Explore | Play | Experience

Call to Order: President Tiesenga called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM.
Commissioners Present: Cathy Cagle, Jason Heisler, Karen Johnson, Keith Nisenson, Frederick Tiesenga

Commissioners Absent: Richard Hickey, Michael Jacobson,

Legal Counsel: Eric Anderson, Staub Anderson LLC arrived at 7:07pm.

Staff: Jason Herbster, Executive Director, Erik Jakubowski, Superintendent of Park Services, Amy Olson Manager of Park Planning and Development/ADA Coordinator, Tina Becke, Superintendent of Business Services, Kurt Reckamp, Superintendent of Recreation Programs and Facility Services, Jenny Leech, Superintendent of Marketing and Communication Services, Anne Sandor, Recording Secretary, Rocio Arreola-Escutia, Human Resources Manager, Claire Naughton, Manager of Facility Services, Rob Laue, Manager of the Racket Club, Wendy LaPorte, Manager of Business Services, Heidi Stolt, Manager of Recreation Programs

Citizens: Marc Sparber, Debbie Gallagher

Pledge of Allegiance: The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of the Agenda: Commissioner Heisler moved to approve the agenda, as presented. Seconded by Commissioner Nisenson. All were in favor.

2026-2027 Proposed Budget Discussion: Executive Director Jason Herbster opened the meeting by thanking staff for their efforts in preparing the draft 2026–2027 budget and acknowledging the Board for reviewing the document. He explained that the purpose of the workshop was to review the draft budget, highlight items of importance, discuss proposed changes, and receive a consensus of the Board to place the Budget Appropriation Ordinance on public display for the required 30-day period. Herbster noted that while budget approval is required in the first quarter of the fiscal year, the Board typically aims to approve it in April so projects can begin promptly on May 1. He emphasized that early planning is critical due to a short construction season that competes with local school schedules.

Herbster presented the proposed deficit budget of $4,945,975, structured to use the surplus fund balance to fund capital projects, representing a significant improvement from the FY 2025–2026 planned reduction of $7,818,276. Minor adjustments may be made following additional review, all favorable to the overall budget. He explained that the budget includes a 4% merit pool for staff salary increases, based on individual evaluations rather than automatically applied across all staff. Herbster clarified that raises are determined through a matrix, and no employee will exceed the maximum for their salary range.

Commissioner Tiesenga raised concerns about transparency around merit increases and staff evaluations. He requested a summary graph showing staff performance ranges without identifying individuals, to help ensure raises are equitable.

Herbster said the graph could be provided for informational purposes, but reminded the Board that its oversight applies only to the Executive Director. Commissioners Cagle and Johnson noted their confidence in staff professionalism while emphasizing the Board's responsibility to be good stewards of taxpayer funds.

Herbster noted that the salary pay scale is reviewed annually against market conditions and revised every two years as needed. Adjustments made at the start of the current fiscal year will remain in effect for another year and a half. Commissioner Tiesenga requested clarification about the 4% merit pool, asking whether it permits salary increases that exceed that percentage. Herbster explained that the percentage reflects available budget and market competitiveness, noting that extreme raises are unlikely, and the pool is rarely fully allocated. Tiesenga requested that an evaluation summary graph be provided at the March 18 meeting for informational purposes.

Herbster noted the proposed budget included the addition of eight new full-time positions: two Park Police Officers, four Park Services positions, one Recreation Inclusion Coordinator, and one IT position.

Herbster also confirmed that the health insurance increase for the upcoming fiscal year would not exceed 9%, based on an agreement with Blue Cross Blue Shield established the previous year.

Park Police: Commissioner Tiesenga asked about the rationale for adding two full-time police positions. Chief Longo explained that the department currently has two full-time and nine part-time officers, and the new positions would help maintain consistent patrol coverage, meet training requirements, and support special details. The proposed wage increase is $86,700, with $20,000–$25,000 in benefits, for a total cost of about $120,000. With reduced part-time hours, the net budget impact would be roughly $60,000. Commissioner Tiesenga deferred the discussion to the March 18th meeting.

Corporate Fund Balance: Executive Director Herbster reviewed the corporate fund balance, noting it fell below policy levels due to reclassification by the new auditing firm. The proposed budget starts the process to bring the fund back into compliance, expected within two to three years.

The IMRF fund balance is also projected below policy because of rate increases and proposed full-time positions, but it's expected to meet policy by year-end, with potential savings from unfilled positions.

Capital Projects: The budget includes a $2.5 million debt issuance for the maintenance garage renovation, with the district's financial advisor confirming it's manageable. Board members discussed using surplus funds to reduce debt, but staff noted that fund-specific requirements limit flexibility.

Final debt levels could be adjusted if surplus is available at year-end, though costs for the renovation are still somewhat uncertain. Superintendent Jakubowski will provide a timeline for the maintenance facility project in the next board packet.

Superintendent Becke reported that the projected year-end balance in the combined corporate fund is $3,782,381, which would allow the city's restricted impact fees to be transferred into the capital fund. She noted that projections for FY 2026–2027 show the fund balance falling below policy targets, and the District would have about three years to restore it.

She explained that developer impact fees are now classified as restricted, rather than assigned in prior years, because the city ordinance limits how they can be used. The corporate fund also includes a transfer to the debt service fund for the June bond interest payment. Herbster added that the city has a policy directing how those funds are to be used, once the funding is received, the city must ensure it is applied accordingly. He noted he would review the city ordinance to confirm.

New Park Services Maintenance Facility: Staff clarified that $2.5 million in new debt was proposed for the project, with a carryover of $2.4 million from prior funds. Board members discussed reducing the new debt issuance to $1.5 million instead of $2.5 million, noting the district would still maintain a sufficient capital fund balance of $1.9 million. It was agreed that the capital fund balance would be reduced by $1 million, with the option to issue additional funds later if needed.

Recreation: Superintendent Reckamp reported the Recreation fund is projected to end with a $173,000 surplus, reflecting continued growth in programs like summer camps and extended-time activities. The budget maintains a roughly 30% program margin, balancing affordability with sustainability, and investments in facilities and programs continue to support strong community participation.

Commissioner Tiesenga questioned non-resident program and facility fees. Superintendent Reckamp explained that non-resident fees are typically 30% higher than resident rates, with annual increases approved by the Board each November. Executive Director Herbster noted fees need to be approved in November for inclusion in the Winter/Spring Activity Guide. Commissioner Cagle shared that non-resident fees were increased from 10% to 30% higher than resident rates in 2023 and that the current board approved the rates for 2026 at the November 2025 board meeting. Tiesenga suggested reviewing the fee structure during the budget process to improve projections and to consider an increase of up to 50% to offset costs of new full-time staff and rising operational expenses. Reckamp will present a report at the March 18 meeting reviewing non-resident fees and FY 2024–2025 revenue. The non-resident fee policy will also be provided at the March 18th Board meeting.

Superintendent Reckamp noted the proposed budget includes a full-time Recreation Inclusion Coordinator. This role would coordinate staff supporting participants with special needs in park district programs. Currently, supervision is dispersed among site supervisors, and one-on-one aides are typically high school or college students. The coordinator would centralize management, maintain communication with parents, and provide operational support for programs such as summer camps and ET programs. It was clarified that NISRA does not provide staffing for these participants. Funding for this position would be supported by the Special Recreation fund, and the board agreed this role is a necessary addition.

IT Support Position: An IT Support position was also discussed. Right now, the District contracts out IT services, but having someone in-house would provide more consistent and reliable

support. This person would help keep things running smoothly across all departments, so issues get resolved faster.

Park Services: Superintendent Jakubowski outlined plans for four new full-time positions: a laborer, an operator specialist, a mechanic specialist, and a natural resource specialist to support operations and natural areas management.

Commissioner Tiesenga asked about the proposed Natural Resource Specialist position and the impact if it were not approved. Jakubowski explained that without this position, the district would need to rely on laborers or less specialized staff, limiting efficiency and expertise. The specialist would handle tasks such as applying herbicides, managing waterways, and clearing overgrown areas that affect public use, tasks currently performed by the Natural Resource Manager. The position would be full-time with IMRF benefits.

