

**MINUTES OF MEETING  
SOUTH ST. PAUL PLANNING COMMISSION  
September 4, 2024**

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER BY CHAIR FELTON AT 7:00 P.M.

Present: Geoff Fournier  
Tim Felton  
Tyler Fehrman  
James Hart  
Andrew Hoffman  
Ruth Krueger  
Brianna Miller  
Michael Healy, Planning Manager

Absent: None

- 1) APPROVAL OF AGENDA - Motion to approve as amended– Hoffman/Fournier (7-0).
- 2) APPROVAL OF MINUTES –August 7, 2024 –Motion to approve as presented– Fehrman/Hoffman (7-0).
- 3) NEW BUSINESS

A. Review of Draft Parks Master Plan

Mr. Healy presented the staff report. The City launched an update of the Parks Master Plan in June of 2023. This updated plan will replace the previous Parks Master Plan that was prepared in 2005. The project team for the update is comprised of City Staff and the consulting firm HKGI. The updated Parks Master Plan was prepared over the course of a year after site visits to the existing parks, review of the big ideas by the City Council and the City’s advisory commissions, and ample public engagement. The plan is a high-level framework that is centered around making improvements to each park as funding is available. Almost all of the projects listed in the Parks Master Plan will require additional design work and construction planning. The City is hoping to pay for park improvements with the help of grant funding. Most grant-awarding organizations will only give funding to projects that have the support of a master plan to show the project is real. All parks master plans include “big ticket items” which are often implemented via a referendum. The proposed plan identifies that the most straightforward way to improve SSP’s parks is to update its playgrounds. Most of the South St. Paul’s playgrounds were constructed in the 1990s and are in fair or poor condition. Updating these playgrounds will vastly improve the quality of the parks. Mr. Healy shared that there was an FAQ included in the Planning Commission packet that is intended to answer many of the community’s questions related to the aquatics program and the implementation of the plan. Mr. Healy explained that the plan does not settle the question of how to handle the aquatics program but sets up two alternatives and next steps for the City to pursue.

Chair Felton asked if it was common to update a Parks Master Plan every 20 years. Mr. Healy shared that the industry standard is to update this type of document every 10-20 years. After 20 years, it is difficult for residents to feel connected to a plan for park improvements that was developed two decades prior.

Commissioner Fehrman commented that he knew a young boy that is eager to learn where a skate park will be located in town and asked if there was a new location in mind for a skate park. Mr. Healy explained that the plan includes two alternative options for aquatics, and depending on where aquatics end up, a skate park could potentially go in at Northview Park. If the aquatics remain at Northview Park, the City would work with local skateboarding enthusiasts to determine the best possible location for a skate park.

Commissioner Krueger asked if it was possible to expand the disc golf course. Mr. Healy explained that the Parks Master Plan called for permanent structures on the site but explained there were challenges related to getting sewer and water infrastructure to the site and addressing the building code requirements. Mr. Healy stated that they had not studied expanding the course area. Commissioner Krueger shared that what made the park attractive was the events and offerings at the site and that she always felt safe walking through the park because there were always people there.

Commissioner Fehrman asked how much money the City had allocated for the Pool Feasibility and Design Study. Mr. Healy explained that when a request for proposal (RFP) for a study is released, there are typically two ways of setting the cost. In one scenario, the RFP sets a hard limit that the City is willing to pay for the study. In the other scenario, no cost limit is set which results in a wide variety of proposals at various different costs. For the Pool Feasibility and Design Study, the City did not list a project cost in the RFP and so this criteria will be taken into consideration as the City is reviewing proposals and ultimately the City Council will decide whether they want to pursue a study.

Chair Felton asked if a study of the aquatics program could be covered by a grant. Mr. Healy stated that grants tend to be very specific, often for a planning study or for preparing a site for development. Representative Rick Hansen did try to get the City money during this last legislative session for this exact type of study but a bonding bill was not passed and so the City did not receive money for this type of study. Mr. Healy explained that one of the things the City is looking to get out of the Pool Feasibility and Design Study is a better idea of outside funding sources that could be used for aquatics.

