

MINUTES  
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS  
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL  
STUDY SESSION  
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM  
FEBRUARY 9, 2026 – 5:30PM

The study session of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 5:36pm.

Councilmembers Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Dwyer, Knol (arrived at 5:45pm), Rich and Starkman

Councilmembers Absent: None

Others Present: Acting City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Directors Skrobola and Schnackel, Deputy Director Farmer and Moran, and City Attorneys Joppich, Sashital and Young

*The closed session started at 5:38pm.*

**CLOSED SESSION ITEMS:**

**CONSIDERATION OF APPROVAL TO ENTER INTO A CLOSED SESSION UNDER SECTION 8(1)(H) OF THE OPEN MEETINGS ACT FOR THE PURPOSE OF DISCUSSING A WRITTEN ATTORNEY-CLIENT PRIVILEGED COMMUNICATION THAT IS EXEMPT FROM DISCLOSURE BY STATE STATUTE.**

**CONSIDERATION OF PERSONNEL/EMPLOYMENT MATTERS ALLOWED UNDER SECTION 8(1)(A) OF THE OPEN MEETINGS ACT RELATING TO THE CITY MANAGER POSITION, UPON THE CITY MANAGER’S REQUEST FOR SAME.**

MOTION by Bridges, support by Dwyer, that the City Council of Farmington Hills hereby enters into a closed session under Section 8(1)(h) of the Open Meetings Act for the purpose of discussing a written attorney-client privileged communication that is exempt from disclosure by state statute; and also under Section 8(1)(a) of the Open Meetings Act for the purpose of considering personnel/employment matters allowed under Section 8(1)(a) of the Open Meetings Act relating to the City Manager position, upon the City Manager’s request for same.

MOTION CARRIED 7-0.

*The open session resumed at 6:03pm*

**STUDY SESSION ITEMS:**

**UPDATE ON THE OAKLAND COUNTY PARKS/CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS AGREEMENT**

Special Services Director Schnackel and Deputy Director Farmer were present for this discussion, which was an update on the Interlocal Agreement between the City of Farmington Hills and Oakland County Parks and Recreation (OCPR) for the management of Heritage Park. The Interlocal Agreement was fully executed on September 5, 2025. The Agreement authorized the City Manager and Director of Special Services to finalize the terms of the agreement in consultation with the City Attorney. Progress has been made and finalized documents are still under development.

The County's written Heritage Park Action Plan draft was received late Friday, February 6. Per agreement, OCPR is required to provide final drafts of the Park Action Plan, the Parks Operations and Maintenance Plan, and the Park Capital Improvement Plan to the City for comments and recommendations by March 31, 2026.

### **Park Action Plan**

Director Schnackel reviewed the purpose and scope of the Park Action Plan, which serves as the master plan for Heritage Park. The Plan defines the long-term vision and includes content areas such as vision and guiding principles, existing conditions and site analysis, park zones and land use, facility planning, and implementation strategies.

The Plan aligns with Oakland County's broader strategic framework known as Mission 26, which establishes a countywide framework for park improvements, partnerships, and decision-making supported by public input. A public engagement session was recently held at The Hawk with significant attendance from across the county (approximately 150 attendees).

### **Operations and Maintenance Plan (POMP)**

The Parks Operations and Maintenance Plan establishes service standards, communication protocols, and delineation of responsibilities between the City and the County. Once adopted, the POMP will define operational service levels, clarify staff-level versus governing body approvals, provide a memorandum of understanding framework, and establish ongoing communication and oversight mechanisms. The POMP defines service standards, roles, and oversight mechanisms between the City and County.

### **Transition Model**

Director Schnackel outlined a phased transition model for management of Heritage Park. Phase three, scheduled to begin October 1 of this year, contemplates full operational management by the County. Under this structure, the City retains ownership of the park while the County assumes operational management, including maintenance, capital improvements, and programming. Operations would transition to County personnel. City staffing currently includes two full-time park employees: a Nature Center Supervisor and a Laborer III.

Although the County would manage day-to-day operations, the agreement includes checks and balances requiring mutual agreement on major decisions. Significant changes would involve defined approval processes.

### **Council Discussion**

Councilmember Dwyer noted that on Phase Three, starting October 1, 2026, the County takes over "full operation" of the park. Did "full operation" mean the City would effectively relinquish control of the park for the next 30 years? He raised questions regarding staffing, maintenance responsibilities, programming authority, and the protection of Farmington Hills resident priorities.

Director Schnackel clarified that employees would be County or County-contracted employees and that operational management would shift to the County; however, the agreement ensures that the City approves everything that is laid out in the Plan. Significant changes or capital decisions would require mutual agreement and Council review where appropriate. In terms of priorities and programming, checks and balances were written into the agreement, with rechecks performed on a consistent basis.

### **Financial Considerations**

Councilmember Dwyer asked how the City would benefit by this agreement. Director Schnackel explained that the primary benefit of the agreement for Farmington Hills was financial sustainability. The City would save approximately \$300,000 per year, receive an initial \$4 million payment to the City, with a further commitment of \$2.5 million in capital improvements over the first two years of the agreement, and there would be ongoing capital improvement discussions every four to five years.

Councilmember Dwyer expressed concern about the County's long-term financial stability.

Mayor Rich inquired about the previously awarded \$850,000 in grant funding from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for crosswalks and ADA improvements, including \$500,000 allocated to Heritage Park. Director Schnackel explained that details regarding the administrative structure for grant implementation will need to be resolved to ensure compliance with grant requirements.

Acting City Manager Mondora clarified that the annual \$300,000 net savings directly affects the structural operating deficit within Special Services, whereas the capital investments are reflected in the Capital Improvement Plan and do not impact the operating deficit.

Emphasizing the importance of financial oversight in evaluating the proposal, Councilmember Bridges confirmed that Finance Director Skrobola reviewed the financial projections.

### **Authority and Oversight**

Councilmember Bridges sought clarification regarding the scope of the City's authority under the proposed Parks Operations and Maintenance Plan. Director Schnackel responded that all significant actions within the park would involve discussion and defined oversight processes. She explained that:

- A long-term 30-year framework would be presented.
- There would be formal review and check-in intervals every four to five years.
- Staff from both the City and County would collaborate on park management.
- The Memorandum of Understanding would specify approval processes and responsibilities.

Director Schnackel said that the County has a strong incentive to ensure the success of the partnership, as Heritage Park would serve as a flagship within its park system. She emphasized that the initiative was explored in response to direction to address the structural deficit within Special Services through partnerships and operational efficiencies.

### **Resident Impact and Service Levels**

Councilmember Bridges expressed concern that residents might perceive a loss of value or deterioration of services under the agreement, particularly given that approximately 40% of park users are Farmington Hills residents and 60% are non-residents.

Director Schnackel said that residents would not experience a deterioration of services. The agreement is intended to enhance services through capital investment and operational stability. She pointed out that current park millage revenues total approximately \$2.1 million annually, with roughly \$1.1 million already committed to other projects, leaving \$1 million to spread across all the parks in the city. There was very limited available funding for Heritage Park improvements without additional partnership resources.

Councilmember Bridges questioned the City's reliance on limited CIP funding while maintaining a \$60 million balance in the rainy day fund. He suggested broader fiscal policy considerations regarding allocation of reserves versus capital investment.

Councilmember Bridges questioned the necessity of a 30-year agreement rather than a shorter 15-year term. Director Schnackel explained that the 30-year structure is consistent with other Oakland County agreements and reflects the County's desire to protect its \$4 million upfront contribution and additional capital investments over a long-term horizon.

### **Resident Fees and Program Protections**

Councilmember Knol inquired whether Farmington Hills residents would retain reduced resident rates for camps and programming if the agreement proceeds. Deputy Director Farmer stated that resident fee structures and similar protections must be expressly written into the agreement prior to execution. He emphasized that:

- Resident rate differentials must be clearly negotiated and documented.
- Existing memorial benches and trees must be protected from expiration policies inconsistent with current City practice.
- All operational expectations must be reduced to writing to ensure enforceability.

Deputy Director Farmer reiterated that staff is pursuing this agreement as one strategy to reduce the structural deficit and that partnering with Oakland County is preferable to contracting with a private operator whose primary motive would be profit generation.

Councilmember Knol asked about potential lost opportunity associated with transferring revenue-generating programs, such as archery and nature programming, to Oakland County. She questioned whether expanded programming under County management could increase revenue beyond current levels, thereby increasing the amount of foregone revenue and reducing projected net savings.

Deputy Director Farmer responded that staff anticipates the opposite effect. He explained that certain programs, including archery and nature-based camps, could be expanded at The Hawk, allowing the City to retain and potentially grow related revenues. For example:

- Approximately \$91,000 is currently generated from the Heritage Park archery range.
- Staff anticipates retaining approximately \$50,000 in revenue by expanding archery programming at The Hawk.
- Nature programming previously promoted through the City's camp brochure would instead be marketed separately by Oakland County, potentially shifting visibility toward City-operated programs first.

Deputy Director Farmer affirmed that staff intends to structure programming transitions in a manner that preserves and strengthens City-operated revenue streams where feasible.

### **Spicer House and Capital Investment**

Noting that she served as liaison to the Historic District Commission, Councilmember Knol raised concerns regarding the condition of the Spicer House and the City's limited ability to fund necessary improvements. The Historic District Commission has expressed concern about deferred maintenance; she emphasized the importance of reviewing the County's proposed capital improvement plan before supporting the agreement.

Director Schnackel and Deputy Director Farmer explained that any improvements to the Spicer House would require review and approval by the City's Historic District Commission. They emphasized that:

- City staff would coordinate directly with County staff on proposed improvements.
- The County would not independently pursue approvals without City involvement.
- The agreement is intended to require collaboration and prevent unilateral decision-making.

Councilmember Knol reiterated that review of capital improvement commitments, particularly regarding the Spicer House, is essential prior to Agreement approval.

### **Governance and Perception of Control**

Councilmember Aldred stated that he had generally been supportive of the proposal but was having increased concern after reviewing the updated materials. He referenced language indicating that Oakland County Parks would assume complete management and independently operate the park, which raised questions regarding the extent of City oversight. He compared the current language to earlier discussions that emphasized collaboration and shared operational decision-making. He previously understood that key programming, site decisions, and resident-facing functions would remain closely associated with the City experience, even with County funding support. Now he was not so sure, and he expressed discomfort with the potential perception of reduced City control. He emphasized the importance of clearly defining oversight mechanisms within the operational plan to ensure continued community input and transparency.

Director Schnackel acknowledged that the agreement language has evolved through negotiations. Staff will provide the finalized documents for Council review after legal and administrative analysis. She reiterated that the guiding consideration remains what best serves Farmington Hills residents.

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware stated that during prior discussions, her initial impression of the proposal was that of a true partnership. Now, based on the current materials, the structure appears more like a transfer of operational control with limited input, rather than a balanced partnership. She referenced the projected net annual savings of approximately \$304,000, equating to roughly \$9 million over 30 years, and questioned whether that financial benefit sufficiently offsets the scope of operational authority being transferred. Her final position would depend on review of the detailed execution framework.

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware asked whether previously projected savings associated with relocating the Senior Activity Center to The Hawk property could be affected by changes in maintenance responsibilities under the proposed agreement. Some savings assumptions may require reevaluation if contracted services shift or are restructured.

Director Schnackel acknowledged that the projections would need to be reviewed in coordination with the finance team. She noted that lawn maintenance at Heritage Park is currently performed through a combination of contracted services and City staff. Seasonal staffing challenges have made park operations increasingly difficult in recent summers.

### **Millage Allocation and Funding Structure**

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware inquired about allocation of the Special Services millage, which generates approximately \$2.1 million annually. Director Schnackel explained:

- Approximately \$1.3 million is earmarked for designated purposes, including cultural arts, the nature center, parks, after-school programs, and senior services, and is transferred directly to the general fund.
- The remaining approximately \$1 million is available for capital projects, infrastructure, and equipment needs such as vehicles and maintenance equipment. Capital demands significantly exceed available annual funding.
- The current millage is nearing expiration.
- Heritage Park does not receive a separately designated millage allocation but draws from broader parks funding.

### **Return on County Investment and Capital Needs**

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware noted that the City has contributed to the County parks millage for years without perceiving a proportional return. While approximately \$9 million in projected net savings over 30 years represents a benefit, she is evaluating whether it is sufficient relative to operational authority being transferred.

Discussion turned to the Spicer House, where preliminary estimates suggest approximately \$750,000 may be required to address needed improvements. Mayor Pro Tem Boleware asked whether such improvements would be incorporated into the County's capital improvement plan.

Director Schnackel explained that:

- A jointly developed capital improvement plan would be reviewed every five years.
- The five-year capital plan would be presented to City Council for review and approval.
- Identified priorities include the Spicer House, accessible playground enhancements supported by a \$500,000 grant, trails, and parking improvements.
- The capital planning process would combine City grant funding with County investment.

### **Governance Structure**

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware stated that the proposal initially appeared to be structured as a partnership but now appears to place greater operational control with Oakland County Parks. She expressed concern that the arrangement resembles a transfer of authority rather than an equal collaboration.

Director Schnackel responded that the agreement includes defined review periods and approval windows, typically 30 to 60 days, during which the City may approve or request revisions to proposed plans. Each capital and operational component would undergo review every four to five years as part of the formal oversight structure.

Director Schnackel acknowledged that negotiations have evolved from earlier conceptual discussions. Council will be provided with the finalized draft documents for comprehensive review, and County personnel will participate in future meeting(s) with Council.

