

MINUTES

Eugene City Council Virtual Work Session Eugene, Oregon 97401

February 8, 2021
5:30 p.m.

Councilors Present: Emily Semple, Matt Keating, Alan Zelenka, Jennifer Yeh, Mike Clark, Greg Evans, Claire Syrett, Randy Groves

Mayor Vinis opened the February 8, 2021, work session of the Eugene City Council.

Councilor Clark joined the meeting at 5:41 p.m.

1. **WORK SESSION – Urban Forestry Program**

Parks and Open Space Division Manager Craig Carnagey, Green Infrastructure Manager Carrie Peterson and Urban Forestry Supervisor Eric DeBord provided an overview of the Urban Forestry Program.

Council Discussion:

- Councilor Groves – thanked staff for the presentation; asked how Eugene stands when benchmarked against other communities and how much wetlands affect the calculation of Eugene’s canopy; asked if staff are careful what species are planted with regard to wildfire concerns.
- Councilor Evans – asked if there is a plan to replace the flowering plum trees that were planted in the Bethel neighborhood 25-30 years ago, whose roots have grown horizontally and displaced sidewalks and curbs; inquired if there is an alternative species that would be better suited to the soil in Bethel.
- Councilor Keating – stated he would like to see a breakdown of canopy percentages for residential, commercial, industrial, parks, open space and right-of-way zones; asked how other municipalities handle tree removal from private property and what best practices are for mitigating canopy loss.
- Councilor Yeh – expressed surprise in learning Eugene is below the national average for tree canopy percentage; thanked urban forestry staff for the work they do.
- Councilor Clark – inquired if the 23 percent tree canopy coverage includes all land, private and public; asked if there are plans to mitigate dangers caused by trees with small root balls falling over.
- Councilor Zelenka – asked if Eugene is behind on tree canopy percentage because of tree loss due to storms in the past 10 years; inquired if it is the City’s responsibility to grind out stumps of trees that have fallen in the right-of-way and how behind the City currently is in doing this; asked if the current practice is to remove an old tree if it is dislocating a sidewalk.
- Mayor Vinis – reminded the public that planting trees can help the city meet climate action goals; reminded Council that trees are part of the current Clear and Objective Standards process.

2. **WORK SESSION – Northwest Natural Gas Franchise Agreement**

City Manager Sarah Medary, Intergovernmental Relations Manager Ethan Nelson, and Assistant City Attorney Hwa Go provided a status update on negotiations with Northwest Natural Gas (NWNNG) regarding renewing its franchise agreement with the City.

Councilor Syrett joined the meeting at 6:31 p.m.

Council Discussion:

- Councilor Clark – asked if there are other municipalities in Oregon that have carbon reduction agreements with their gas company and if Eugene has the opportunity to create the first one; inquired what the consequences will be if the franchise agreement expires, and if it will cost more for residential customers to establish new service; stated he is concerned that commercial customers will be required to pay more and restaurants that survived COVID will not survive this; asked what will happen to the Riverfront development without a franchise agreement in place.
- Councilor Zelenka – stated this agreement is the first of its kind and will take time to negotiate; asked questions regarding how the City will operate without the franchise agreement; asked what the circumstances are for termination under the current franchise agreement.
- Councilor Evans – inquired what the urban renewal agency had decided regarding allowing gas infrastructure in the Riverfront development; stated he would like to see a greater commitment by NWNG to carbon reduction goals and environmental stewardship.
- Councilor Groves – stated he is still interested in reaching an agreement with NWNG and is not concerned if negotiations extend past the deadline; stated he is concerned for infrastructure laborers and business and how to help with the transition and keep them surviving; expressed concern over costs and stated the reality is that costs will be passed on to the consumer and will be burdensome for low-income households; stated he would like to hear from more community members on this topic.
- Councilor Yeh – stated negotiations with NWNG began in 2018 and she does not feel that continuing unsuccessful negotiations will be of benefit when the current deal points do not contribute substantially to meeting the City’s climate recovery goals; stated at this point she is not in favor of extending the franchise agreement but in finding other ways to meet climate recovery goals.
- Councilor Keating – inquired if the City fails to enter into an agreement with NWNG that puts the City on track to meet its Climate Recovery Ordinance (CRO) goals, could it ban fossil fuel infrastructure until policies sufficient to meet CRO goals are put in place.
- Councilor Syrett – stated the City’s Planning and Development Director confirmed for her that NWNG is putting basic infrastructure into the Riverfront development now under the current franchise agreement; stated that two years ago NWNG was given an opportunity by the City to join it in demonstrating leadership in addressing climate change and in creating a model that other communities could follow; expressed frustration at recent developments and behaviors by NWNG, including dragging its feet and engaging in a public relations campaign that spreads lies about what Council is trying to do; stated that NWNG seems determined to pass on any additional fees to the customer and has not proposed any sacrifice on its own behalf; stated this industry is facing an existential crisis and fossil fuels need to be phased out.
- Councilor Semple – stated she is in agreement with the comments made by Councilors Yeh and Syrett; expressed frustration that negotiations have dragged on and is discouraged that progress has not been made; stated she would like to see staff time devoted to work that actually makes a difference.
- Mayor Vinis – stated NWNG is not offering the City very much and if Council considers decoupling the carbon reduction agreement from the franchise agreement, it really has no hold over NWNG since NWNG’s actions would then be voluntary and its commitment is limited; stated if Eugene is to be a model, let it be for doing good work on behalf of carbon reduction and climate change, not for how a city is held hostage to a franchise agreement that doesn’t serve its higher goals; stated this is an important moment for Council to stand clearly for what it sees as its legacy work going forward.

Mayor Vinis adjourned the meeting at 7:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Julie Adams", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Julie Adams
Deputy City Recorder

(Recorded by Jessica Gebb)

Link to the webcast of this City Council meeting [here](#).