Commissioner Fehrman commented that it was his understanding that Representative Hansen attempted to start the process of getting the City funding for a new aquatics facility after the legislative session had already started. Commissioner Fehrman asked if the City has started conversations with our local representatives to start the process in advance of the next legislative session. Mr. Healy shared that the City does communicate with our legislators on various topics but that these conversations are not led by the Planning Office. These conversations are typically led by the City Administrator. Mr. Healy shared that he did not know how the proposal for funding was brought forward but that staff was feeling optimistic that South St. Paul would receive this funding until the bonding bill collapsed.

Commissioner Hart asked that people who want the pool to stay at Northview be given information about the two potential scenarios and the cost to each scenario. Commissioner Hart asked if there was data about the usability of Northview Pool in its current location and commented that the community needs to separate the feelings of keeping a pool at Northview from the reality of the costs and time involved with keeping the pool at Northview. Mr. Healy shared that the Pool Design and Feasibility Study is intended to help answer questions about the cost of the two different pool scenarios. At this time, the only information the City has is the cost to replace similar sized pools in peer communities. Mr. Healy added that the South St. Paul community cannot have the conversation it wants to have about continuing the status quo versus consolidating the pools without

additional information about the costs for the two different scenarios. These costs include the cost of operating two different bathhouses, maintaining two different aquatic facilities, hiring lifeguards for two different aquatic facilities, and staffing the concessions at two different pool facilities. Mr. Healy added that there are some fundamental misunderstandings about aquatic facilities and the amount of revenue they bring in. Mr. Healy shared that aquatic facilities are generally not a money maker for a City and that communities are lucky if they come even close to breaking even on operating costs. Chair Felton echoed that the Woog Arena was similar. Commissioner Krueger shared that while aquatic facilities are not money makers, they potentially save money from being spent on other welfare programs.

Chair Felton asked Mr. Healy to clarify that when he referred to keeping the “status quo” at Northview, he was referring to replacing the aquatic facility there with a new one as opposed to continuing to bandage the old one. Mr. Healy confirmed that was correct.

Commissioner Fehrman asked how much the City had spent this year to keep Northview Pool open. Mr. Healy stated that he did not have this number.

Commissioner Miller asked if there was a prioritization list for playground updates. Mr. Healy shared that the Parks Department had this information. Commissioner Hart asked if Mr. Healy knew the criteria that was used to prioritize which playgrounds would receive updates. Mr. Healy shared that he does not know the exact criteria but that large playgrounds cost significantly more than small playgrounds and this factored in to determining how many playground projects could be completed each year.

Commissioner Miller asked why specific estimated costs for park upgrades were not included in the master plan. Mr. Healy shared that this was discussed during the project, but this information was ultimately not included because specific dollar estimates do not age well and will often become outdated or inaccurate after just a few years. Additionally, many of the big-ticket items can have prices that vary greatly depending on the design. Commissioner Miller shared that she felt this information is important to include for the sake of transparency.

Commissioner Fehrman echoed Commissioner Miller’s statement about having information about the specific cost of proposed updates. Commissioner Fehrman referenced North St. Paul’s Parks Master Plan and that it included the cost of the items in the plan. Mr. Healy shared that he could take this feedback to the consultant.

Commissioner Hart added that it would be helpful to have information about which items in the Parks Master Plan could be covered by the City’s annual budget versus which items would need to be paid for using a referendum. Mr. Healy explained that this information was not as easy to discern as one might hope. The City makes decisions every year about what to do within its budget for the following year. When the decision is made to focus on installing a new playground, other items in the CIP may get bumped. Mr. Healy stated that he would share this request with the project team.

Commissioner Fournier asked if it was normal to not include the school’s playgrounds in the Parks Master Plan. Mr. Healy shared that it was common to not include them as City parks but stated that there was acknowledgement about the School District’s parks in the plan.

Commissioner Krueger shared that she found the demographic information in the plan very interesting. Commissioner Krueger shared anecdotes about the transformation of Kaposia Landing from a wild unusable space to a park with baseball fields, an accessible playground, and a scenic river walk. Mr. Healy added that Kaposia Landing is a wonderful amenity that functions almost like a regional park. Mr. Healy noted that the plan did include a list of regional parks in the area and commented that the off-street trails that go through Kaposia Landing connect to regional parks all over the metro.

Chair Felton asked if the City has ever approached large corporations asking for donations related to park infrastructure. Mr. Healy shared that many corporations donate to the City, but these donations are most often made to the Police Department. Mr. Healy added that the City cannot solicit donations for improvements the way a private, non-profit organization can. One of the goals of the pool feasibility study is to determine potential funding sources.

Commissioner Fehrman stated that the City he grew up in had an old box pool that needed to be replaced. The City utilized a lot of public-private partnerships and was able to create a new aquatics facility. Commissioner Fehrman shared stories of other communities where its residents raised money for public projects and that he had made inquiries to local businesses about public-private partnership opportunities.

Commissioner Felton asked if there was any discussion about a joint venture between the City and the School District to address the joint tennis courts at Roosevelt Field that are in disrepair. Mr. Healy stated that there had never been any formal asks. Chair Felton commented that the school district is seeing declining enrollment and feared lower enrollment as the result of the loss of the tennis team/facilities. Mr. Healy stated that the City valued this partnership and that there had been a lot more emphasis on collaboration with the School District in the last year.

Commissioner Hart commented that there were a lot of softball/baseball fields included in the plan. Commissioner Hart asked if this was due to a large demand for these types of courts and if the City had demographic information about the sports of choice for different South St. Paul families. Mr. Healy stated that the City is not planning to add any new softball or baseball fields as part of the plan and shared that the Parks and Recreation Director has stated that during peak season, the softball/baseball fields were all used. Eliminating any of these fields would result in individuals having less access to the fields. Commissioner Hart shared that he would be interested in seeing the data about the usage of these fields and shared an anecdote that many of the fields are not used. Commissioner Hoffman shared a similar sentiment. Commissioner Hart shared that he viewed this as an opportunity to create additional amenities if the softball/baseball fields were underutilized. Commissioner Hoffman asked if there had been an increase in T-ball or youth sports enrollment to support the change. Commissioner Fournier commented that T-ball enrollment had increased substantially that year. Commissioner Krueger added that many of the parks have pickup games as opposed to scheduled games. Mr. Healy commented that this makes it difficult to track field usage. Chair Felton reiterated the importance of having space for adult softball leagues.

Commissioner Fehrman stated that the plan itself was ambitious and included amenities that the community would like to see but that he was struggling with the plan due to the lack of concrete information provided about the cost of each amenity. Commissioner Fehrman shared that he felt this was a matter of transparency and commented that the City would be doing the residents a disservice by getting them excited about a plan without providing specific information upfront about the cost of implementing the plan. Commissioner Fehrman reiterated that he liked the plan but viewed it more as a visionary document of what the park system could look like as opposed to a plan with specific costs to the implementation of the plan. Commissioner Fehrman recommended tabling the Parks Master Plan until the City provides exact numbers about how much the plan will cost the community if it were fully implemented.

Chair Felton asked Mr. Healy if the Planning Commission's role was to provide a recommendation on whether the plan be approved or if the Planning Commission was purely providing feedback. Mr. Healy stated that staff was ideally looking for a recommendation, but feedback would be appropriate if the Planning Commission is not inclined to give a recommendation. Mr. Healy shared that the Planning Commission is not in a position to table this item and they are a supplemental advisory commission reviewing the plan. The Parks Master Plan is

primarily the responsibility of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission. The plan will likely be brought forward to the City Council with or without feedback from the Planning Commission.

Chair Felton shared that he appreciated Commissioner Fehrman's comments but stated that he viewed the plan a little differently. Chair Felton stated he viewed the cost ranges that were provided for each amenity as relative and stated that it is difficult to determine the exact cost for a project 20 years from now. Chair Felton stated that the dollar range was helpful for the plan and stated that it would be helpful to have more specific information if a referendum is put up for a vote. Mr. Healy highlighted the cost ranges that are listed in the plan. Mr. Healy added that for the more expensive projects, those listed as costing "\$\$\$\$\$", those types of projects will often involve additional study and putting the project out for bid. Mr. Healy stated he will review how HKGI came up with the dollar ranges that were provided. Mr. Healy shared that the purpose of having a Parks Master Plan is kind of like a Kickstarter with a big vision of what could be done along with "stretch goals." If the community does not support some of the bigger items proposed in the visionary document, such as the amphitheater at Kaposia Landing or the heated warming house at Jefferson Park, they do not have to be implemented. Before a referendum is proposed, a survey would be done to determine exactly what residents would like to see included. Several of the items in the 2005 Parks Master Plan were not built through the previous referendum because the community did not want to pay for the amenities.

Chair Felton encouraged each commissioner to summarize their thoughts so they could be shared with HKGI, the Parks and Recreational Advisory Commission, and the City Council. Mr. Healy stated that if the Planning Commission wished to share their feedback as opposed to making a formal recommendation, they could do so.

Commissioner Hart asked who would be reviewing the plan after the Planning Commission. Mr. Healy explained that the plan would ultimately go to the City Council next for approval/denial so any motion or feedback would be given to the City Council.

Commissioner Hoffman shared that he liked the plan. Commissioner Hoffman added it would be nice to see the costs eventually. Commissioner Hoffman shared that he was in favor of keeping Northview Pool and was open to having waterpark-type features at Northview Pool instead of just a box pool.

Commissioner Hart shared that he was in favor of the plan and liked the vision. Commissioner Hart shared that he likes to see natural spaces and diversification in the playgrounds and sport courts. Commissioner Hart stated that he wants to ensure the plan builds on the status quo as opposed to sticking with the status quo.

Commissioner Hart spoke to ensuring that the parks system evolves with the demographics and interests of the community. Commissioner Hart encouraged transparency about the cost and applying for as many grants as possible to help fund park improvements.

Commissioner Krueger praised the plan as a comprehensive, flexible, and well put together document.

Commissioner Fournier echoed the sentiment that the plan was well put together. Commissioner Fournier shared that he had a special interest in the updates to Kaposia Landing as this is close to where he lives. Commissioner Fournier highlighted the food truck station, the amphitheater, and the other amenities that will attract people to the park. Commissioner Fournier shared that his greatest concern at Kaposia Landing is access to the site, particularly for pedestrians.

Commissioner Fehrman reiterated that he thought the plan was a great plan but that decisions needed to be made about the aquatics program and creative funding solutions would need to be found for implementing the plan instead of relying on funding improvements locally through a referendum or taxes. Commissioner Fehrman

again suggested providing specific project costs and implementation timelines so that residents are informed about what implementing the plan will cost them.

Commissioner Miller stated that she appreciated the analysis that went into the plan and agreed that additional information about the costs of implementing the plan should be included. Commissioner Miller shared that she is a big advocate for Northview Pool and would like to see Northview Pool continue with the status quo. Commissioner Miller encouraged the City to share additional information about the cost for playground replacements, including the amounts that are budgeted for playground replacements in the next few years.

Mr. Healy noted that the access to Kaposia Landing is a unique challenge because of the railroad. The draft Parks Master Plan calls for both a pedestrian bridge at Bryant Avenue as well as a second vehicle access. The second vehicle access will be very difficult to make happen. Mr. Healy shared that the pedestrian access will hopefully happen soon. The City was successful in getting grant funding to create a preliminary design of the Bryant Avenue pedestrian access but has not yet been successful in getting grant funding to construct the access. Mr. Healy stated that the City is continuing to pursue funding opportunities for this project.

4) PUBLIC HEARINGS

None.

5) OTHER BUSINESS

None.

6) STAFF UPDATES

Mr. Healy shared that the City has launched a zoning study for South Concord Street. The City Council is hosting a joint work session on September 23<sup>rd</sup> to discuss what has been found so far and to conduct a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) exercise. The Planning Commission is invited to attend the work session.

7) ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn- Hart/Hoffman (7-0).