



PARKS & RECREATION ADVISORY BOARD MEETING MINUTES

April 1, 2026, 6 PM - Grand Rapids Public Service Center

Call to Order

Meeting was called to order at 6:03 PM

Roll Call

Members Present: Max Gibbs, Luke Stier, Sonja Forte, Kelli Jo Peltier, Hannah Mico, Megan Catcho, Stacy Bare, Marta Johnson, and Nate Rauh-Bieri

Staff Present: Laura Cleypool, Chardonnay Henderson, and Christy Brunsell

Approval of Agenda

Motion made by Stacy Bare, supported by Max Gibbs, to approve the agenda as presented. Motion carried.

Approval of Minutes

Motion made by Kelli Jo Peltier, supported by Megan Catcho, to approve the February 4, 2026 minutes as presented. Motion carried.

Comments from Public

None.

Agenda Item(s)

Naming of Mayor's Grove at Riverside Park: Laura presented the proposed naming of Mayor's Grove, a new multi-use space within Riverside Park designed as an outdoor classroom and green space to honor Mayor Bliss's tenure. The group that brought the project forward followed the City's naming policy, which required a contribution of half the project cost, and fulfilled that requirement. Because the feature constitutes a major element within a park, Advisory Board approval is required. Postcards were sent to all residents within a 300-foot vicinity of the park notifying them of the opportunity to comment. No members of the public were present to speak. Motion made by Stacy Bare, supported by Luke Stier, to approve Mayor's Grove as the official name for the new space within Riverside Park. Motion carried.

Budget Update: Laura provided an update on the City's budget process. The preliminary budget will be presented to the City Commission on April 28, at which point commissioners will have the opportunity to weigh in before final approval in May. Laura noted that the Parks and Recreation Department did not request significant changes overall but did submit two specific requests: additional funding for the forestry division, and a new full-time position along with expanded funding in park operations to establish a trail maintenance crew. The new crew would initially focus on paved trails, with potential to expand to other trail types as the park system continues to develop. Laura indicated that the general operating fund is tight, and final decisions will not be known until commission approval. No action taken.

Urban Agriculture Grant Update: Laura provided an update on the \$500,000 EAGLE grant received by the Parks and Recreation Department, which was previously presented to the board by Joe Sulak. The department issued a Request for Qualifications for potential sub-recipients and has approximately \$300,000 to award, distributed across two rounds. The Urban Agriculture Committee, along with project

manager Angelica, reviewed submissions and has identified two to three projects totaling approximately \$150,000 for the first round. Potential project sites include Joe Taylor Park, Garfield Park, and Martin Luther King Park, though Laura noted these are not final until approved by the City Commission, which is expected to occur at the end of April. A second round of solicitation will follow later in the summer. No action taken.

Parks Master Plan Update: Laura provided an update on the Parks Master Plan, also covering on behalf of Karie Enriquez. The department has officially contracted with Veritas, the firm that completed the 2022 refresh, to conduct the next plan update. By way of background, the department completed a full master plan overhaul in 2017 — a new mission, new vision, and new structure — followed by a refresh in 2022. The current update is due to the state by the end of January 2026, which maintains the department's eligibility for MDNR Trust Fund grants and fulfills the five-year update requirement. Community engagement is scheduled to run from May through approximately August or September, with a rough draft expected in October. Laura indicated the board should anticipate a presentation of the plan recommendations in October and will be asked for feedback at that time. Laura also noted that the 2031 cycle will involve a full refresh, given how significantly the department and its partnerships have evolved since 2016. No action taken.

Comments from the board/partner reports

Stacy Bare/Friends of Grand Rapids Parks (FGRP): Stacy provided several updates. Arbor Fest is scheduled for April 24 and 25, with two shifts (Friday afternoon and Saturday morning) and registration capped at 350 participants. Approximately 150 people are already registered to plant 200–250 trees, with additional giveaways, at Garfield Park. On May 5, Friends of Grand Rapids Parks will welcome a new trail coordinator, selected through a national search that drew approximately 90 applicants. The coordinator will focus on improving existing trails and restoring habitat in the 10–20 foot corridor along trail edges, including fuels removal. Stacy noted enthusiasm for collaborating with the City's new trail coordinator, emphasizing that partnership is where both organizations do their best work. On June 6, Friends will participate in National Trails Day with volunteer opportunities at the bike park, similar in format to Arbor Fest. Stacy also shared that a parks passport project is underway — less of a game and more of a field guide — expected to be available by summer. Stacy highlighted ongoing conservation work being guided by the lens of the 1821 Treaty of Chicago, which ceded this territory from the Three Fires Confederacy to the federal government. A forging workshop on May 2 will introduce invited guests to what that treaty framework looks like in practice. Broader conservation conversations are ongoing around oak savanna and maple forest restoration, Norway maple removal, and the potential reintroduction of controlled burns in some parks, with updates to the Floral Quality Index and natural resource management plans anticipated. Finally, Stacy shared that Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is partnering with Baxter Community Center and GR Outside to pilot an outdoor recreation-focused summer engagement series. One day per week over a ten-week summer camp, a group of youth will be taken to different parks throughout the region. Stacy highlighted the collaboration with Ari from Sandra's team and Sam from GR Outside, noting that this type of citywide outdoor engagement for youth does not yet exist in any meaningful way in Grand Rapids.

Megan Catcho/Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI): A representative provided several updates. The summer concert series, Relax at Rosa, returns in May with weekly Thursday events from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. featuring food trucks, music, and games. Planning is also underway for a festival in late August. Two new activations were highlighted: a ribbon cutting for the Women's Way alleyway mural in late May, located at the Public Museum School, and a historical projection mapping show called The Grand Rapidian, which will be displayed on the Civic Auditorium using infrastructure installed during the Lion Square renovations. The show is being developed in collaboration with a local artist.

Luke Stier/Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS): Luke shared two updates. First, the proposal period for new uses of the Stocking and Alexander school sites closes tonight at midnight. The department has been working closely with the City on this process. Community feedback gathered at meetings held in January emphasized the importance of preserving green space at the Stocking site, particularly given the limited amount of green space in that neighborhood. That community input has been incorporated into the scoring matrix used to evaluate proposals. Results are expected to be shared with the community over the next month and a half. Second, the Grand Canoe Experience at Riverside Park is approaching, scheduled for the week of May 11. The event is a partnership between GRPS, the Parks and Recreation Department, and several other community organizations.

Urban Forestry Committee (Christy Brunsell): Christy provided an update on behalf of the Urban Forestry Committee, noting that the March meeting was canceled but the committee meets again next week. Christy shared progress on the formation of a communications subcommittee, which originated last fall when Park Superintendent Joe Sulak, who also serves on the Urban Forestry Committee, approached Christy on the committee's behalf to request a subcommittee focused on communications for the forestry division. The subcommittee has since met and developed a plan to improve communications between the forestry division and residents, with a focus on empowering residents to know what to do and not to do with their trees, and who to contact for assistance. The subcommittee is building out a committee of contributors who will develop messaging on a set schedule tied to key events throughout the year. Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is participating, including their foresters and communications specialist. The goal is to produce cohesive, coordinated messaging that can be distributed across multiple channels, with flexibility for partner organizations to carry messaging that may not be appropriate for the City to share directly. Christy offered to share notes from the subcommittee with any board members interested.

Future agenda items

- Naming policy (June meeting)
- Master plan discussion (June meeting)
- Meeting Luke Bronkema, Assistant Director, Parks & Rec (June)
- (Park) Parking lots

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 6:53 PM