

CITY COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS

BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA

Work Session – June 23, 2025

Pursuant to due call and notice, a work session of the City Council of the City of Bemidji, Beltrami County, Minnesota, was held on Monday, June 23, 2025 at 5:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers of City Hall, Mayor Prince presiding.

Upon roll call, the following Councilmembers were declared present: Prince, Fiskevold Gould, Peterson, Dickinson, Eaton, Thayer. Absent: Rivera

Present: Rich Spiczka, Justin Sherwood, Mike Mastin, Marcia Larson, Sam Anderson, Donna Coe, Michelle Miller, Caralee Nowack, Rob Elliott

Motion by Peterson, seconded by Thayer, amending the agenda by adding items to the agenda (1) City Departments Update Related to Storm Response and Status, (2) Consider Resolution Extending Emergency Declaration. Motion carried by unanimous voice vote.

City Department Update Related to Storm Response and Status

City departments provided a comprehensive update on their response to the recent severe storm:

- **Emergency Management & Fire:** The fire chief described the city's rapid transition into emergency management mode after the storm hit early Saturday morning. An Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was established, and all available city staff were mobilized. The initial focus was on ensuring staff safety, opening thoroughfares for emergency access, and coordinating with county and state partners. The fire department responded to over 80 emergencies in the first 12 hours, including a building explosion, fires, and numerous gas leaks. Mutual aid was received from 14 fire departments across Minnesota. Notably, there were zero deaths and zero injuries reported.
- **Police/Public Safety:** The police chief highlighted the importance of immediate safety and access, commending public works for quickly clearing roads. The transition from emergency response to recovery was discussed, with an emphasis on the need for outside resources and community volunteers. United Way was identified as the main point of contact for those wishing to help.
- **Public Works/Utilities:** The public works director reported that water service was uninterrupted, and most sewer lift stations were back online, though some were still running on generators. Debris removal was underway, with city crews conducting multiple rounds of curbside pickup. Residents were encouraged to bring debris to the curb, and alternative disposal sites were being considered. Refuse collection was challenged by blocked alleys and missing garbage cans, but normal routes were being run where possible.
- **Parks & Recreation:** The parks department supported street cleanup efforts and began assessing and clearing parks. Most parks were close to reopening, except for Diamond Point, which suffered significant damage. Volunteers were being organized to help with debris removal, and some recreation programs were canceled or modified. The department was also assisting with public communications.
- **City Management:** The city manager praised staff for their flexibility and teamwork, highlighted the importance of coordinated communication, and noted the transition from emergency response to long-term recovery. The city was working with state and federal partners for resources and funding. Special attention was given to vulnerable populations, such as the unhoused, and to ongoing power restoration efforts.
- **Community Support:** The Sanford Center shelter was closed as other facilities reopened, and the center transitioned to a supply distribution site. Team Rubicon and other organizations were coming to assist with cleanup at no cost to the city. Residents needing help were directed to Community Resource Connections.

Consider Resolution Extending Emergency Declaration

RESOLUTION NO. 6630: Extending a Local Emergency Declaration Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes Sections 12.29 and 21.37 Until July 7, 2025 was offered by Councilmember Fiskevold Gould, who moved its adoption, and upon due second by Councilmember Peterson, passed by unanimous voice vote.

Neilson Reise Facility Use/Grant Update

The council discussed the future of the Nielsen facility after a presentation from the Bemidji Indoor Sports Commission (BISC), which is a partnership of local softball, soccer, and baseball organizations. BISC received a \$250,000 grant from the Nielsen Foundation and plans to use the

facility as a multi-use indoor sports space. Councilmembers expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the project, noting the benefits for youth and the community. The city manager explained that staff will negotiate a lease agreement with BISC, modeled after the existing curling club lease, and aim to present it for council approval at future council meeting. The discussion also touched on the need for repairs to the building and the importance of ensuring equitable lease terms. Overall, the council was excited to see the facility repurposed for community recreation.

Prince called for a brief recess at 7:03 p.m. Meeting reconvened at 7:06 p.m. with all members present.

City Operations Discussion

The city manager presented several staffing and organizational proposals to the council:

1. **Contracting Out Civil Legal Services:** The city manager recommended continuing to use an outside law firm for civil legal work, citing benefits such as access to a broader range of expertise, efficiency, and continuity. Councilmembers asked about costs, the number of firms available, and how this would be budgeted. There was general openness to the idea, with requests for more detailed financial comparisons and contract terms.
2. **Separation of Parks and Recreation:** The manager proposed separating the Parks and Recreation Department into distinct units to improve focus and efficiency. This change does not require council approval but was shared for transparency. Some councilmembers wanted more discussion and information before fully supporting the change.
3. **Communications and Engagement Director:** There was strong support for creating this new position, with councilmembers noting the need for improved communication, especially during emergencies. The manager indicated that the city's budget could support the position and that a job description would be provided.
4. **Community Development Director:** The manager proposed reinstating this position to better manage large projects and support community growth. Councilmembers generally supported the idea but requested more information about the role, costs, and potential overlap with other organizations.

Councilmembers expressed trust in the city manager's judgment but requested more details, especially regarding costs, job descriptions, and the impact of recent emergencies on the budget. The manager plans to bring more detailed proposals and job descriptions to a future council meeting for further discussion and possible approval. Overall, there was cautious support for the proposals, with a desire for additional information before making final decisions.

ADJOURN

There being no further business, motion by Thayer, seconded by Eaton, to adjourn the meeting. Motion carried by unanimous voice vote. Meeting adjourned at 7:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Michelle R. Miller
City Clerk