The meeting convened at 6:30 p.m.

Councilmembers present: Mayor Jake Spano, Tim Brausen, Rachel Harris, Larry Kraft, Anne Mavity, Nadia Mohamed, and Margaret Rog.

Councilmembers absent: none.

Staff present: City Manager (Mr. Harmening), CFO (Mr. Simon), CIO (Mr. Pires), Police Chief Harcey, Fire Chief Koering, Building and Energy Director (Mr. Hoffman), Director of Operations and Recreation (Ms. Walsh), Engineering Director (Ms. Heiser), City Attorney (Mr. Mattick), Deputy City Manager/Human Resources Director (Ms. Deno), Director of Community Development (Ms. Barton), Racial Equity Manager (Ms. Sojourner), Communications Manager (Ms. Smith), Senior Management Analyst (Ms. Solano), and Recording Secretary (Ms. Pappas).

Guests: None

1. Covid-19 Update


Fire Chief Koering stated he serves as the Emergency Management Coordinator during the pandemic. He stated the city continues to operate at a level 4, which has been working very well. He noted the pandemic plan and emergency operations center are run in a virtual environment, and the operational plan is set up 1 week in advance. There are goals, strategic objectives, and a structured plan to meet within the 1-week timeframe. He added that city directors are part of the planning process and stated the care coordinator is the liaison for every senior facility in the city. She is in contact daily with each facility, to stay ahead of the virus getting into these populations. He pointed out there are currently no incidences of COVID-19 in any of the St. Louis Park senior facilities.

Fire Chief Koering added he is in daily contact with STEP, Park Nicollet Health Services, and Park Nicollet Foundation. Mr. Harmening is in contact with the chamber of commerce, while Ms. Sojourner stays in touch with the historically underserved populations in St. Louis Park, making sure there are no gaps and looking for resources.

Fire Chief Koering stated Mr. Harmening sees the weekly action plan and signs off on it each week. He also noted a daily activity log is kept, in order to keep track of any costs associated with Covid-19 work, so as to keep a record for FEMA in order to receive reimbursements. They are also tracking PPE for public safely needs, and to recover costs from FEMA. He stated as this all evolves, there may be a need for volunteers, donations, and the emergency plan will also look at how to approach this.
Councilmember Kraft asked what FEMA reimburses to cities. Chief Koering explained anything related to COVID-19 that is above normal expenditure is documented and tracked so it can be submitted to FEMA for reimbursement if and when reimbursement policies become clear.

Councilmember Kraft asked how the city is doing so far on needs and tracking costs. Chief Koering stated the city is doing fine, doing a great job of planning and taking care of city needs. He added there is a number of growing community needs as well, such as food shelf needs and growing concerns on utility and rent bills. He noted as things move along, there will be a path to county and state resources to help with these needs.

Councilmember Rog thanked the Fire Chief and staff for all they are doing, adding she is appreciative of the work both fire and police are involved in with the Orthodox Jewish community. She asked if any fire or police staff are in isolation or quarantine. Chief Koering stated not at this time.

Councilmember Rog asked Chief Koering about the rec center being set aside as potential hospital space for Methodist Hospital. Chief Koering stated this was discussed earlier on when looking at potential city space for surge capacity at Methodist Hospital, for non COVID-19 patients. He noted this is a proactive preparedness measure, and if the space were needed, the ice could be removed quickly in order to house patients. He added the emergency management team continues to be in discussions with Park Nicollet on this issue.

Councilmember Rog asked if the city is secure on PPE at this time. Chief Koering stated while there is a shortage across the US at this time of PPE, the fire department has a good inventory in place for their staff, which was left from the past, careful planning, and ordering ahead. He added the fire department continues to monitor the CDC and MHD guidelines for safety of firefighters.

Councilmember Rog asked if this PPE supports Methodist Hospital at all. Chief Koering stated no, Park Nicollet Foundation (PNF) is conducting a PPE drive at their 3900 Building location on Excelsior Avenue and collecting PPE that goes to the MN Healthcare Consortium, where it is shared across the entire healthcare system in Minnesota.

Councilmember Rog asked what other types of donations are currently needed in St. Louis Park. Chief Koering stated food and cash donations are needed for STEP and later, volunteers will be needed after the appropriate PPE is acquired.

Councilmember Rog stated she was pleased to hear this and looks forward to safe ways for people to volunteer. Chief Koering added staff is working with the city’s volunteer coordinator to develop a list of volunteers, and residents can email the chief to be added to the list.

Mayor Spano noted STEP does have sufficient food for the next two weeks and will accept cash donations.
Councilmember Mavity stated she wants to be sure everything is being communicated to residents, so they hear about something, before they see it happening. Chief Koering stated communication with citizens will continue at all times, no matter what the incident.

Councilmember Harris asked if the city is looking at where we are as compared to rest of the world and also where residents think we are and what is that. Chief Koering stated the police and fire departments are meeting people where they live, and getting feedback from them, while measuring all of this against what we are hearing in the news and in the world. He stated it seems in St. Louis Park, it does not feel as chaotic as in other places. While people are scared and apprehensive, they do feel the city is staying ahead of this and doing a great job.

Councilmember Harris asked if the Good to be Home Program could be used for follow-up, or a virtual meeting for mental health and well-being. Chief Koering stated Good to be Home and CERT would not be appropriate as the folks who follow-up are not trained appropriately for COVID-19. He added Good to be Home and CERT visits add value, but are not a good fit right now, create another entry point, and possible exposure.

Mayor Spano asked what tool is in place in the structured incident management plan for longer term planning, like a month or two months ahead. Chief Koering stated the incident action plan is guided for weeklong preparations and outside of that is work the directors and Mr. Harmening are doing.

Mayor Spano asked how the team is doing emotionally, and how is morale currently. He noted where there is a high risk and high demand situation, it can wear on people overtime, and he asked staff to keep this in mind. Chief Koering stated the process and structure brings calm to the situation, and everyone has been accepting of the framework. He added the team is concerned but is working together very well.

Chief Harcey stated the police took immediate steps to isolate patrols and shifts while having the minimum number of investigators working in the office, while others are working from home. He added the police department front desk is open.

Chief Harcey added much work has been done with dispatch, and Edina will be back up if needed, along with Hennepin County. He noted they have a good plan in place to continue operations no matter what staffing levels are. He stated police are seeing calls for service at average, and police are no longer responding to upper respiratory or flu symptoms as fire is now handling all of this. He added there is a small increase in domestic disturbances, and increase in auto thefts, while there has been an increase in burglaries across Hennepin County.

Chief Harcey added police are doing extra patrolling at religious institutions that are empty now, and construction sites, and the police received a lot of questions about the Governor’s executive order. He stated they are responding to these questions and on social media as well.

Ms. Walsh stated signs have been added in all 52 park areas, encouraging distancing. Park structures have been closed and maintenance staff is running different shifts, so they maintain zero interaction with each other. All programming and events at the nature center have been cancelled until May 15 for now, and the skate park and basketball courts are being monitored.
She added there is much concern for the areas where kids are congregating. Skate parks are still open at this time and can remain open if they don’t get overcrowded. She stated staff is monitoring the situation.

Councilmember Kraft noted in Edina, there are challenges with folks gathering, and Edina has issued a strong warning that they will enforce the misdemeanor. He asked if St. Louis Park is seeing the same kind of issues with gathering. Chief Harcey stated the Hennepin County chiefs have discussed this and everyone is on same page, with enforcement being a last option. He added this is voluntary compliance at this time.

Councilmember Mohamed stated with the weather getting nicer and youth gathering at the park, it is a concern and also is a misdemeanor crime. She asked Chief Harcey to review the fine and process. Chief Harcey stated the misdemeanor crime is 90 days in jail and $1,000 fine.