### **Staffing Continuity and Camp Programming**

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware emphasized the importance of maintaining opportunities for local students who are hired seasonally for camps and park programming. Director Schnackel indicated that staff have discussed continuity of experienced seasonal employees with County representatives and will recommend retention where possible, though final hiring authority will rest with the County.

Concerns were also raised regarding the continued development and expansion of innovative camp programming. Director Schnackel noted that the County's recruitment of former staff member Ashley Smith, who has demonstrated success in developing camp programs, suggests alignment with Farmington Hills programming priorities.

### **Fiscal Context**

Deputy Director Farmer emphasized that the discussion ultimately centers on long-term fiscal sustainability. Current capital resources are limited to approximately \$1 million annually for systemwide equipment and infrastructure needs. The proposed agreement represents one strategy to reduce the structural deficit while securing additional capital investment.

### **Duration of Agreement**

Councilmember Starkman expressed concern regarding the 30-year duration of the proposed agreement, noting that significant changes can occur over such a lengthy period. He questioned whether the term could be amended or shortened. He also needed to review forthcoming materials before reaching a conclusion.

### **Employee Protections**

Mayor Rich reiterated her prior concerns regarding the treatment of City employees currently working at Heritage Park. She noted that while only two full-time employees are formally assigned to the park, many Farmington Hills employees support park operations. Based on the draft materials, it appears that employees would transition to Oakland County employment. She emphasized the need for assurances that:

- Employees would not experience a reduction in pay or benefits.
- Part-time and seasonal employees would be treated fairly.
- Existing employees would have meaningful opportunity to retain comparable positions.

She further noted that while the projected annual deficit associated with Heritage Park is approximately \$1.1 million, and the proposed Activity Center carries a projected cost of \$30–\$35 million, employee protections remain a priority as Council evaluates financial considerations.

### **County Governance Structure**

Councilmember Dwyer raised concerns regarding the County's internal approval processes. Referencing his experience of serving as a County Commissioner for 8 years, he cautioned that capital projects such as improvements to the Spicer House would face multiple levels of review involving different committees within the County's administrative structure, with the outcome not being a "slam dunk."

### **Legal Framework and Termination Provisions**

City Attorney Joppich provided clarification regarding the contract term and termination provisions. He explained:

- The agreement provides for an initial 30-year term.
- At the conclusion of 30 years, the agreement automatically renews for an additional 30 years unless one party provides notice 180 days prior to expiration.
- Early termination without cause is permitted but requires repayment to the County of the non-depreciated value of capital improvements invested in the park.
- If the agreement is not renewed at the 30-year mark, repayment of the non-depreciated value of County-funded capital improvements is also required.

He noted that “non-depreciated value” is not explicitly defined in the agreement but would generally reflect the remaining value of capital investments. Any change to the 30-year structure would require amendment to the agreement.

Attorney Joppich further advised that Council retains the ability to terminate the agreement prior to capital investments if it determines that the Park Action Plan, Parks Operations and Maintenance Plan, or Capital Improvement Plan are not acceptable. He indicated that Council could also revisit the duration of the agreement during negotiations tied to review of these plans.

#### **Timing and Review Period**

Mayor Rich inquired whether the March 31 timeline for next steps could be extended to allow additional review time of the 131-page draft document recently received. Attorney Joppich indicated that staff could request an extension and would seek written confirmation to ensure any timeline modification is formally recognized. However, there was a question as to whether the draft document submitted last Friday constitutes the formal submittal triggering contractual review deadlines, or whether the draft was provided for preliminary review rather than as a formal submission.

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware asked whether the agreement contains provisions allowing the City to terminate prior to the 30-year term if the County fails to deliver on commitments.

City Attorney Joppich explained that the agreement is currently in its initial phase, during which the City retains the ability to terminate if the Park Action Plan (PAP), Parks Operations and Maintenance Plan (POMP), or Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) are not acceptable.

He stated that:

- During this initial phase, no capital improvements have been made, and no funds have been exchanged.
- If the City does not approve the plans after mediation or good-faith efforts to resolve concerns, it may terminate the agreement.
- Once the agreement enters the long-term operational phase, early termination provisions apply.

Attorney Joppich further explained that the agreement provides for:

- Termination with cause, if the County breaches the agreement and fails to cure the breach within a specified period.
- Termination without cause, subject to repayment obligations.

Council asked about the definition of “non-depreciated value.” Attorney Joppich explained that “non-depreciated value” is not specifically defined in the agreement, but this language generally reflects the remaining useful value of capital investments that cannot be removed from the property. Acting City Manager Mondora and Finance Director Skrobola clarified that these improvements, such as splash pads or other fixed assets, would remain at the park and could not be reclaimed by the County. Therefore, if the agreement is terminated, the City would reimburse the County for the remaining value of those improvements.

#### **Uniqueness of the Agreement**

Councilmembers inquired whether this structure is common in other Oakland County arrangements. Staff indicated that this appears to be a unique agreement due to the City’s existing successful park

system. Unlike other communities where the County has intervened to improve underperforming parks, Heritage Park is already a well-established asset, resulting in a customized partnership structure.

Mayor Rich closed discussion on this item.

**DISCUSSION ON THE PROPOSED AD-HOC STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE NEW ACTIVITIES CENTER**

Director Schnackel explained that the City's consultant, Sports Facilities Company (SFC) suggested that City Council consider establishing an Ad-Hoc Steering Committee, to be established by resolution, for the new Activities Center.

User groups at the Costick Center have expressed concern regarding communication and transparency about this project. Given that the Costick Center facility is beyond its useful life and the City has authorized exploration of constructing a new facility at The Hawk campus, staff is proposing a committee structure to enhance communication and engagement.

The intent of the committee would not be to participate in architectural meetings, approve budgets, or revisit site selection decisions. Rather, the committee would:

- Serve as ambassadors to the community.
- Facilitate two-way communication between staff and user groups.
- Provide general input on programmatic and design concepts.
- Increase transparency and engagement with current users.

Councilmember Bridges questioned the purpose of the committee in light of continued public disagreement regarding the decision to study only The Hawk as the project site. Community concerns remain significant and unresolved. The proposed committee could be perceived as endorsing a decision that many residents still oppose. Councilmember Bridges reiterated his position that, in order to restore public confidence, both the Costick Center site and The Hawk site should be evaluated equally. He also requested documentation supporting the projected annual savings of approximately \$300,000 associated with co-location at The Hawk. Council should receive itemized and documented financial analysis for all cited cost savings and tax-related projections.

Acting City Manager Mondora confirmed that staff is actively working with SFC to provide a detailed breakdown of the projected \$300,000 in operational efficiencies. This documentation will be provided prior to any award of architectural and engineering services.

Councilmember Knol supported establishing the advisory committee. Council has already voted to move forward with an engineering study of the new Activity Center as a separate building on The Hawk campus. The committee would support constructive dialogue and provide meaningful user input into the design process without reopening prior Council decisions. Councilmember Knol outlined the intended function of the committee as:

- Providing feedback on facility features such as pool design, pickleball courts, and programming spaces.
- Serving as a communication bridge between project leadership and the Commission on Aging and existing Costick Center users.
- Ensuring representation across age groups, including individuals under age 50, to reflect future users and current taxpayers.

Councilmember Starkman expressed support for the advisory committee concept and noted that Dan Fantore, current Chair of the Committee on Aging, would be a valuable resource.

Councilmember Dwyer also supported the formation of an advisory committee but emphasized the importance of clearly defining its structure, authority, and leadership. The committee must have a clearly articulated purpose from the outset, defined limits regarding authority and scope, a strong facilitator in order to prevent delays or diversion from project objectives, and a clear understanding that its role is advisory and communication-focused, not policymaking.

Acting City Manager Mondora indicated that staff would need to identify an appropriate City representative to lead or coordinate the committee.

Councilmember Aldred stated that the committee would serve an important communication function and could address concerns that have persisted due to perceived gaps in outreach. Earlier enhanced communication might have prevented some of the current tensions surrounding the project.

Deputy Director Farmer thought the advisory committee could be a turning point toward more positive engagement. The goal is alignment and collaboration rather than division.

Mayor Pro Tem Boleware reiterated that although she was not initially supportive of the Hawk location, Council has made its decision, and she intends to move forward constructively. However, she continues to receive frequent communication from residents expressing dissatisfaction with the choice of location. The advisory committee could reduce misinformation by providing information to the community, with its primary function being communication, timeline updates, and project transparency.

Councilmember Starkman added that many residents are seeking involvement, not merely information. He stated that centralizing communication through an advisory committee would help reduce confusion resulting from multiple informal information sources and provide a consistent forum for engagement. Structured engagement may facilitate broader acceptance over time.

Mayor Rich asked whether any key constituencies were missing from the proposed committee structure. Councilmembers indicated that the list appeared comprehensive.

In summary, Councilmembers generally expressed support for formation of the ad-hoc advisory committee, contingent upon clear definition of scope, leadership, and communication objectives, as discussed.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

Mayor Rich closed discussion and adjourned the meeting at 7:21pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk