

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL
STUDY SESSION
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM
SEPTEMBER 8, 2025 – 6:00PM**

The study session meeting of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 6:00pm.

Councilmembers Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Bruce, Dwyer, Knol and Rich

Councilmembers Absent: None

Others Present: City Manager Mekjian, Assistant City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Directors Aranowski and Rushlow, and City Attorney Joppich

UPDATE ON FOOD WASTE ELIMINATION PILOT PROGRAM

Director of Public Services Rushlow introduced this topic, and Council heard a presentation by Danielle Todd, Make Food Not Waste. Consultant Stephanie Osborne, Giffels Webster, was also present. The purpose of the presentation was to overview the blueprint for Farmington Hills' Zero Food Waste program and summarize public input received.

The initiative builds on state and local goals to cut food waste in half by 2030. The project was funded by the U.S. Climate Alliance with support from EGLE and plans have been developed concurrently with neighboring communities including Canton, Westland, Dearborn, Livonia, and Southfield. The plan emphasizes food waste prevention, food rescue, donations, and composting, incorporating behavior change strategies across residents, businesses, schools, and institutions.

Public input was gathered through a survey that drew 783 responses. Results indicated strong support for food scrap diversion, with 61% expressing interest in drop-off programs and 89% favoring curbside collection. Respondents cited environmental benefits as the leading motivation.

Further points included:

- Farmington Hills generates ~24 million pounds of food waste annually, equivalent to 6,600 tons of Co2 emissions, with \$66 million in resident costs
- Plan proposes 3-year phased implementation with grant funding. Curbside collection (if utilized) will not be included in grant funding and will cost an estimated \$2/month per household
- Potential \$250,000 EGLE grant may support a drop-off pilot program, modeled after Southfield's program, which is currently underway.
- City involvement would primarily include promoting the program through official communications; demonstrating leadership by incorporating food scrap collection at city events and facilities; clarifying backyard composting rules for residents; and considering either a drop-off or curbside food scrap collection program. Drop-off could serve as an effective first step before curbside implementation, which requires contractual changes with haulers and extensive resident education.

Next steps include council adoption of the plan, pursuing grant funding for implementation, and determining interest in supporting an application to the upcoming EGLE grant for a drop-off pilot program.

Council discussion:

Discussion focused on:

- Costs: Implementation over three years is estimated at \$4.6 million, covering outreach, education, and startup materials. The costs would be covered by grants and other funding sources; there would be no cost to the city for the pilot. However, the estimate does not include carts. The \$4.6 million figure covers one-time costs designed to establish education and cultural change components, while ongoing costs for collection would be separate. Management of resident complaints is built into the program. All food types can be included.
- Importance of education and cultural change in reducing food waste: The cost, while substantial, reflects the need for immersive, citywide engagement to achieve meaningful behavior change and deliver a strong return on investment through reduced financial, environmental, and social costs.
- Of the communities mentioned, only Southfield has actually begun a program. The Southfield pilot is structured as a 15-month effort, including two months of resident recruitment followed by 12 months of food scrap collection. The program features four drop-off sites using sealed, locked Bigbelly bins, accessible only with a QR code. Participating residents receive startup kits including countertop caddies and educational materials. The pilot is supported by \$190,000 in grant funding, covering management, bins, and resident materials.
- Concern about relying on grant funding. Programs dependent on temporary grants can frustrate residents if discontinued after funding expires.
- Concern about the accuracy of survey enthusiasm translating into actual participation.
- Concern about potential for rodent issues if food waste were left at the curb, even in sealed containers.

Council members indicated general support for the pilot if there was no cost to the city. However, Council remained concerned about ongoing costs after grant funding completed. There was consensus to observe Southfield's pilot program before moving forward.

Mayor Rich recommended asking the Innovation, Energy, and Environmental Sustainability Commission to monitor Southfield's pilot and lead initial education efforts, which could include what residents can do in the meantime (purchasing less, home composting).

DISCUSSION ON PLACING RIBBONS AND OTHER MATERIALS ON CITY PROPERTIES

City Manager Mekjian introduced the topic, explaining that the matter originated with a request from an organization supporting ovarian cancer awareness. In the past, a local resident survivor had informally placed purple ribbons on city property with support from the City via proclamations, but that individual has since moved away. The current request came from a statewide group seeking official participation. City Manager Mekjian noted the challenges posed by First Amendment considerations and referred to a legal opinion issued by City Attorney Joppich on August 8.

Attorney Joppich outlined both legal and practical implications relative to this issue. He noted that city ordinances and facility use policies currently prohibit the attachment of objects, signs, or posters to public property. He referenced Section 18-106 of the city code and related provisions, which protect public welfare by preventing clutter. Attorney Joppich also cited recent Supreme Court case law in which

a city was found to have violated free speech rights by allowing certain flags but excluding others, highlighting the risks of selective enforcement.

Attorney Joppich emphasized that although ovarian cancer awareness is a well-supported cause in Farmington Hills, once the city allows one group to place materials on public property, it may be required to allow others, including groups that might not be responsible regarding cleanup or whose messages may be controversial. He stressed that current ordinances do not permit such postings and that policy revisions would be required to accommodate them, including the need to carefully define locations if a permitting system were created.

City Manager Mekjian added that from a maintenance standpoint, if groups failed to remove materials, city staff from Parks or Public Works would be left with the burden of cleanup. He also raised concerns about potentially offensive or inappropriate displays, as well as the need to carefully define locations if a permitting system were created.

Councilmember Boleware recalled that purple ribbons had been displayed on city campus property in recent years and questioned why the practice had been discontinued without council discussion. She believed the primary issue was the messaging printed on the ribbons rather than the ribbons themselves. Attorney Joppich responded that while the wording made the ribbons more clearly fall under signage restrictions, the act of attaching any material to city property could also be considered a violation of ordinance provisions. He reiterated that even absent written messages, ribbons or materials affixed to public facilities may constitute defacement under existing law.

Councilmember Boleware pointed out that many ribbon displays traditionally represent health causes or memorials, such as pink ribbons for breast cancer, purple for ovarian cancer, or black for fallen officers. There was value in reminding residents of important public health concerns and community solidarity. She supported allowing ribbons without words, provided parameters are established, but acknowledged council should collectively decide policy direction.

Attorney Joppich clarified the distinction between private groups placing ribbons on city property and the city itself engaging in “government speech.” If the city chooses to display ribbons under its own authority—for example, to promote public health, safety, or welfare—it is constitutionally permissible. However, permitting outside groups to place ribbons creates legal risks and potential inequities in determining which groups are allowed.

Councilmember Dwyer recommended maintaining the status quo by denying outside requests and supporting the city attorney and manager’s position.

Councilmember Boleware was interested in developing a controlled policy allowing limited ribbon use for health-related causes. City Attorney Joppich warned that once parameters are set, groups may attempt to broaden the interpretation, and crafting an ordinance narrow enough to avoid constitutional challenges would be very difficult. Regulations cannot discriminate based on the content or viewpoint of speech.

Councilmember Bridges asked whether the city’s current ordinances are sufficient under Supreme Court precedent. Attorney Joppich confirmed they are, since the city does not permit displays by outside groups. Councilmember Bridges asked whether the city itself could display ribbons on city property in

the event of tragedies or to honor fallen officers. Joppich confirmed this is permissible as government speech.

Mayor Rich summarized that proclamations combined with city-controlled ribbon displays could be an option. While the city may display such items under its authority, allowing organizations to do so independently would risk a slippery slope of conflicting or inappropriate requests. Attorney Joppich affirmed this distinction.

City Manager Mekjian outlined the challenge of crafting a narrow policy limited to specific health observances (e.g., breast, ovarian, or colon cancer awareness). He cautioned that once such a list exists, other organizations—including those linked to divisive issues—would likely seek inclusion. As a potential alternative, he suggested using existing city digital smart signs to promote public-health messages (e.g., reminders for screenings) in tandem with proclamations. Councilmember Knol questioned whether promoting causes on city smart signs would create similar equity and consistency issues.

Councilmember Aldred agreed that distinguishing between government speech and third-party messaging is complex, especially because proclamations themselves are often initiated by outside requests. He favored caution given the difficulty of drawing clear lines.

Councilmember Boleware maintained that many council actions involve some degree of risk and supported proceeding where appropriate to advance public health messaging. Fear of potential litigation should not automatically preclude city action when serving residents' welfare.

Mayor Rich proposed that administration develop a draft policy allowing the City to engage in government speech on health matters. This could include ribbon displays or limited use of smart signs, with the draft to be brought back to council for discussion.

Councilmembers agreed to consider further conversation on this topic, and asked staff to research how other communities handle similar requests.

DISCUSSION ON RESPONSIBLE CONTRACTING

Mayor Rich opened the discussion on responsible contracting, noting the importance of ensuring safety, high-quality work, and cost efficiency in upcoming major city projects. She emphasized the need to prevent unsafe practices and to safeguard the city's investment by requiring skilled and trained workers. She referenced other municipalities, such as Royal Oak and Lansing, that have adopted responsible contracting ordinances.

City Manager Mekjian explained that many of the requirements found in responsible contracting ordinances are already present in the city's contracts, including Davis-Bacon wage compliance, insurance, and OSHA training. He suggested conducting a side-by-side review of Royal Oak's ordinance to determine if additional safeguards could be useful, with assistance from legal counsel.

Mayor Rich noted pre-qualifying vendors was one potential approach. However, there were concerns that pre-qualification processes could disadvantage small or minority-owned businesses unable to navigate the requirements, potentially limiting competition and increasing costs. Could contract language be strengthened without requiring pre-qualification?

Director of Central Services Aranowski reported on her outreach to benchmark cities regarding this issue. Royal Oak's ordinance has resulted in larger firms dominating bids while smaller firms abstain. The process requires significant administrative resources, including staff from engineering and finance. Other cities, such as Troy and Livonia, expressed opposition to adopting similar ordinances, citing resource demands and the risk of excluding long-standing local contractors. Southfield uses contractual checks and balances without a formal ordinance, and Rochester Hills did not have such an ordinance.

Councilmembers discussed administrative impacts. New requirements should not overburden staff. City Manager Mekjian described the city's current practices, including quality-based selection for engineering consultants, detailed bid reviews, bonding requirements, and insurance verification. He also pointed out that staff, because of their long-standing experience, was aware of contractor performance. Director Aranowski added that her department was updating its boilerplates for purchasing for construction projects.

The consensus of the council was to direct administration to perform a side-by-side review of the city's current contracting practices with Royal Oak's ordinance and report back with recommendations for potential improvements.

ADJOURNMENT

The Study Session meeting was adjourned at 7:21pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk