



NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes October 4, 2023
Duluth City Hall, Conference Room 330

I. Call to Order

Chair Lindgren called the meeting to order at 6:01 PM.

II. Roll Call

Commissioners Present: Lori Dando, Pam Foster, Judy Gibbs, John Lindgren, Mike Schrage, Nancy Schuldt, Tiffany Sprague

Absent: Andrew Streitz

Staff Present: Jim Filby Williams, Kate Kubiak, Sam Singer

III. Approval of the Agenda

Commissioner Dando made a motion to approve the agenda; seconded by Vice Chair Schuldt. Unanimously approved.

IV. Approval of the September 6, 2023 Meeting Minutes

Secretary Gibbs made a motion to approve the September 6, 2023 meeting minutes; seconded by Commissioner Foster. Unanimously approved.

V. Old Business

A. Proposed Focus Watersheds – MOTION TO APPROVE

Kubiak reviewed three proposed focus watersheds, Amity, Tischer, and Keene Creek. Asking for a motion to approve the proposed focus watersheds. If the NRC approves, they will be submitted as a resolution to the city council either at the next or the following council meeting.

Chair Lindgren asks if the recognizing focus watersheds integrates well with Natural Resources Program, and if we focus on these watersheds, whether the city pursue funding opportunities and resources for those areas. Kubiak responds that, as opportunities come up, partners who have their own niches, would work towards addressing issues. The city wouldn't apply for a stream restoration grant, but would support partners and will help us work towards getting the streams in these watersheds off of the impaired list.

Commissioner Dando asks if there are any budget impacts as a result of the NRC approving the proposed focus watersheds and Kubiak says no. Commissioner Dando agrees that the NRC's action would provide an emphasis on these watersheds.

Kubiak explains that this is where the energy and the money is, and focusing on these three watersheds.

Vice Chair Schuldt comments that our commission has a specific focus, and we don't always have action items on the agenda with most of the NRC role being review and advisory. Seems like this is a case that we can make a recommendation by resolution that can go directly to council. Asks if NRC is the only one bringing information on these watersheds to the council on this issue. Kubiak confirms this topic isn't being presented to the council by any other group.

Vice Chair Schuldt made a motion to approve the priority focus on these three watersheds; seconded by Commissioner Dando. Unanimously approved.



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VI. New Business

B. 2023 Stream Restoration Work – Tischer and Miller Creeks [Speaker: Tim Beaster, South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District]

Tim Beaster, Conservationist for the South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), attended the meeting to provide information on stream restoration projects.

Since the flood of 2012, there has been an increased awareness of stream health, resulting in more opportunities to identify and fix potential issues. Beaster presented on two completed projects and introduced future projects the South St. Louis SWCD will be working on.

The first project was to remove a derelict culvert on West Branch Tischer Creek, located where Maryland Street dead ends near Bagley Nature Area. The culvert sat in the woods for 70 years and is undersized at 4 feet despite the stream being 12 feet wide. The culvert created a barrier to brook trout migration and caused sediment upstream – negatively impacting stream health and fish migration. The South St. Louis SWCD was able to secure funding for the \$80,000 project from GLRI and Conservation Partners Legacy grant to remove the culvert and restore the stream channel. As a result of this work, trout are able to pass through the area, and access 2.4 miles of additional stream up through Hartley Nature Area. Beaster thanked the City of Duluth, the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and three private property owners who all cooperated with the SWCD to allow access for the project.

The second project, Miller Creek restoration, was previously brought before the NRC to ask permission to use some of the trees on site to aid in the project. Miller Creek is a trout stream, impaired for temperature among other things. During high flow events, water is contained in the stream channel, creating problems downstream. Sediment is staying in the channel, settling on the bottom and destroying habitat. Additional problems described as a result of the stream not being able to access floodplains. The restoration work turned the 2,500 ft ditch into a 5,000 ft meandering channel, using material excavated from channel to build the banks. As a result of the NRC's approval to use materials on site, and repurposing other materials, the restoration work did not require any materials to be brought in from off site. The South St. Louis SWCD was able to secure funding for the project through the Outdoor Heritage Fund, GLRI, and the Coastal Program.

The April 2023 snowmelt showed the benefit of the work in the floodplain—the floodwaters were distributed across the floodplain rather than concentrating in the channel. The water throughout the floodplain better distributed the sediment allowing for water infiltration into the ground rather than flowing downstream via the channel, carrying sediment with it.

Chair Lindgren comments that this restoration work could likely reduce the pressure on the system downstream. Discussion on whether stream restoration is green infrastructure. Rain event in September also provided opportunity to confirm that restoration work at Miller Creek has the intended outcome.

Future projects the South St. Louis SWCD is planning include a stream restoration project for Buckingham Creek to address warming of the water. Other planned work is directed at Amity Creek, to address the impairment in two areas from incised, unstable stream banks. Amity Creek is a big priority and is known as the best trout stream in Duluth. Planning to working over the next ten years and delist both areas. The South St. Louis SWCD is also planning work on Kingsbury Creek in Proctor, and mentioned to the NRC because of



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the downstream impacts in Duluth as Kingsbury Creek flows through the zoo. Vice Chair Schuldt mentions Kingsbury Bay has been identified in the past as an area of focus. Beaster confirms that the sediment flowing through Kingsbury Creek impacts Kingsbury Bay.

The South St. Louis SWCD also received a Coastal Program grant to address gaps in data on culvert inventory. They know there are unmapped, smaller headwater tributaries and crossings but may be unaware if any are problems. Looking to identify and assess those culverts that haven't yet been assessed with this project.

Secretary Gibbs asks if downstream affects of these culverts will be considered during this project. Beaster says they are prioritizing trout stream watersheds. Downside of culverts is they inhibit trout migration. Any that haven't been assessed will be assessed unless they are on private land and permission isn't granted to access them.

Culvert replacements will be prioritized by habitat and reconnecting trout to get them moved back into habitats that they need – especially in light of warming streams and more frequent flooding.

Commissioner Sprague asks if the trees in Miller Creek were used in the restoration work. Beaster says yes, contractor used the root balls from mostly balsam poplar to protect the stream bank. Replanted a lot of cedar and other higher value trees. Beaster appreciates being allowed to use them, saved a lot of money on the project.

Chair Lindgren comments it's great to see focus on the watersheds going down the hill in light of past focus on AOC. Now focus is on sediment issues that flow down into the AOC. Beaster appreciates partners. JFW comments that the city appreciates the partnership with SSWCD. Beaster offers out a tour for any of these project sites, Kubiak could set it up.

C. Hartley DNAP – Wild Ones Garden

A small part of the natural management plan for Hartley has been achieved. Parking island in Hartley previously occupied by lots of tansy and buckthorn has been replanted by the Wild Ones Garden group in partnership with the city. The city removed the tansy, put in good soil, and provided mulch. Wild Ones volunteers did the planting and will do some of the ongoing maintenance. Invasive species management is a small part of the plan, and has been achieved.

VII. Staff Reports

A. Natural Resources Coordinator Report

Refer to written report for updates on work in process. Commissioner Schrage asks about the forester's past initiative on timber harvesting within the city. Has noticed some of the forests in West Duluth would benefit from management. Concerned there may be issues similar to what's happening up the shore as a result of not maintaining forests and loss of birch trees. Hopes it does not fall off the table and is still being considered.

Kubiak says no one has been bidding on the thinning projects that have been posted. Managing the larger parcels of forests is being discussed. Just applied to DNR to do some tree planting in Mission Forest, under ash, and also up in Amity for white pine regeneration. Filby Williams states that the projects have been



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posted twice with no bids being submitted. Suspects the reasons may be the result of imposed appropriate limits and conditions that would make in the best case be a borderline, nonviable timber harvest, nonviable. Commissioner Schrage asks if maybe we need to find supplemental funding to make this viable.

Good News: The Magney Snively management plan is 20 years old and quite big. Planning a more detailed look at Magney Snively Natural Area and how to keep it pristine, keep buckthorn out and develop an updated management plan. The city has been awarded a grant from the MN Land Trust for \$500K, requiring a \$70K match from the city, with the grant period starting in January and lasting three years. These funds can be used to implement an updated management plan for Magney Snively.

B. Director's Report

Filby Williams provided an update on efforts to acquire and protect open space in Amity Creek between Jean Duluth Rd and Woodland Ave. There are about 400-500 acres of ecologically valuable, undevelopable property owned by four property owners (city of Duluth, St. Louis County – tax forfeit, and two cemetery associations). One of those cemetery associations put their open space up for sale. The city is on pace to get approval with the state two previously awarded state grant and one federal grant to acquire 54 acres, 1500 linear feet of stream course. It is likely that will be considered by the city council at the October 30th meeting, possibly as early as October 16th meeting.

Working with EPA partners towards a Spirit Lake remediation project celebration event the week of October 23rd. Mayor's office is coordinating. Presuming that goes forward, Filby Williams will make certain that they reach out to all valued partners.

Chair Lindgren comments he appreciates the hustle on the land owned by the cemetery association.

Secretary Gibbs mentioned past efforts to develop land near and owned by cemetery associations. A lot of the neighbors that are over on that area ended up buying the tax forfeit land in there so it wouldn't be developed. Filby Williams believes the city's approach to the land in question is consistent with comp plan, to forego acquisition and protection of that subset of the acreage that is contiguous but is on dry reasonably flat land contiguous with the existing, developed transportation network. Filby Williams feels what the city is doing for those neighborhoods is impactful, and is looking forward to engaging those communities – letting them know about the work we are doing with that land.

Chair Lindgren brought up that these lands are different ecologically with the soils. Preservation with those areas is critical, where the water is falling on the land and recharging the streams. Came up with the Vassar St project, looking to prioritize these areas. Acknowledges they are important for social reasons but also critical for cold water streams.

VIII. Announcements

None.

IX. Public Comment

No public comments.

X. Adjournment



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Vice Chair Schuldt made a motion to adjourn; second by Commissioner Foster. Unanimously approved.

Meeting adjourned at 7:11 PM.

Next Meeting - Wednesday, November 1, at 6:00 p.m. in Duluth City Hall, Conference Room 155.