

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM
JANUARY 11, 2025 – 9:00AM**

The goals study session meeting of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 9:04am.

Council Members Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Bruce, Dwyer, Knol, and Rich

Council Members Absent: None

Others Present: City Manager Mekjian, City Clerk Lindahl, Assistant City Manager Mondora, Director Skrobola and City Attorney Joppich

OPENING COMMENTS

Mayor Rich outlined the purpose of this goal study session:

- Review of the status of 2024 goals.
- Focus on identifying priorities for the coming year.
- Determine whether items should proceed for further evaluation in study sessions or through memos.

Tonight’s discussion will not include deliberation on the specific issues themselves.

REVIEW STATUS OF 2024 GOALS

City Manager Mekjian noted that a provided matrix indicated the status of twenty-three 2024 goals, under sub-heads “Developing” (1), “In progress” (7), “Completed” (11) and “Ongoing” (9). Five goals fit under more than one category.

Mekjian reviewed the matrix, noting:

- Items marked as complete or ongoing through 2025.
- Several multi-year efforts, including the Special Services Evaluation with SFC (Sports Facilities Companies) and strategic deficit reduction planning for the HAWK.

Regarding Urban Deer Management:

- Deputy Director of Special Services Brian Farmer has become a leading expert in the state, forming regional coalitions to address the problem, with participation from SEMCOG, Livonia, Southfield, West Bloomfield, and Oakland County Parks. The goal is to organize a regional initiative to educate the public with data-driven facts and conduct a cull in spring 2026.
- The number of car-deer accidents is increasing, with 147 deer/car crashes in 2024 on Farmington Hills maintained streets alone.
- A dedicated study session will be held before March 2025 regarding this topic.

DISCUSSION ON 2025 GOALS

The 2025 goals being discussed this evening were submitted by individual Council members.

Fair Share with City of Farmington

- Mayor Rich confirmed unanimous Council support to continue discussion on the Fair Share Agreement, following initial dialogue during 2024 budget sessions.
- Finance Director Skrobola will provide data for Council review.

Accessibility Listening Sessions

- Some people with disabilities have asked Council to schedule listening sessions about accessibility in City facilities and parks.
- SFC could be asked to integrate this goal into their ongoing study. The SFC study includes all parks and facilities and is not limited to the HAWK and Costick Center.
- Accessibility should encompass all city facilities, parks, and digital resources.

Regarding translation services:

Gaps remain in providing translation services for police and fire in emergent situations. Suggestions included:

- Explore contracted interpreter services, particularly for police and emergency situations. Council Member Dwyer volunteered to provide vendor recommendations.
- Invite a presentation from a translation services company.
- Explore contracted services similar to those used in court systems.
- Leverage existing County resources and technology such as phone-based translation tools.
- Incorporate accessibility improvements such as translation services powered by AI.

Discussion regarding developing a comprehensive AI strategy, building on 2024's goal of incorporating AI into website improvements:

- IT funding proposals for AI-related projects, including software, consulting, and website upgrades, are being prepared for the coming budget year. This is a "developing" and "ongoing" item from 2024.
- AI discussions and classes are regularly being held at municipal organization training events such as MML.
- Current website complies with federal regulations but needs updating.
- Use AI with vehicle-mounted cameras, particularly on zoning vehicles, to identify subtle changes in neighborhood infrastructure or property conditions.
- New Innovation, Energy, and Environmental Sustainability Commission could be tasked with assisting in AI integration, looking at both pros and cons relative to AI's ability to support energy and environmental sustainability.

In summary:

Focus on strategic integration of AI to enhance city services and accessibility at parks and facilities, to upgrade digital resources, and to support proactive measures for zoning and blight management.

Reimbursement for Local Costs for Political Events

Council Member Bruce raised concerns about the financial burden placed on the City during privately hosted political campaign events. The cost born by the City becomes a de facto contribution to the campaigns, when national campaigns have billions of dollars in their coffers.

- Example: The Harris campaign event cost the city over \$30,000 in public safety services for a closed, private event.

- Combined costs of recent Trump and Harris events exceeded \$43,000.

Council discussed implementing a policy requiring campaigns to reimburse the City for public safety and other services.

- Research how other communities handle this issue.
- It is not practical or reasonable to think the City would say “no” to providing emergency services for these events.
- When the State of the County address was held at the Hawk, the County reimbursed the City for all services.

Council consensus was to study this issue further during a future study session.

Fire Station #4 Staffing and related discussion

City Manager Mekjian emphasized the need for a strategic plan and community needs assessment for the Fire Department, to provide clarity on the future direction of the Department, including staffing and operational needs.

- Delivering emergency services to the City of Farmington had the potential for cost-neutral operations.
- Chief Unruh had brought forward the possibility of hiring four additional firefighters. This request should involve more detailed conversation by Council, possibly during the budget study session.
- Central Services is putting together a proposal for an overarching strategic plan for the Fire Department, acknowledging the Chief’s vision for the Fire Department as well as Administration’s vision of how a strategic plan for the department will dovetail with the City’s overall strategic plan.
- Council will be making profound decisions that will affect the Fire Department in the coming years. For instance, the Chief would like to transition to a full-time career fire department. This decision will ultimately rest with Council, with council members requiring good and thorough information for their decision making process.

Regarding hiring an outside consultant:

- Council Member Dwyer strongly opposed bringing in an outside consultant to look at how the Fire Department will phase out the paid on-call firefighters and how they will be replaced. The Department has competent people who know the department and who can put together such a plan.
- Council discussed the pros and cons of utilizing an objective outside consultant vs. internal staff.
 - Concerns were raised about potential bias in internally prepared plans. There was value in getting an external, high-level perspective.
 - Mayor Pro Tem Bridges countered that internal staff, particularly the Fire Chief and department leadership, possess the necessary expertise to conduct a thorough and unbiased assessment.
- Council Member Knol proposed a compromise where internal staff prepare the initial plan, followed by an external review to ensure objectivity and eliminate bias.

Regarding Fire Station #4:

- Fire Station 4 remains the only station not staffed 24/7, with paramedic support being pulled from other stations during off-hours.
- Consistency in staffing and service capabilities across all fire stations is a priority.
- A resident complaint relative to these issues at Station #4 highlighted community concerns.

Regarding potential discussion about department staffing during the May budget study sessions:

- Council emphasized the importance of setting clear goals during planning sessions to prevent last-minute budget adjustments during formal budget deliberations.
- New positions [across the City] should be carefully planned and incorporated into the budget well in advance.
- Headcount should not be increased without clear justification, as there are long-term financial implications of permanent positions, especially in unionized departments.

This discussion highlighted the need for study sessions relative to strategic planning to ensure equitable fire service delivery along with sustainable budgeting practices.

Budget Strategy

- Council discussed decision-making process/challenges relative to goal setting.
- Council Member Boleware and others noted difficulty in making informed decisions due to a lack of information on topics discussed during goal-setting sessions, which may be the first time Council hears about an item. Yet the goal-setting session determines the budget. It is very difficult to make important decisions without complete information including supporting data.
- Council members asked for more detailed progress updates on ongoing projects, and more timely and greater detail on new projects.
- Are there ways to refine the goal-setting process in order to avoid last-minute budget adjustments? For instance, could a timeline be implemented where priorities and big-ticket items such as staffing are discussed earlier in the year to help ensure alignment with budget preparation? This would prevent a reactive approach during formal budget sessions and allow for more balanced decision-making regarding resource allocation.

There appeared to be consensus support for further study regarding the budget process to allow for better planning and integration of Council goals.

Single Sign-on Software with Online Bill Pay

Council Member Knol revisited a prior request for a unified online bill pay system that would allow residents to manage payments for property taxes, recreational classes, and other city services with a single username and password. Other cities of similar size have implemented such systems.

City Manager Mekjian and Finance Director Skrobola explained that for the last three years the City had been migrating to BS&A software for its core financial systems in order to modernize city operations, reduce paper use, and improve efficiency. The BS&A payment platform will streamline transactions for services in City Hall. However, integration with Special Services systems (RecTrack and CardConnect) remains challenging. External vendors like PayIt offer potential solutions but have yet to fully meet the city's needs for seamless integration.

- Council expressed frustration with the clunky and inconsistent user experience across the city's current platforms.
- Upcoming budgets will include increased spending on software, cloud storage, and security. Long-term benefits of these investments include improved efficiency, reduced reliance on paper, and better utilization of staff time.
- The investment required for IT upgrades/systems integration is significant.

There was consensus on commitment to modernizing city operations and improving the digital experience for residents.

Park Amenities

Council Members discussed the importance of maintaining and upgrading park facilities and historic structures to ensure they remain attractive to residents and visitors. The conversation emphasized coordinated planning, funding prioritization, and integrating these initiatives into the city's long-term budget strategy.

Parks and Playscapes:

Council Member Aldred provided examples that compared playscapes and park facilities in neighboring communities to those in Farmington Hills; Farmington Hills did not compare well. Aldred highlighted the need for Farmington Hills to invest in such amenities to remain competitive, especially in terms of attracting families.

Council discussion included:

- Investments in updated playgrounds align with the City's identity as a family-oriented community.
- It was suggested to use funds from the Oakland County Parks millage to create a coordinated master plan for playscapes to ensure consistency and appeal across all parks.
- Prioritize maintaining historic structures within Heritage Park, including Spicer House, the Barn (art studio), and Longacre House.
- Develop a phased approach, starting with the most pressing needs. Leverage grants, corporate support, and city funds.
- Some communities have playscapes provided by private industry, with acknowledgements posted next to the playscapes.
- Playground equipment can also be adult friendly. Install adaptive and adult-friendly playgrounds at locations such as The Hawk and Costick Center, as well as at city parks.
- Council also discussed cricket field plans and their potential impact on existing baseball and softball fields.

Council acknowledged the complexity of the Special Services Department's budget and discussed the need for a strategic, holistic approach to parks and recreation planning. City Manager Mekjian pointed out that this was why SFC had been brought in – to make recommendations regarding a comprehensive strategy that incorporates the Parks Master Plan with the Capital Improvements Plan. Finance Director Skrobola highlighted that despite the city's strong fiscal health – due in part to one-off events such as fund infusions that took place during the pandemic, including federal grants and money sent directly to individuals – as well as the City's strong tax base, care must be taken to ensure long-term sustainability and avoid placing future councils in budgetary constraints. This is especially important as the budget planning document shows deficits than must be acknowledged and dealt with.

In terms of the current conversation, Council Member Aldred noted that the most important question relating to playscapes and parks amenities was: How do we make this happen?

In response, Mekjian stated that his role is to provide the Council with a transparent budgetary strategic plan that clearly outlines the current situation, identifies priorities, and explores solutions. He emphasized the need for a sustainable approach to address deficits, which could include options such as

millage increases, bonds, or debt financing. Such a plan would help Council make informed decisions regarding critical priorities, including playgrounds, programming, staffing at The Hawk, as well as improvements at the Senior Center, noting that a presentation will be made to Council detailing options for the future of the Costick Center by June 30.

In summary, Council members agreed that well-maintained parks including play structures and historic structures positively influence the city's image, attract families, and enhance the overall quality of life. Council expressed unanimous support for upgrading park playscapes and also historic structures and asked that they be integrated into the city's strategic plans as priority items.

