutes

May 4, 2022, 7–9 p.m., via Zoom

President Sarah Dvorak, Secretary Amy Gage

Griggs Midway Building, 1821 University Ave. W., room 330, St. Paul, MN 55104

Members present (9): Sarah Dvorak (Grid 7), presiding. Scott Berger (Grid 10), Dan Elenbaas (Grid 11), Ellen Fee (at-large), Kirsten Fryer (at-large), Harmony Neal (Grid 9), Claire Warren (Grid 4); plus, Amy Gage (University of St. Thomas), Gregg Gridley (Desnoyer Park Improvement Association), Kent Treichel (Lexington-Hamline Community Council)

Members absent: Bruce Corrie (Concordia University), Joe Hughes (business), April King (Grid 5), Henry Parker (Grid 8); open seats for Grids 1, 2, 3, 6, nonprofit, Skyline Towers and Macalester College (7 open seats)

Staff: Abdulrahman Wako, executive director; Leah Timberlake Sullivan, program manager; Jonah Wexler, intern (Macalester College)

Guests: Christie Manning, Ph.D., director of sustainability and Environmental Studies faculty, Macalester College; Russ Stark, chief resilience officer, City of St. Paul; Jane McClure, *My Villager*; neighbors Paul Chellsen, Dean Cummings, Kevin Lee, Lisa Nelson and Barb Thoman; Mary McKeown, Keystone Community Services

Meeting

Call to order: Sarah Dvorak called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

Consent agenda: Dvorak added two items to the agenda: a date for the annual Ice Cream Peanut Butter & Jam fundraiser and a letter from Keystone Community Services for consideration. Gridley/Warren moved to approve the May 2022 agenda and the April 2022 meeting minutes. *Approved.*

Climate Action Panel: Wako mediated the presentation and conversation by Russ Stark and Christie Manning, Ph.D.

- Fact: July 2021 was the second warmest month in recorded history.
- Fact: More than 1 million species are at risk of extinction due to climate change.
- Fact: Many people from developing countries are having trouble weathering the heat and drought due to climate change.

Manning asked: What are the psychological motivators that help us take individual actions but also to help change systems? Stark said he has the privilege of thinking about climate change

every day, operationalizing some of the city's actions; the flip side is understanding the daunting scale and scope of the challenge. He recently updated the City Council on the city's progress toward the Climate Action & Resilience Plan. He said local, national and international systems will have to "come together" to address climate change.

- <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/mayors-office/climate-action-planning/climate-action-resilience-plan>

Question: *What does it look like to be a climate activist?*

Water protection is important to Manning. She referenced a gathering in northern Minnesota scheduled for early June about how treaty rights could "save the world." She also shows up for protests and demonstrations. It can mean listening, planning or even bringing food to someone who's had no time or is sick or injured.

Question: *How does Stark help get the word out and inspire action?*

People are aware but have a lot of questions about what they can do and what needs to be done. "The things that we can do as individuals are meaningful and important," he said, "but are not nearly enough." In St. Paul the bulk of greenhouse gases come from energy used in buildings and from transportation. What partnerships does the city need to create?

- Building codes, for example, come from state law.

Question: *How do you battle feelings of hopelessness around the climate crisis?*

Stark referenced the lives being displaced, people running out of water or food due to changes in the climate. He doesn't have those challenges immediately in front of him, which gives him the responsibility to do something. We have an opportunity to make an impact, he said, and noted that UPDC wasn't hosting a dialogue like this during the decade when Stark served on the City Council, from 2008–2018.

Manning is researching climate anxiety. She loves being outside, biking on the trails in the Twin Cities, and spending time with college students and other activists. "We have everything we need to solve this problem," she said, noting the "accelerating pace of awareness," which is cause for hope. That combats the worry, anxiety and grief.

Question: *We have the tools, but where do we start?*

For every individual action she takes, Manning seeks to take a corresponding action that is out of her comfort zone. She tries not to drive in a car alone. She'll be a delegate at the state DFL convention for the first time and can start to drive systems change that way. How can she help other, less privileged people to have access to the choices she makes?

Back when Mayor Melvin Carter was in college in the late 1990s, he told Stark that being sustainable meant being able to afford a Prius or hemp clothing. He asked Stark to make this issue relevant in every person's life. What can create benefit to the community, especially

lower-income and people of color? They will be the first impacted. Look first at the places where we are every day: our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods.

- Union Park has a lot of larger, older homes that aren't energy efficient. And it's a neighborhood with resources and substantial home ownership. Arrange a visit from the Home Energy Squad. <https://www.homeenergysquad.net/>
- Make it competitive! Break it down into the district's grids.
- Living in the city also offers the opportunity to walk and use mass transit. "Not everyone can choose those options," Stark said.

Question: How is the city ensuring that developers adhere to sustainable building practices?

Building and energy codes all emanate from the state, said Stark. Minnesota once was a leader and has been surpassed by neighboring states. Multi-family properties are considered "commercial," when it comes to energy code.

- St. Paul has a sustainable building ordinance that's been in place for 10 years. A state program, B3, helps to insist on a higher standard. State Buildings (SP) 2030 will require net zero emissions by the year 2030. <https://www.b3mn.org/>
- Union Park could assist the city when public money is being used.

Question: What is the balance between individual action and corporate responsibility?

Manning said climate change is an example of slow violence — though some are experiencing the disasters right now. But for many of us in Minnesota, it feels psychologically different. "It's not yet on our doorsteps," she said. "We are all part of these systems that allow corporations to pollute." If we don't stand up and demand change, then we're allowing the problem to continue. She said, "There are many ways to raise our voice."

- Change Narrative is a project or approach that helps people find their climate story, Manning said. <https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/narrative-change>
- Always offer action options, she said, such as the Home Energy Workshop.

Question: Why does the city not have a city-wide composting program? Are these programs actually successful and how can residents get more buy-in or interest?

"If you see your neighbors doing it, you're a lot more likely to do it yourself," Manning said. Stark said the city's partners at Ramsey and Washington counties will soon be allowing communities in those counties to engage in a composting program. A pilot will be starting, and a city-wide program could be available by early 2023.

- More durable bags will be distributed, and residents can put them in their trash bins, where they will be separated. That means a third truck won't come down alleys.

Question: What has Manning learned from her *Psychology for Sustainability* work?

What stretches people's idea of what is normal? What helps them step out of their comfort zones? She co-wrote a textbook, *Psychology for Sustainability*, along with Dr. Elise Amel of the University of St. Thomas and two others.

- Activists tend to feel the most fear about the climate crisis, she said. But they do the work anyway; “fear motivates us.”

Question: What is the most impactful thing that individuals can do? Where do they have the most leverage?

Stark said issues of affordable housing, public safety and others have occupied city officials in the past two years. He said policymakers need to hear from people, whether through an email, showing up at a public meeting or reaching out directly. Last year, St. Paul was ranked the most improved city in the country regarding sustainability issues; we rank No. 16. Make more connections across neighborhoods. Ward 4 has been represented for some time by folks concerned about the climate crisis; that may be less true in some other neighborhoods. Stark said he struggles with this question: “We’re doing a lot, and it’s not enough.”

Committee Reports and Updates:

Committee on Land Use & Economic Development (CLUED): Co-chair Dean Cummings said Thompson Hall and the Deaf Club is undergoing a renovation and elevator project.

- <https://charlesthompsonhall.org/>
- <https://savethompsonhall.org/>

Neighborhood Involvement Committee (NIC) and Environment & Parks: Co-chair Ellen Fee said the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency came to talk about Cooperative Plating, which is looking to renew its license. The company will address the committee next month.

- St. Paul Parks & Rec talked about how to keep the low-mow area at Merriam Park healthy. The committee wants to improve signage around the area.
- They’re accepting micro-grant applications; the first round runs through May 15. More information is on the UPDC website.