Councilmember Mohamed added there is a lot of misinformation on the stay at home orders and asked for clarification. Chief Harcey stated the Governor’s office issued an executive order for all citizens to stay at home, while 7 businesses and 35 job classifications that are exempt. He suggested folks look at the Governor’s website or call the police department for more information.

Mr. Harmening added there is nothing in the Governor’s order about not walking or exercising but if people are congregating it’s an issue, and they must stay 6 feet apart.

Councilmember Rog stated there will need to be messaging on the city’s stance on this and with people at parks, where to report sightings of congregating. She asked if the city phone app might be appropriate to notify about congregating. She added she is getting lots of questions from residents on this.

Mr. Harmening noted that this has been a difficult question, adding that Edina has taken a more stringent line and actions, like fencing off park equipment, and not using fields and park facilities. He stated St. Louis Park can do some things to help lower congregating at parks, like putting fences around the skatepark and obstacles in it to make it harder for someone to use. Likewise, he added, all rims can be removed from basketball courts, and they can also be fenced in. He added, however, the police will not arrest for congregating. But if the council has guidance on this or if the city should be more proactive or stringent, they can direct this.

Councilmember Rog stated she is not in favor of fencing in the park equipment. She asked if residents should call police if they see congregating. Mr. Harmening stated yes, they can call police on the non-emergency line.

Chief Harcey noted the police non-emergency phone number is 952-924-2618.

Councilmember Rog asked for some type of messaging on this to residents. She added she is concerned about the increase in domestic incidents. Chief Harcey stated there have been no arrests, and no domestic assaults, but the police work closely with Cornerstone and can get information out on social media about Cornerstone’s services.
Mayor Spano added that distancing is a concern and when kids are done with spring break, they may be more compliant.

Councilmember Harris asked if there is a city liaison who communicates with Perspectives about the uptick in verbal incidents. Chief Harcey stated there is a liaison that works with Perspectives, but there are no reports of increases at this time.

Councilmember Harris added with regard to social distancing, perhaps the schools can help to get the message out to parents as well. Mr. Harmening stated staff is in communication with the school district ongoing and will follow up on this idea.

Councilmember Brausen stated he has no issue at all with occasional group of kids getting together in the parks, adding he does not want to become a police state. He stated there is no perfect system to keep this issue in check, and the city is doing a good job of spreading the message about social distancing. He stated kids will congregate and a certain percentage will not comply, but if the vast majority do comply, we are doing our part to flatten the curve.

Mayor Spano agreed it is a challenge, adding that Edina is taking a more aggressive stance. However, it is not more than strong words at this point. He stated in speaking with Edina Mayor Hovland, they are instituting counter clockwise movement on walking trails. He added he agrees broadly with the approach Police Chief Harcey is taking.

Mr. Harmening noted also that Chief Harcey is working with the skateboarder’s social media page in getting the social distancing information out.

Councilmember Mavity stated she agrees with Councilmember Brausen on this issue and as long as the police are handling this issue, she does not support escalating in any way. She added it might be helpful to create social media that is humorous, or a contest, that would appeal to folks about social distancing.

**Department updates**

Mr. Simon stated finance has been planning for COVID impacts, and not waiting until June to do planning and analysis, while also working to stay in front of the issue. He stated staff and the team is engaged, doing sensitivity analysis, and looking at impacts currently.

Mr. Simon added staff is looking at recreation programs, and other outstanding expenses to help mitigate, as well as looking at building permits, tracking property taxes, and possible effects of delayed payment. He stated they are also reviewing capital expenditures and the bond market, noting that with interest rates so low, there is not a demand for municipal bonds currently. He stated they are also tracking costs for potential reimbursements and working closely with department directors on what can be delayed. Mr. Simon stated the council will be kept apprised and there will be more to come.