Master Plan Implementation and Development Process Options

Economic Development Grants

- Master Plan Implementation and Zoning Amendments
 - City Manager Mekjian explained ongoing efforts to implement the city's master plan, beginning with a study session scheduled with the Planning Commission on January 16 to address zoning in the OS-4 district along 12 Mile Road and I-696. Discussion will include:
 1. Exploring zoning text amendments to address vacant office space.
 2. Potential office-to-residential conversions.
 3. Increasing building height limits near the freeway to encourage mixed-use and higher-density development.
 - John Trafelet, Planning Commission Chair, confirmed progress on these items.
- Economic Incentives
 - Council Member Knol proposed educating the Council on economic incentives, citing the need to attract developers for redevelopment projects, which are more costly than greenfield developments.
 - Proactive study of incentives would enable the City to respond quickly to developer proposals.
 - Examples include tools used by neighboring communities, such as Livonia's development along Haggerty Road, which leveraged access and incentives to attract high-profile restaurants and businesses.
 - Council members supported scheduling a Saturday session to learn about economic incentives.
- Competitiveness and Redevelopment
 - Mayor Pro Tem Bridges emphasized the importance of adapting to the city's evolving needs and competing with neighboring communities to attract desirable businesses and developments.
 - City Manager Mekjian pointed out the potential of contextual zoning to streamline development approvals, drawing on examples from Troy's Big Beaver Corridor. However, a balance must be maintained between efficiency and public oversight.
 - Comprehensive strategies that align zoning, economic incentives, and master plan goals will be critical to ensuring sustainable growth.
- Council Engagement – Extended Saturday study sessions
 - Council members supported extended Saturday meetings to allow in-depth discussions on important topics and avoid prolonged delays in addressing key issues.
 - Mayor Rich agreed to explore scheduling options to facilitate these discussions.

Future sessions will focus on economic incentives and refining development strategies.

Police Data Reporting

Council Member Aldred stressed the need to ensure all stakeholders have access to reliable data for decision-making, particularly regarding sensitive topics related to policing.

- There are differing views and perceptions related to this topic and discussion is sometimes difficult.
- The addition of a data analyst presents an opportunity to improve data reporting and evaluation. Council expressed interest in understanding the data analyst's work plan and how the analyst's efforts will enhance police data reporting and analysis.
- Discussion underscored the importance of continued open, transparent conversations on this topic.
- Mayor Rich suggested that once the data analyst's work plan is developed and reviewed, it could be presented to Council.

Anti-Discrimination Ordinance Review

Mayor Rich reviewed an incident in October when people left discriminatory literature on people's property during Rosh Hashanah. When Chief King presented to Council on this issue, he reported that the only charge that could be made against the people involved was littering. Mayor Rich proposed looking at the current ordinance with an eye to expanding the language to address hate-related activities while respecting First Amendment rights.

City Attorney Joppich explained that the existing anti-discrimination ordinance (Chapter 13.5) addresses housing, public accommodations, and employment. However, it does not cover the issues raised by recent events. He suggested that as part of a study session on this issue, Council would be brought up to speed on State law, research could be presented regarding ordinances in other jurisdictions, and discussion could take place relative to possible changes that could address activities such as those that occurred in October.

Council expressed support for this proposed course of action.

Discussion on allowing Council adequate preparation time:

- Council Member Knol suggested providing Council with materials in the packets for the meeting prior to the meeting when items are going to be discussed, especially for items that require in-depth Council discussion.
- Council Member Boleware felt that study sessions often include too many agenda items, leaving insufficient time for meaningful discussion.
- One suggestion is to include non-time-sensitive topics contingency items ("if time allows") for study sessions to ensure productive use of time if other discussions conclude early.
- Council members could communicate to the City Manager via the Mayor regarding items for which they need more lead time for discussion preparation.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

John Trafelet raised the issue of underutilized property located across from the high school at 13 Mile and Farmington Road. While the property is owned by the drainage district, the gate has a sign that says "City of Farmington Hills." Currently the property is scrub trees and brush.

In response, Mayor Rich noted that at one time the suggestion had been put forward to install city art at this location. She acknowledged Mr. Trafelet's comment and thanked him for bringing the issue forward.

Firefighter Nick Newcomb raised his concerns about staffing at Fire Station #4. He indicated that the station is open 24/7 and relies on paid on-call firefighters without paramedic certification after 6pm and on weekends. He stated that Basic Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) cannot provide advanced life support (ALS). Newcomb cited data showing a correlation between timely ALS interventions and improved patient survival rates indicated that the current reliance on basic EMTs at Station #4 creates a gap in care.

ADJOURNMENT

The study session meeting adjourned at 10:58am.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk