

Urban Forest Commission

Meeting Minutes April 18, 2018

Attendance:

Commissioners: Mike Pennington, Beth Kleinke, Judy Gibbs, Brandon Van Tassel, Jim Lemmerman

City Staff: Clark Christenson, City Forester; Erik Birkeland, Ex-Officio

City Councilor Em Westerlund (not present)

Call to Order:

The meeting started at 6:02.

Minute Approval:

A motion was made to approve the minutes from the March 21th, 2018, Meeting. M/S/C.

Public Comment Period

Kathleen Hannah (public) spoke on the poor aesthetic conditions of the trees located in the median of Mesabe Avenue and other highly visible locations throughout Duluth. She explained that she was a Master Gardner and as part of that program she is required to perform 25 hours of volunteerism annually.

Judy Gibbs shared that unfortunately those trees are maintained by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). She suggested that Kathleen contact the MnDOT Forester to offer her services.

Gary Anderson (City Councilor 1st District) introduced himself and thanked the Urban Forest Commissioners for their good work and service.

Forester's Report

City staff have been working diligently in the Lakeside neighborhood and have removed 106 Ash trees to date. The total number to be removed is close to 400. The City is hoping to have this completed by the end of spring or early summer.

Old Business:

Viewshed Policy

Clark showed three examples in and around different neighborhoods where illegal tree removal has clearly taken place. He explained that the City does have a mechanism in place to fine folks for tree removal and the intent is to allow "controlled" removal. The group discussed that the viewshed policy (35-29.1) is in place to help landowners remove trees correctly without alarming concerned citizens, however there seems to be an enforcement problem in that this code, while adopted, is cumbersome and confusing and lacks teeth to it. The commission questioned how to make this policy more effective and provide clarification for citizens. Mike Pennington agreed that the viewshed policy is confusing and to his knowledge we do not have a record of anyone completing the request form as directed in the viewshed policy flowchart. It is his opinion that clearly citizens are taking matters into their own hands and that we need to increase our enforcement levels.

The group discussed the need for a subcommittee to work on the development of an education piece. Additionally, it was agreed that this group would contact the individual landowners highlighted in Clarks presentation and send each of them copies of the viewshed policy and flowchart. Judy Gibbs volunteered to coordinate this effort.

New Business:

Woodland Avenue & Upcoming construction projects

Tom Pfeffer (City of Duluth - Senior Engineer) shared a project list for the 2018 season that was prepared by Cindy Voigt (City of Duluth – City Engineer).

Tom explained to the Commissioners that the Woodland Avenue construction project is assigned to him and that the City is a *participant* on this County led project. The County is responsible for the road design and the sidewalks while the City is handling intersections and side streets. The County sought the City's input specifically regarding trees and plantings. There is no finalized plan yet, but he has been assured that the County is planning on planting trees where they can. The County will be planting and installing trees that have a 2-year warranty. The County is then hoping that the City will provide continued maintenance. Tom will be working with Clark to select tree species and enhance soil conditions which will hopefully increase survivability.

Judy thanked Tom for speaking to this effort and for clearing up these rumors. Judy questioned whether the City is set up to take over the maintenance of these trees?

Erik Birkeland explained that while taking on more maintenance responsibilities is *always* a challenge, he agreed, that yes, we see that as a possibility. Furthermore, he agreed that engaging the Forester in the early stage will hopefully increase success as replanting's can be expensive endeavors. Erik shared that it is clear that the citizens of Duluth have an expectation that there will be trees along our boulevards.

Judy asked Tom to speak to his knowledge of who will be overseeing the County's tree plantings, so that the City can be sure they go in properly? Tom shared that past plantings have failed for a whole host of reasons including using low bid contractors, snow plowing, salt use, etc. Judy shared that perhaps the City should consider developing a standard or adopt the MN planting booklet and also require that qualified staff oversee plantings. Tom assured the group that on this project all parties are making strides to work collaboratively.

Gary Anderson suggested that the City develop a standard policy regarding tree plantings on street projects. A policy that would include best practices, identify key species, and mandate enhanced soil conditions. He charged the Commission to push for this and felt it would have Administrative backing.

Beth Kleinke commented that the City really needs to have the right staff onboard who have the knowledge and expertise to handle tree plantings.

Three representatives from Park Maintenance attended the meeting and shared that it would be ideal that when a planting is done that there be some record, or data base created, documenting species and type so that Park Maintenance staff would be better equipped to care for the trees.

Erik Birkeland assured the Commission that the city is engaged in this process and determined to make it work.

Forestry & Natural Resources Coordinator – Position Updates

Erik Birkeland reported that both the Forester and the Natural Resources Coordinator position descriptions had been finalized and will be presented for council approval on April 23rd.

The Forester position will be under the Park Maintenance division and the hope is to have someone in place by June 1st pending financial and administrative approval.

The Natural Resources Coordinator position will be under the Parks and Recreation division. Currently this position is filled provisionally by Diane Desotelle. Once approved by finance and administration, the hope is to have this position in place by the beginning of the 3rd quarter (July 1st).

Erik shared that these positions are a big improvement and that heading into the third quarter the City is looking at a more robust staff on board that will be able to address these types of issues.

Commission Effectiveness

The Commissioners continued their discussion from last month on how to be more effective. The group agreed that one focus would be on attracting and selecting commissioners with a broader understanding of Natural Resources issues. It was determined that the group as a whole currently has a good grip on Forestry but that they could increase knowledge in areas such as the MIC, Transportation, Invasive, IKES, among other groups.

Additionally, Judy Gibbs will be leading a sub-committee of commissioners who will focus on goals for the future. This group has an initial meeting scheduled and are planning to meet twice a month for 2-3 months to focus on increasing effectiveness and transformation. A motion was passed that the group would present on potential changes in two months' time.

Mike Pennington commented that this commission should be assured somehow that their input should not only be needed but be deemed necessary. He is of the opinion that currently the UFC is viewed as an "advisory" body.

Beth shared that she thought it would be a good idea for the subcommittee to contact staff from the County Land Department to discuss setting goals and objectives. She commented that currently the UFC doesn't have an Urban Forest Master Plan and that the development of such a document would prove to be effective.

Arbor Day Celebration

Brandon Van Tassel will be meeting with the City's Volunteer Coordinator in his capacity as the Duluth Stream Corps Project Manager for Community Action Duluth, to discuss a plan for Arbor Day. His vision is to have some planting projects in July or August that utilize citizens. He is determined to include an educational component to these activities to emphasize why the trees are being planted. Lincoln Park will be the primary site for the volunteer crews.

A member of the public commented that she was glad to hear of this plan. Her feelings are that Arbor Day should be a joyous and community wide celebration and that including the educational component was an excellent idea.

Alison Clarke (Friends of Western Duluth Parks & Trails) commented that she was in attendance representing several local organizations that would be interested partnering and/or co-sponsoring the Arbor Day tree planting in Lincoln Park.

Brandon shared that he would follow up with Alison once he had met with the City's Volunteer Coordinator to shared ideas and contact information.

Adjournment

There was a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:03, m/s/c.