Ms. Deno stated Mr. Bultema is currently working with Hennepin County on property values, while Ms. Kennedy is working as the assistant to Chief Koering, as well as on elections and records. Ms. Solano is working with boards and commissions, while Ms. Sojourner is working on
outreach, and Ms. Timpone continues her focus on city employees, support, families, and helping set up staff to work from home. Employee communications include daily meetings and updates with Mr. Harmening and keeping business going, while supporting staff well-being.

Ms. Sojourner stated while the total community is extremely important, they are focusing on the historically underserved, reaching out, and connecting. She is connecting with stakeholders who work with those groups and neighborhood associations, on a weekly basis and with other racial equity folks in other cities. She noted St. Louis Park is a bit ahead of the curve.

Ms. Sojourner stated she is hearing there is a huge fear of contracting COVID, personal economic challenges, job loss, rent, electricity, food shortage, concern about children and youth, distance learning, and keeping kids busy. She added there is an increase of concern for the mental health for both youth and parents.

Ms. Sojourner added she’s had calls from community members who are undocumented and have less resources, and who may not have access to certain food shelves, are worried about getting tested, or no access to the stimulus package.

Ms. Sojourner stated Ramadan starts at the end of April and she has heard a lot of people concerned about their celebrations. They are also working on getting messages out about completing the 2020 census. She stated there are concerns of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia, and staff is monitoring this, although nothing has been heard on this yet. Messages are going out on social media to folks about how to get help if they are experiencing any racism issues.

Ms. Heiser stated the Governor’s order identifies construction as critical and essential work. She stated staff will finish pavement management projects, as well as sanitary sewer lining, curb and gutter projects, Bridgewater Bank, and the Dakota Bridge bikeway. She added some construction staff is working from home and some on site with physical distancing. She stated they will not engage any projects for 2021 at this time.

Ms. Barton stated all of her staff is working from home except one, who is at Hamilton House. She noted the Governor has suspended all eviction actions in the state and information has been distributed to property owners to waive late fees and work with renters. She stated St. Louis Park is doing this as well with all public housing. All voucher and public housing tenants are able to get rent reductions whether or not their situation is COVID-related.

Ms. Barton stated $108,000 has been allocated to STEP for rent assistance and COVID-related rent assistance and can be used by one household for 3 months in a row. She added staff has sent information to residents about resources available to them and is asking owners to also share this information with residents as well.

Related to business assistance, Ms. Barton stated staff has a robust list of assistance for small businesses on the city website, and the city has suspended all enforcement actions related to temporary signs for small business. She added staff will mail a postcard to all businesses in the city notifying them of resources and leading them to the city website and also to a staff contact. She added staff will also call all St. Louis Park businesses to tell them about resources, and ask...
how the city can help them, while also directing them to the city website. She noted staff will continue with all planning and zoning as well through WebEx and zoom conferencing.

Mr. Pires stated technology has worked on deployment for employees working remotely and also began staggering staff to have them work different shifts and distanced from others. He added technology staff offers remote support and responds to help desk calls.

Mr. Pires noted staff and council will be using WebEx as the tool future meetings. Regular council meetings will continue to be live streamed on Channel 17. He stated the first council meeting by WebEx will be held April 6, and the public hearing component will be added to the April 15 meeting.

Mr. Pires stated the city has a dedicated webpage for COVID-19 and is working with other city departments to publicize cancelled events. He added his staff is also working collaboratively with other cities.

Mr. Hoffman stated the Governor’s order allows continuing of inspections and permits, adding he has inspectors work both on site and is exploring doing video inspections as well. He stated inspectors are using PPE if necessary and all rental and business inspections have been stopped, with only essential ones being conducted, related to real estate and sales.

Mr. Hoffman added the sustainability staff is working from home, and facilities and maintenance staff are disinfecting buildings, and wiping down surfaces to reduce contamination. He added maintenance staff is on rotating shifts as well.

Councilmember Kraft asked how much of the city’s budget is at risk, and what are the best-case and worst-case scenarios. Mr. Simon stated the directors are finalizing numbers currently, and it will be presented to Mr. Harmening soon. He stated there may be budget amendments, and after more data is available, staff will be able to make estimates.