Transportation: Co-chair Scott Berger said I-94 was the only topic at the April meeting. Our Streets Minneapolis came and talked. <https://www.ourstreetsmpls.org/> and <https://www.twincitiesboulevard.org/>

- Barb Thoman, former Transportation Committee co-chair and a Merriam Park resident for 30 years, presented about the history of what was lost with the construction of I-94.
- Thoman said Reconnect Rondo has documented the “tragic and historic” loss due to the freeway construction. She focused her research specifically on Union Park.
- Union Park was middle-class and largely Catholic “and had more clout,” she said, than the Rondo neighborhood. MnDOT (then called the Minnesota Department of Highways) began buying houses in 1962 in Merriam Park and the Lexington-Hamline neighborhood. A lot of the planning took place behind closed doors and at a rapid pace.
- The highway followed and replaced a “thriving commercial corridor” called St. Anthony Avenue; Cretin, Vandalia, Cleveland, Prior and Fairview all had business nodes in the St. Anthony Avenue area.

- About 266 structures were removed throughout the neighborhood, which doesn't include garages and outbuildings. Merriam Park Floral and Nursery was one business lost, at the Cretin-Vandalia interchange.
- Two buildings remain from the commercial district at old St. Anthony and Prior.
- "Our neighborhood lost so many businesses," said Thoman, "walkable locations, as a result of construction of the freeway." She named a long list of places like shoe stores, drugstores, tea shops "that we don't have anymore in our neighborhood."
- Wheeler, Herschel, Pierce, Fry, Asbury and Aldine all are streets cut off by the freeway. That severed physical and social connectivity.

Berger and co-chair Lisa Nelson have read the Our Streets Minneapolis letter advocating the Twin Cities Boulevard project, a trench that would replace I-94.

Discussion: Gage asked about "traffic evaporation," the opposite of "if you build it, they will come." Nelson said the idea is that people will make different choices. Berger added that a tangible and current option is working from home.

- 50 percent of Union Park is within the I-94 corridor.
- Non-white traffic density; "we live in a terrible place for air quality," said Nelson, "and it's almost entirely because of the highway."

Action: Warren/Neal moved that the board support the Our Streets letter of support for Twin Cities Boulevard. Passed unanimously.

West Summit Neighborhood Advisory Council (WSNAC): The committee will meet on Tuesday, May 10: <http://wsnac.net/home/meeting-information/agenda/>

Neighbors United Funding Collaborative (NUFC): The Executive Committee approved the grants submitted. Wako is waiting for more information from the NUFC advisory committee.

- \$368,000 in funds left for NUFC, down from \$800,000 this year last time.

Communications Task Force: The group is meeting May 11.

Staff report: The contract with the city has been submitted, with thanks to the committees for their work. Wako and Leah are getting a head start on Ice Cream-Peanut Butter & Jam, the annual fundraiser. They propose Saturday, September 17 at Merriam Park, which doesn't conflict with the annual Mac-Groveland celebration on September 10.

- *Action:* Gage/Warren moved to approve this date. Unanimous.

Keystone Community Services: The nonprofit is applying for \$100,000 in Neighborhood STAR funds to stucco the outside of their new building on University Avenue. They will renovate and equip the site, current site of Bonfeed Transmission. They're getting city and state funds, with plans to start construction in September 2022. They hope to move in by May 1, 2023.

- <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/planning-and-economic-development/economic-development/sales-tax-revitalization-star-3>

Action: Fee/Gridley moved to approve and send the letter. *Unanimously approved*

- Warren asked if any of the funds would contribute to energy efficiency. McKeown said Keystone will put up new glass, hopes to become part of a solar garden (they can't afford to put solar panels on the roof), will do all new electrical and work with Xcel Energy to move the power lines.

Executive Committee update: Dvorak noted that the board social at Yum! on April 26 went very well, and all agreed it was important to have in-person events since the meetings are on Zoom.

- Isabel Chandlor visited EC and urged people to visit AJ International Mall on Snelling north of University.

The board acknowledged the work of Macalester College intern Jonah Wexler, who has been with UPDC for 21 months. He still has a year at Macalester.

The meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.