Superintendent Jakubowski noted that, while the District has previously had one or two full-time mechanics, the proposed Mechanic Specialist position would be a new full-time role to expand capacity and support operations. Commissioner Tiesenga asked whether a financial study had compared contracting repairs versus in-house work; Jakubowski explained the District currently uses a hybrid system, with one crew leader overseeing maintenance of vehicles, mowing equipment, tractors, and other implements.

Executive Director Herbster noted that, based on standards from the Association of Physical Plant Administrators, the District ideally needs 50–70 full-time staff to maintain current parks and facilities, but Park Services has only 35, creating a staffing gap. The Board asked that staff brink back 4 positions to the March 18th meeting.

Capital Projects: Manager Amy Olson reported that the District has several planned projects and staffing updates for the upcoming year. ADA improvements will be funded through the Special Recreation fund, including new surfacing at Canterbury Playground and ADA-compliant work at the parks maintenance building. In professional services, $120,000 is allocated for tennis court and asphalt consulting to address courts that are beyond repair, including Brighton Oaks, Four Colonies, Ken Bird, Fetzner, and Main Beach, with Wynwood Park slated for future years.

Consultants will provide construction and engineering drawings, ensuring proper bidding, permitting, and "shovel-ready" projects. This proactive approach allows the District to act quickly if additional funding becomes available from grants, impact fees, or donations. Smaller repairs will still be handled in-house or with contractors, while the consulting ensures consistency and compliance for major replacements.

Manager Amy Olson discussed plans to refresh the skate park for improved usability and accessibility, and Commissioner Cagle suggested removing damaged components rather than allocating additional funds to replace them.

Commissioner Cagle asked about installing shade structures at Lakewood Meadows playground, and Olson noted that the current equipment layout makes overhead shade challenging but that options to cover benches and surrounding areas are being explored. Cagle asked staff to find ways to install shade over the playground structure and expressed her disappointment that the equipment was designed without accommodating shade.

Commissioner Cagle asked about ice skating rinks. Herbster explained that staff looked into the cost, which came in around $120,000. With Lakewood Meadows that opened and the park on the Immanuel Lutheran property opening soon, adding a rink this year is not feasible, so the plan is to hold off for now, though it could be reconsidered next year.

Commissioner Cagle inquired about fenced-in playgrounds for children with special needs or those who elope. Olson noted that Barlina Preschool is currently fenced. Commissioner Cagle suggested Spoerl Park as a potential next site, and recommended the District aim for three fenced-in playgrounds over the next five years.

Superintendent Jakubowski addressed the West Beach boat launch project, stating there are two line items in the budget. The larger one, around $240,000, is for a full repair of the launch, including the circle drive and the ramp down to the water. This project went out to bid, and the numbers came in much higher than expected, so the budget includes carryover funds and will be rebid.

Commissioner Nisenson asked about plans for the Barlina Barn, and Jakubowski reported that lean-tos removal has been Board-approved and the contract signed; the lean-tos will be removed and the structure stabilized, while Herbster noted the District will continue exploring potential donations for future roof improvements.

The following items will be added to the regular Board meeting agenda on March 18.

1. A summary graph showing staff evaluations, without individual names, will be prepared and presented at the March 18 board meeting.
2. Proposed program fees and revenue for fiscal year 2026-2027
3. Proposal for four additional full-time positions

Herbster distributed comments from Commissioner Hickey outlining his thoughts regarding the budget and additional comments related to the proposed budget.

Matters from the Public: None.

Matters from the Board:
Commissioner Cagle noted that Executive Director Herbster's final Board meeting will be March 18, which will include recognition of Herbster, and a Park Initiative Foundation presentation with Commissioner Tiesenga serving as the MC.

Executive Session: None.

Adjourn: Commissioner Tiesenga adjourned the meeting at 8:24 pm.

Approve: _____ Attest:_____

President Secretary