Councilmember Kraft asked what happened with tax delinquencies in 2008. Mr. Simon stated he will look into that, but noted tax payments come in throughout the year, and even if late, will still be coming in.

Councilmember Mohamed stated it is important for the city to be sympathetic for people’s struggles. She asked how lenient the city will be with utility payments and rents. Ms. Barton stated at city-owned properties, in public housing units, the city will work with tenants on payment plans, and adjusting rents, as well as paying renter’s utilities. She added they are encouraging owners to also work with renters on waiving fees and providing rent assistance for 3 months through STEP.

Councilmember Mohamed asked what the city is recommending related to Ramadan, as it can get overly crowded during the celebrations. She noted many residents will go to Minnetonka and Minneapolis mosques for the celebrations. Ms. Sojourner stated staff is watching and waiting on Ramadan currently, and educating the Islamic communities, as well as all faith communities, about social distancing.
Councilmember Rog asked if there are any updates on election planning. Ms. Deno stated Ms. Kennedy is in touch with Hennepin County and the Secretary of State’s office and there is more to come on this related to what is decided on various levels.

Councilmember Rog asked if there would be an extra cost to the city if we change the way our elections are done. Ms. Deno stated it would depend on whether there were more mailings involved, and noted Ms. Kennedy is gathering information and will advise on this soon.

Councilmember Rog asked if the city is taking direction from the Governor and President, putting the stay at home orders out to April 30, and if the city is looking at 30 days or more.

Chief Koering stated he does not have an answer to that but would expect the Governor to extend the stay at home orders to the end of April, or into May.

Councilmember Rog asked how city businesses are doing, if take out is going well for restaurants, and if any layoffs have occurred. Ms. Barton stated some restaurants have had to let staff go, while some are doing curbside delivery. She noted Punchbowl Social laid off their entire staff and pointed out statistics from DEED will be 2 months behind.

Councilmember Mavity stated the plans of the finance department make sense and the city should continue forward as outlined. She stated the city will have revenue and higher costs, which is cause for concern, especially when hearing health insurance costs might go up 40% next year. She stated they will need to think hard about what that will mean for the city and need to consider not raising taxes next year.

Councilmember Mavity added the city might need to put some discretionary costs on hold and be extra cautious. She added the council will need to think hard on what priorities will be, while there will not be as much flexibility as in the past.

Councilmember Mavity stated in terms of community development, and with unemployment claims, if 20-40% of folks cannot pay rent, that impacts housing availability, and tenants will ultimately be responsible for rent that is not paid. She added more community block grant funding will be available and the state may do something, but for folks who are not receiving vouchers now, they don’t have a safety net.

Councilmember Mavity noted the city will need to educate tenants they still need to pay rent, as well as work with landlords on payment structures for renters. She added in the end, there could be massive buildings in the city that will foreclose, with others coming in to purchase them.

Councilmember Mavity stated it will be important to communicate that the city is open for business, and that the city wants developers to be doing projects in St. Louis Park, which would be helpful to the city’s economy. She added this is a time to think about how to do the city’s work differently, resources and planning.

Councilmember Harris stated this is a marathon, not a sprint, and is a very unusual time. She stated our focus should be on our departments, our staff, across teams, and the underserved.
She added she would like to see a renewed focus on communication conveying St. Louis Park is a “people first” community, and to share in Park Perspectives how we are connecting with the underserved, working on reducing costs, and thinking about residents who are newly unemployed. She added this will be important and valuable in the coming months and will provide a connection for folks to reach out to the city in ways they haven’t in the past.

Councilmember Harris asked about postponement of projects to 2021 and if those are non-essential projects, she is inclined to hold off. She added the city may want to hold off on bikeways and sidewalks for 1 year and asked how folks are being notified about rental adjustments. Ms. Barton stated all tenants in public housing or who have housing vouchers were sent direct mailings from the city on the process and resources. She added if residents know they have a change in income they may notify staff and their rent will be adjusted accordingly.

Councilmember Harris stated she was glad to hear that $108,000 will go to STEP and asked if this will provide a stop gap for STEP. Ms. Barton stated this is the number STEP provided to the city, which would cover a 4-month period. She stated the city will continue to evaluate this with STEP over time, and the amount will increase, if needed.

Councilmember Harris stated she is concerned folks don’t know to go to STEP if they need help and asked how folks can become aware. Ms. Barton stated the city has sent letters and emails to all property owners in the city telling them about the resources and asking them to tell their renters as well. It has also been added on social media and in Park Perspectives.

Councilmember Harris asked if the two affordable housing projects, in the former Prince of Peace location and at UCC, will still move forward. Ms. Barton stated UCC is fast-tracking their project and moving ahead with Project for Pride in Living. She stated the Common Bond project with Prince of Peace will happen further in the future.

Councilmember Brausen thanked staff for all their work, and stated he is not going to ask staff to speculate on the future. He did ask if potholes are getting fixed. Ms. Walsh stated yes and to let her know if any problem potholes need filling.

Councilmember Brausen asked if the Dakota Bridge project is in danger of losing federal funds. Ms. Heiser stated the project is on track and staff will continue to monitor it.

Councilmember Brausen added he appreciates Mr. Simon and staff’s forward thinking on the budget and the communications area is doing a great job. He asked Ms. Smith if more press releases could be sent to the Sun Sailor so they know we are open for business and where to get help around town. He stated he is proud of the city’s effort in all of this.

Councilmember Mohamed added St. Louis Park is far ahead of what other cities are doing around the nation, in these uncertain times. She stated she was glad for this update and that things were put in perspective for her, adding she is glad to be part of this city. She commented that she has been laid off, and half of her family was laid off, and they don’t know what will happen, but she thanked staff for their hard work, and hopes everyone can make it through this together.
Mayor Spano stated he has been assured that SWLRT will continue to move forward with no problem. He agreed that the city is only one month into this and while it is good to plan related to financial impacts, he doesn’t think decisions should be made for next year as yet.

Mayor Spano added he will send a resource list to Ms. Sojourner and Mr. Harmening related to what other cities are doing, and he will share this with the council as well.

Mayor Spano thanked Ms. Barton and staff for calling every business in the city and for their tremendous level of service. He asked Mr. Mattick if he is hearing about any emerging legal issues at this point. Mr. Mattick stated he has seen a lot of labor issues at this point, and some issues on planning and zoning, with the 60-day rule, but nothing else yet.

Mayor Spano asked if Ms. Barton is on the calls with DEED. Ms. Barton stated she is, and Mr. Harmening is also. Mayor Spano noted the website Criticalsectors@state.mn.us where folks can sign-up if they want to be on list of essential business.

Communications/meeting check-in (verbal)

Mr. Harmening stated he will want the council to discuss understanding what the city’s focus and priorities should be right now, in terms of business. He stated at the April 13 meeting there will be another update on COVID.

Councilmember Rog commended Ms. Smith for the city’s excellent communications and social media postings. She asked how the council can best be of service to the community now.

Mr. Harmening stated the council has been incredibly supportive over the last three weeks, and staff truly appreciates it so much. He stated the council is the eyes and ears of the community and asked them to watch out for folks in their neighborhoods, which is very valuable.

Councilmember Kraft noted the number one issue in all of this is making sure folks in the community have food and are able to handle their rental issues. He asked if it is necessary for staff to do another detailed 4-hour COVID update to the council in two weeks.

Mayor Spano stated he views this report as a necessary pit stop and getting an update is important for the council.

Mr. Harmening added staff needs to give council the full picture on how this is being handled from an operations perspective, and how the city is working to stay ahead of this. He noted the next report will be more big-picture, but that depends on what happens in the next two weeks.

The meeting adjourned at 10:25 p.m.

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Melissa Kennedy, city clerk                Jake Spano, mayor