

ANNUAL REPORT

2024



THE
CITY OF
COLUMBIA
HEIGHTS



Community members painted a snowplow blade at the City's annual Truck or Treat event in October.

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ADMINISTRATION

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- Aaron Chirpich, who previously served as the City's Community Development Director and Assistant City Manager, was selected to serve as City Manager following a national search by the City Council.
- Communications staff received a Minnesota Association of Government Communicators Northern Lights Award for its Community Poster Series in the Central Place Room.
- Communications staff planned and coordinated several free City events for residents including SnowBLAST, the Citywide Garage Sale, the Community Art & Info Fair, Music in the Park, Movies in the Park, and Truck or Treat.
- The City's Facebook account gained 533 followers during the year with a cumulative post reach of 234,000. Instagram gained 110 followers with a total reach of 4,000 for the year.
- The City hired 39 full-time employees (of which 21 were on a promotional basis), 16 part-time employees, 3 paid-on-call firefighters, and many seasonal and temporary positions.

AARON CHIRPICH NAMED CITY MANAGER

In June, Aaron Chirpich was named City Manager following a national search. He had previously served as the City's Assistant City Manager and Community Development Director. Chirpich took over for Kevin Hansen, who had served as Interim City Manager since April 2023.

Chirpich has played a crucial role in numerous redevelopment projects, such as the new City Hall location at 3989 Central Ave NE, the 62-unit affordable housing unit located at 800 42nd Ave NE, and being the lead staff contact for the redevelopment at 4300 Central Ave NE.

Chirpich, along with City staff and elected officials, will continue to work on future redevelopment projects in Columbia Heights, such as 4300 Central Ave NE (former Rainbow site) and 800 53rd Ave NE (former Medtronic site).

In addition to the major redevelopment projects on the horizon, the City of Columbia Heights is working

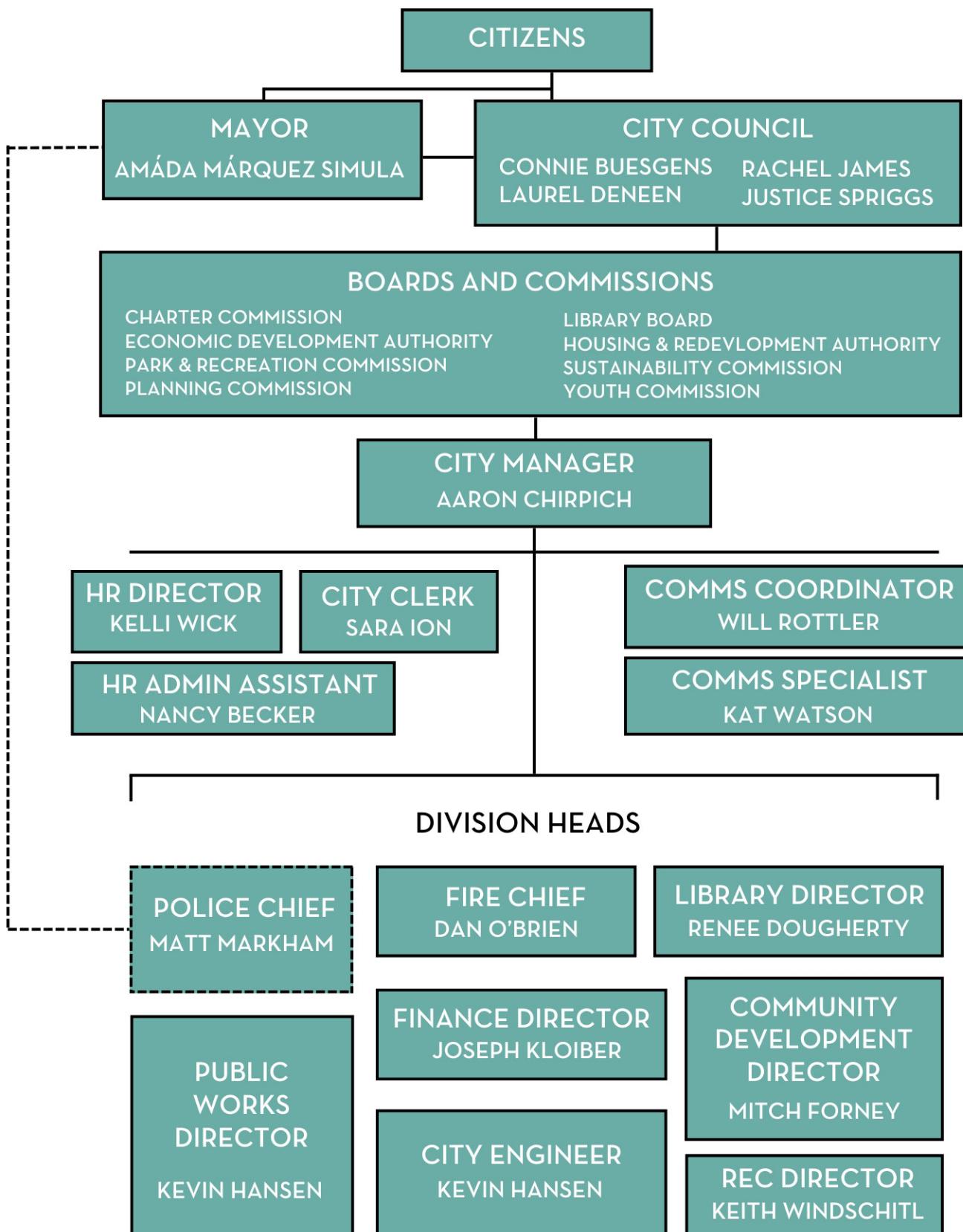
towards replacing its aging park system, John P. Murzyn Hall, and Public Works Building.

Before joining the City of Columbia Heights as Community Development Director in 2019, he served as the Community Development Specialist at the City of New Hope and Development Director with the Headwaters Regional Development Commission.

Chirpich graduated from Bemidji State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history with a minor in political science. He furthered his educational background with a Master of Public Administration from Metropolitan State University.



ADMINISTRATION ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



2024 ELECTION RECAP

More than 10,000 Columbia Heights residents voted in the General Election on Nov 5, which is nearly 82% of the City's total registered voters.

In the Columbia Heights mayoral race, incumbent Mayor Amáda Márquez Simula was reelected to a third mayoral term.

In the City Council race to fill two seats, incumbent Council Member Connie Buesgens was reelected to serve a third term, and Planning Commissioner Laurel Deneen was elected to a first term on the City Council.

Prior to the November General Election, the City administered the Presidential Primary on March 5 and the State Primary on Aug 13. Approximately 115 election judges were hired to assist voters at the City's eight voting precincts.

ABOUT THE CITY COUNCIL

The City of Columbia Heights is governed by a five-member council, consisting of a mayor and four council members elected at-large. The mayor serves a two-year term, with council members serving staggered, four-year terms. Elections are held in November of even-numbered years.

The City of Columbia Heights is a charter city. The City Charter determines the procedures of city government in accordance with state statutes and the Minnesota State Constitution. Under this charter, the City has adopted the council-manager form of government. The City Council appoints the City Manager, who is the chief administrative officer for the City. The City Council meets on the second and fourth Mondays of the month at 6 pm in the City Hall Council Chambers (3989 Central Ave NE).



From left, Councilmember Justice Spriggs, Councilmember Connie Buesgens, Mayor Amáda Márquez Simula, Councilmember Rachel James, and Councilmember Laurel Deneen.

2024 OUTSTANDING CITIZENS

In May, the 2024 Outstanding Citizen award recipients were announced at a City Council Meeting. Denise Johnson and Brian "Beany" Drews were recognized in the adult category, with Jack Israelson accepting the award in the youth category.

DENISE JOHNSON

As Denise was winding down her 47-year career in healthcare, she knew she needed to spend her time in a meaningful way in retirement. She credits her parents for giving her inspiration. "The volunteerism spirit was role-modeled at home," she said. "Volunteering was never a question based on the example my parents set."

Originally from Columbia Heights, Denise watched her mom volunteer at Southern Anoka County Assistance (SACA) every Wednesday for 20 years. Both parents volunteered at SACA and local churches, and her dad used his handy skills to help neighbors with odd jobs.

After retiring, Denise followed in her parents' footsteps and is now a second-generation volunteer at SACA. She helps clients shop and ensures they have a positive experience.

Just before retiring in 2021, Denise also started working with Reach Out and Read, an organization that works to get books into the hands of children at annual check-ups during early childhood. Denise said she enjoys getting to work alongside young adults from Columbia Heights who also volunteer with the organization as part of a career pathways program.

When the City's Sustainability Commission was launched in 2023, Denise applied and was appointed as one of the first commissioners. She said she brings her love of Columbia Heights to the role and has learned a lot along the way. She added that her involvement with the commission is a great jumping-off point for other volunteer opportunities in the City.

For those looking for ways to get involved, Denise noted the ample need in Columbia Heights. "You don't have to go far if you're looking for volunteer opportunities," she said. "It's right in your backyard."



From left: Conner Drews (accepting on behalf of his father), Mayor Márquez Simula, Jack Israelson, and Denise Johnson.

BRIAN "BEANY" DREWS

It's no surprise that many in the community knew Brian "Beany" Drews. He called Columbia Heights home for most of his life and had a knack for brightening people's days, according to his son Conner. "He was easy to approach," said Conner. "I don't think he realized the impact he had on people."

Beany spent many years as an assistant coach for numerous youth sports. Conner said his dad went out of his way to help kids who needed rides to practice and played an active role in fundraising efforts to ensure kids could participate. Although Conner played for St. Anthony, Beany couldn't help but root for the opposing team anytime they faced teams from Columbia Heights.

After Beany's passing last November, Conner said he's been taken aback by the number of people who recognize him because of his dad. Everyone from the mail carrier to former youth sports peers have approached him. They all remember talking to Beany and enjoying his sense of humor and the light-hearted atmosphere he created anywhere he went.

Beany's family is rooted in Columbia Heights, and he often assisted with fundraising efforts and events at his family's local church. He also stayed active in the community through softball and the Italian American Club.

We thank Conner Drews for accepting the Outstanding Citizen Award on behalf of his father.

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2024 OUTSTANDING CITIZENS, CONTINUED

JACK ISRAELSON

Jack Israelson, a senior at Columbia Heights High School, serves as a member of the City's Youth Commission and is a volunteer photographer with Heights-NEXT.

Jack said he has enjoyed being part of the Youth Commission and learning from various City staff that have presented to the commission. "It's opened my eyes to many of the different departments," he said. "It's been a very valuable experience, and I've liked contributing to local government."

In addition to his volunteer work, he's a writer with the Heights Herald, where several of his stories focus

on the Columbia Heights community and local government. One of the nominations for Jack noted his dedication to covering issues that impact the City and ensuring that his peers are well-informed citizens.

After graduating this spring, Jack plans to attend the University of Minnesota in the fall, hoping to study geography or urban studies.

Being involved in the Columbia Heights community has been important to Jack. "It's a vibrant and progressive community," he said. "I'm glad to be a part of it. If you want to get involved, it's easy to do."

DIANA ARNE NAMED EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Congratulations to our 2024 Employee of the Year, Diana Arne! As a cashier at Top Valu Liquor, Diana has been a familiar face to community members for over 24 years. Diana's dedication, outstanding service, and commitment to her role have made a lasting impact on Top Valu Liquor operations and the City.

"Diana comes to work each day knowing what she does has a positive impact on the residents of Columbia Heights," said Top Valu Liquor Operations Manager Jason Schulz. "Each day, she shows up with a good attitude and has a great ability to see the bright side of any situation."

In a role that involves daily interaction with hundreds of community members, Diana's friendly demeanor and care for others have made her a favorite among customers. Regular patrons often stop in to chat with Diana, a testament to her ability to create genuine connections with the community.

Through her interactions, Diana drives profitable sales for the City. Last year alone, she handled over 52,000 transactions totaling more than \$1.3 million in sales! This remarkable contribution speaks to the hard work that Diana brings to her role every day.

A lifelong resident of Columbia Heights, Diana's commitment to the community goes beyond her official role. She has gone out of her way to purchase or donate clothing, including winter boots and coats, to customers in need. These acts of goodwill demonstrate Diana's values and care for the community.

Diana's contributions have been central to the success of Top Valu Liquor, and we are fortunate that she has chosen to work with us for the past 24 years.



Above: Employee of the Year recipient Diana Arne pictured with Mayor Márquez Simula at Murzyn Hall in December.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- Implemented a Time-of-Sale Housing Inspection Program designed to preserve the quality and value of the City's housing stock
- Partnered with Better Futures to deconstruct and salvage materials from City-owned properties that were set for demolition.
- Continued to work with Alatus LLC to develop plans for the redevelopment of 4300 Central Ave NE.
- Created an Energy Action Team and completed five Partners in Energy workshops to guide the creation of the City's Energy Action Plan.
- Completed a Comprehensive Plan amendment to rezone the former Medtronic site. The site is now zoned for Transit Oriented Development (TOD) to optimize redevelopment options for the 12-acre site.

PLANNING COMMISSION HIGHLIGHTS

- Variance for setback requirements for an attached garage addition to 1650 40th Ave NE.
- A Comprehensive Plan amendment for the former Medtronic site was reviewed and given a positive recommendation by the Planning Commission; City Council approved the amendment, which was also accepted by the Metropolitan Council. The amendment reguides the property's land use from Commercial to Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and increases the density to 25 – 65 units per acre with a composition of approximately 85% residential and 15% commercial.
- Interim Use Permit for Renaissance Fireworks.
- Minor Subdivision of La Casita at 5075 Central Ave NE into two separate parcels concurrent with a Site Plan Review approval for Chase Bank on the newly created parcel.
- Reviewed acquisitions of 675 37th Ave NE and 4416 Central Ave NE
- Zoning Text Amendments:
 - Amending outdoor play area requirements for day care uses, definitions and specific development standards for uses in the City, and allowing for the use of administrative citations to address land use, public health and safety, and property maintenance code violations.
 - Establishing tree preservation and replanting standards, an impervious surface maximum and artificial turf review process for residential properties, and allowing Accessory Dwelling Units and shared family living arrangements by removing the limit on the number of unrelated adults that can live in a residence.
 - Removing the legal nonconforming status from lots of residential properties by allowing reduced lot size/widths based on when the properties were platted.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (EDA) HIGHLIGHTS

- 2024 Columbia Heights Business of the Year awarded to Heights Pizza Man.
- 10 Façade Improvement Grants awarded.
- Deconstruction of 3851 Central Ave NE, 3853 Central Ave NE, and 4416 Central Ave NE.
- Demolition of 941 44th Ave NE, 3851 Central Ave NE, 3853 Central Ave NE, and 4416 Central Ave NE.
- Purchase of 4416 Central Ave NE.
- Sale of 4243 5th Street NE to Habitat for Humanity.
- Affordable Housing Trust Fund: In May, the City established an affordable housing trust fund and delegated the administration of this fund to the EDA. The fund stores the affordable housing sales tax revenue received from the State, as well as any additional contributions from the City or EDA. Currently, the affordable housing trust fund contains \$142,878.18 from the 2024 sales tax issuance. The EDA will allocate these financial resources for use in affordable housing initiatives.

BUILDING SAFETY HIGHLIGHTS

1,816
**PERMITS
ISSUED**

\$44.9 MILLION
**PERMIT
VALUATION**

2,500
**BUILDING
INSPECTIONS**

CITY IMPLEMENTS TIME OF SALE PROGRAM

In May, the City Council passed a Time of Sale Program. The ordinance aims to ensure that properties meet city codes and standards before they change ownership, promoting public safety and property maintenance within the community. Ultimately, the Time of Sale Program seeks to enhance property standards, safeguard buyers and sellers, and support the city's broader goals of maintaining a healthy and safe housing environment.

Under the program, no person may sell, purchase, gift, or transfer ownership of any residential property with buildings or structures without obtaining a certificate from the City. This requirement applies to all residential properties, including transfers between family members, foreclosures, and bank-owned properties. The program promotes responsible property ownership while ensuring homes meet safety and health requirements before ownership changes hands. As of January 2024, the Building Inspections department completed 284 time-of-sale inspections since the program went live.

BETTER FUTURES MINNESOTA PARTNERSHIP

As part of its reinvestment work, the EDA makes strategic property purchases to facilitate code compliance and redevelopment. Frequently, once the EDA has purchased a property, it contracts with a local business to demolish the existing structures on the site. In 2024, the EDA worked with Better Futures Minnesota, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping men who have faced incarceration.

Better Futures' operations model is based on four fundamental themes: employment, health and wellness engagement, workforce development, and life coaching and compassionate care. One service Better Futures provides is deconstruction, which allows building materials like lumber and bricks and items like doors, flooring, and appliances to be salvaged and recycled for reuse. In addition to managing the deconstruction and salvaged materials donations process, the program also trains participants for careers in deconstruction or construction.

The EDA awarded three contracts to Better Futures for the deconstruction of three EDA-owned properties: 3851 Central Ave NE, 3853 Central Ave NE, and 4416 Central Ave NE. The materials salvaged from the properties were resold at their ReUse Warehouse Store.

By partnering with Better Futures, the City is supporting workforce development and promoting sustainable construction and redevelopment practices. A video about Better Futures' activities in Columbia Heights is available online at bit.ly/4gWNv2L.



FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

In 2024, the City's Economic Development Authority approved ten business grants through its Façade Improvement Grant Program. Out of a 2024 program budget of \$50,000, the EDA allocated a total of \$46,752 for direct disbursement to local businesses.

The City's Façade Improvement Grant Program was established in 2018 in an effort to revitalize, rehabilitate, and restore street-facing storefronts. Commercial property owners and business tenants on certain streets can apply for grants of up to \$5,000 to complete permanent exterior improvements to existing commercial structures. As part of the program, applicants are given the opportunity to express interest in CHPD installation of exterior surveillance cameras.

This year, grant recipients completed a variety of projects including design and installation of signage, window and door replacement, awning installation, and restaurant patio renovations. Most participating businesses were located along Central Avenue, but several properties on 37th Ave NE, 40th Ave NE, and University Ave also received funding.

As of Jan 1, submissions are open for 2025 Façade Improvement Grants. The EDA accepts and reviews applications on a rolling basis. Visit columbiaheightsmn.gov/business/facade_improvement_grant.php for more information.



New windows and doors installed at 852 40th Ave NE.



New windows installed at 4030 Central Ave NE.



New signage installed at 4801 Central Ave NE.

HEIGHTS PIZZA MAN NAMED BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

The Outstanding Business of the Year Award recognizes businesses in the City for noteworthy accomplishments, long-standing contributions to the community, and significant community service efforts. In 2024, Heights Pizza Man was named Business of the Year by the Columbia Heights Economic Development Authority (EDA). This recognition is a testament to Heights Pizza Man's success as a local business known for continuously giving back to the community. Nominations for Heights Pizza Man highlighted the business's generosity and commitment to the people of Columbia Heights.

"During the EDA's review of the nominations, it became apparent that Heights Pizza Man has become an integral part of our community," said Community Development Coordinator Mitch Forney. "Their dedication to supporting local nonprofits, assisting those in need, and fostering a sense of unity is commendable. I am proud to see them recognized for their outstanding contributions, and I do not doubt that they will continue to inspire others to make a positive impact in our community."

Kolstad purchased Heights Pizza Man in January 2020, not knowing the COVID-19 pandemic was just around the corner. At a time of great uncertainty for businesses large and small, Kolstad chose to focus outward. During school closures, he saw the void left by the absence of school lunches and invited families to contact him for free pizza slices during lunchtime.

"We don't have dine-in, so thankfully we were able to get back up and running," Kolstad said of the pandemic. "We were operating with delivery when many other businesses remained closed."

Mayor Amáda Márquez Simula, Heights Pizza Man owner Chris Kolstad, Kitchen Manager Ryan Beatt, and Community Development Coordinator Mitch Forney pictured in front of Heights Pizza Man after the award was presented to Kolstad on May 1.

When the Southern Anoka County Assistance (SACA) Food Shelf announced in November 2023 that it was facing a funding shortage to provide holiday meal ingredients to its clients, Kolstad stepped up. His leadership and generosity were instrumental in ensuring SACA clients could enjoy a holiday meal. His initiative inspired other businesses, organizations,



Above: From left, Mayor Amáda Márquez Simula, Heights Pizza Man owner Chris Kolstad, Kitchen Manager Ryan Beatt, and Community Development Coordinator Mitch Forney pictured in front of Heights Pizza Man after the award was presented to Kolstad on May 1.

and individuals to contribute to SACA, amplifying the impact of his gift.

While much of Heights Pizza Man's philanthropy focuses on food insecurity, Kolstad also prioritizes community safety. He offers free rides home on New Year's Eve, ensuring that cost is not a barrier for anyone to get home safely.

Just this March, Kolstad jumped on a community member's idea and launched a "pay it forward" program to help anyone needing a meal. With community donations and a portion of sales going towards the program, Heights Pizza Man's latest effort makes meals available to community members who may not have other options.

"We were supposed to make pizza," Kolstad said. "My favorite part is that it's become more than that."

Kolstad said the previous owner of Heights Pizza Man took a chance on him when he was given the unexpected opportunity to purchase the business. "We've put everything into it and are fortunate to have the community behind us," Kolstad said. "This recognition means a lot not only to me but also to my staff. They genuinely care about this business, which is a big deal."

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- **Enhanced Police IT Support:** In partnership with the Police Department, the IT Department assumed responsibility for information systems support for officers and records staff, allowing Police resources to focus on crime analysis. To support this initiative, IT added a full-time Technician dedicated to the maintenance and improvement of Police IT systems.
- **Upgraded First Responder Connectivity:** Deployed Cradlepoint cellular, GPS, and Wi-Fi solutions to all Police squad cars and Fire trucks. This upgrade ensures secure, reliable field connectivity for first responders, accommodating the increasing number of electronic devices used during operations.
- **Formalized Cybersecurity Program:** Established a comprehensive cybersecurity program to track and address vulnerabilities, develop a response plan, and train staff. Columbia Heights also joined Minnesota's "Whole-of-State" cybersecurity program, leveraging federal grant funds to offset endpoint security costs and enhance statewide coordination.
- **Cybersecurity Leadership:** Transitioned the Application Support Technician role to an Application Support & Security Analyst position, reflecting the growing demands of cybersecurity. This position is set to achieve a Department of Defense-level certification in 2025, further positioning Columbia Heights as a leader in municipal cybersecurity.
- **Advanced Communication for Fire Alerts:** Collaborated with Anoka County, PSDS/JLEC, and LOGIS to implement and secure communications for the Fire Department's Phoenix Alerting system.
- **License Plate Reader Implementation:** Tested, installed, and maintained License Plate Reader (LPR) cameras to assist Police in crime investigations.
- **Mobile-First Initiative:** Deployed additional laptops and ensured uninterrupted VPN service to support the City's mobile-first strategy.
- **Generative AI Exploration:** Began testing and monitoring the development of generative AI technologies to enhance City services and improve efficiency.
- **Citywide Permit and Licensing System:** Completed procurement for a new electronic permitting and licensing software, slated for deployment in 2025.

1,233

HELPDESK
TICKETS
RESOLVED

785,801

EMAILS
PROCESSED
(41% of which were
spam or malicious)

158,000

TERABITS
OF DATA
TRANSMITTED

FINANCE

2023 HIGHLIGHTS

- Lisa Holman and LuAnn Hake were hired as Accounting Clerk I/Customer Service Representatives. They are typically the first point of contact for residents entering City hall as well as responding to many customer matters over the telephone and through the City website.
- The Government Finance Officers' Association awarded a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting to the City for its 2023 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report.

2024 PROPERTY TAX LEVY

The City gross property tax levy for 2024 was \$17,373,000, an 8.4% increase over 2023. However, the annual tax subsidy provided to Columbia Heights by other metro area communities decreased by 11% for 2024. Unfortunately, this caused Columbia Heights property owners to pay a greater share of the City gross property tax levy for 2024. For local property owners, this resulted in an average increase of 14.2% in City property taxes for 2024.

TOP VALU LIQUOR

In 2024, overall sales increased by 7%, or \$598,000, with all three locations outperforming the previous year. Staff attributes this growth to the reopening of 37th Ave NE, which had made access to Top Valu Liquor #2 challenging in 2023. Additionally, the influx of new customers suggests that the store's advertising strategies, product selection, pricing, and customer service contribute to the success.

Top Valu Liquor #1 and #2 each saw a 2% increase in sales, while Top Valu Liquor #2 experienced a 17% boost.

Top-selling categories for 2024 included:

- Low-dose hemp-derived THC products, which saw a remarkable 196% increase.
- High-ABV sweet wines, up by 44%.
- Rye whiskey, which increased by 37%.
- Non-alcoholic wines, rising by 31%.

In October, the stores switched card processors, enabling the acceptance of credit cards for THC purchases for the first time since sales began in 2023. This change made it easier for customers to purchase THC items during the final quarter of the year, and staff anticipate this will further drive growth in this category throughout 2025.

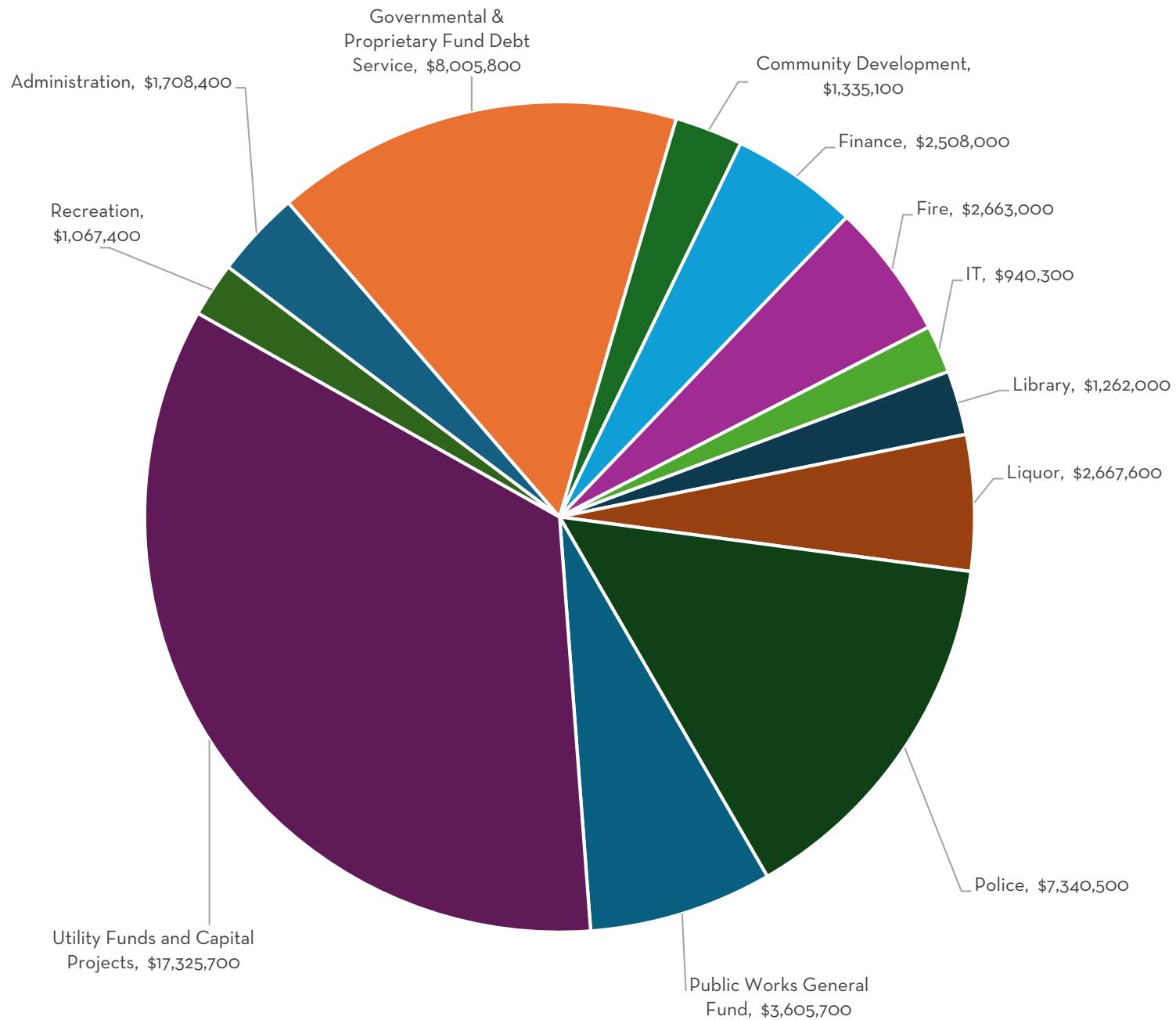
Top Valu Liquor is also proud to have received two 2024 Readers' Choice Awards for Best Liquor Store in Columbia Heights/Fridley & Mounds View/New Brighton, as well as one Readers' Choice Award for Best Beer Selection in Columbia Heights/Fridley.



2024 SALES: \$9,514,688

2024 BUDGETED EXPENDITURES

For 2024, the City budgeted increases in tax-supported expenditures of 8.7%. These increases were primarily personnel costs including cost-of-living increases for all permanent employees, two additional police officers, a contract social worker embedded with the police, and portions of two part-time positions in other departments. Additionally, the 2024 budget included biennial election costs of \$119,000; and \$150,000 to complete the final phase of the City's five-year strategic plan for technology.



FIRE DEPARTMENT

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- Crews responded to 2,182 calls for service, including 560 fire incidents and 1,622 medical calls.
- In May, the department conducted live burn training in a City-owned house at 3853 Central Ave NE.
- On May 31, a pre-dawn duplex fire on Circle Terrace Blvd claimed one life despite rapid rescue efforts. Firefighters contained 34 structure fires overall, limiting property losses to a fraction of the value at risk.
- In November, the department welcomed a new 110' Ascendant Aerial Platform (Aerial 6) to our fleet. This state-of-the-art apparatus, built by Pierce Manufacturing, replaces Aerial 1.
- In October, Chief Charlie Thompson retired from the CHFD, and Assistant Chief Dan O'Brien was promoted to fire chief.
- In November, Firefighter Emily Kosman was promoted to captain.



Attendees at the Fire Department Open House in October.



Santa was toured around town in a fire truck for the Holiday CityTour in December.



The department took part in National Night Out in August.



Live burn training at 3853 Central Ave NE.

DAN O'BRIEN NAMED FIRE CHIEF

Dan O'Brien has been appointed as the next fire chief for the Columbia Heights Fire Department. O'Brien most recently served as the department's assistant fire chief and was promoted following the retirement of former Fire Chief Charlie Thompson.

"I want to congratulate Dan O'Brien on his well-deserved promotion to fire chief for the City of Columbia Heights," said City Manager Aaron Chirpich. "Dan's longtime commitment to the safety and welfare of the residents of Columbia Heights is truly commendable. I look forward to watching Chief O'Brien implement his leadership vision for the department, and trust that he will uphold and build upon the department's legacy of excellence."

A lifelong Columbia Heights resident, O'Brien has been a fixture at the Columbia Heights Fire Department for nearly 30 years.

"Being appointed to the position of fire chief is both an incredible honor and a tremendous responsibility," O'Brien said. "I am committed to ensuring that we not only respond effectively to emergencies but also prioritize prevention, education, and community engagement. It's a privilege to serve, and I look forward to working with all stakeholders to keep our community safe and resilient."

O'Brien will lead a busy department that responded to 1,574 medical incidents and 583 fire incidents last year. To maintain the department's service levels, one of his first initiatives will be to ramp up recruitment efforts to bolster the department's pool of paid on-call firefighters.



As assistant fire chief, O'Brien oversaw property maintenance code enforcement and rental licensing, services that are essential to the community's life and safety. Last year, the department administered over 900 rental licenses and conducted over 4,000 property inspections.

Until 2015, O'Brien also led the department's Fire Explorer program and served as the first president of the Minnesota Fire Exploring Association, a non-profit organization he helped found to promote firefighting as a career path for youth. Several youth Fire Explorer participants he mentored became firefighters with the department, many of whom he is proud to continue to work alongside today.

O'Brien's promotion to fire chief was recognized at an Oct 28 pinning ceremony.

EMILY KOSMAN PROMOTED TO FIRE CAPTAIN



The Columbia Heights Fire Department is happy to share that Emily Kosman has been promoted to captain. Captain Kosman has been a dedicated member of the department since 2011. Throughout her career, she has consistently demonstrated exceptional leadership, skill, and commitment to the Columbia Heights community.

Captain Kosman's promotion was recognized at a Nov 20 pinning ceremony.

560

fire incidents

1,622

medical and rescue
incidents

110

foot new aerial
platform truck

SEPT

busiest month of the year with
213 incidents

MONDAY

busiest day of the week for
incidents

1, 5 & 8 pm

busiest hours of the
day

25

fire incidents with
property loss

41

incidents with
mutual aid given or
received

\$6.9

million property
value saved

893

total rental licenses
administered

3,947

property inspections
conducted

LIBRARY

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- The collection of physical library materials totaled 46,695 in 2024.
- Staff weeded and shifted the entire physical collection to align with Anoka County Library's merchandising guidelines, and to highlight books and increase browsability within the building.
- The library hosted four art exhibits, including a juried student art show coordinated by CHPS teacher Sarah Honeywell, Mississippi Pearl, an interactive artwork created through the Mississippi River Watershed Management Organization, a workable penny press featuring the artwork of four Twin Cities artists installed by the Minnesota Artists Penny Press Project, and 32 pieces from the library's Tiny Art Contest.
- The Columbia Heights Public Library Foundation pledged to donate \$49,086 to fund programs for youth and adults, eBooks, and a parking lot expansion.
- The Library Board worked with the City Council to increase weekly public service hours from 47 to 50 and to discontinue the fee for replacement of lost library cards.
- Library visits were up 14.8% over the previous year, and 18,730 people used their library cards to borrow materials.
- The library engaged in several outreach efforts including school visits, hosting an English Language Learner Family Night, partnerships with several local organizations, including the League of Women Voters and Eastside Coop, and hosting workers from Guild Services and the Salvation Army to assist library patrons seeking paths out of homelessness.
- Staff participated in Anoka County Library staff day, and the adult and youth services librarians attended the Minnesota Library Association conference in Rochester and the director attended the American Library Association CORE Forum in Minneapolis.
- The library launched a new website in November.
- Thirteen adults donated 389 hours of service; seven teens donated 92 hours of service in 2023.
- Program attendance increased 33% over 2023.

MOST CHECKED OUT TITLES IN ANOKA COUNTY: 2024

ADULT FICTION

The Women, Kristin Hannah
The River We Remember, William Kent Krueger

ADULT NONFICTION

Spare, Prince Harry
Dear Jacob: A Mother's Journey of Hope, Patty Wetterling

YOUTH/TEEN

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood (series)
Alexandra Cassel Schwartz
Rhinos at Recess
Mary Pope Osbourne
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: No Brainer
Jeff Kinney
The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes
Suzanne Collins

2024 YEAR IN REVIEW



COLUMBIA
HEIGHTS
PUBLIC LIBRARY



90,594

VISITORS TO THE LIBRARY



176,804

ITEMS WERE
CHECKED OUT
(75% PHYSICAL | 25% DIGITAL)



CARDHOLDERS

11,548

(RESIDENTS)

7,182

(RECIPROCAL)

312

PROGRAMS
OFFERED



5,440

PROGRAM
ATTENDANCE



38,096

WIFI
SESSIONS



21,215

PUBLIC PC
SESSIONS
(18,024 HOURS)

SELF-DIRECTED ACTIVITIES

3



546

ACTIVITY PARTICIPANTS



2,423

PUBLIC SERVICE
HOURS



3,755

STUDY/MEETING
ROOM USES

22,620

REFERENCE QUESTIONS



3939 CENTRAL AVE NE
COLUMBIA HEIGHTS, MN 55421
CHPLMN.ORG
763-706-3690

ADULT PROGRAMS

Adult programs included Community Craft Night; Computers 101; Driver's Licenses for All (Spanish); English Language Conversation Circles; Experimenting with Embroidery Stitches; Financial Literacy: Credit, Loans, Debt; Finding Authenticity in Social Media; Getting Started with Libby; Introduction to Citizenship with MetroNorth Adult Basic Education; Intro to Watercolor; Jane Austen Tea; Mayor's Monarch Pledge, Seed Paper and Citizen Science; Needle Felted Pumpkins; Pet Beds for Animal Shelters; Photography Basics; Puzzle Contests; Start Writing Your Life at 55+; Summer Luminaries; Tapestry Weaving; Weaving Water with the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization; Writing Better Presentations; and Yard Cleanup with Hennepin County Master Gardeners.

YOUTH & TEEN PROGRAMS

Youth programs included self-directed winter and summer reading programs; storytimes for families and daycares; and hands-on Tinker Times with polymer clay, winter lanterns, fingerprint art, galaxy slime, LEGOs, Perler beads, seed mosaics, leaf-shaped suncatchers, tote bags, DIY tic tac toe sets, and snow globes. Summer Adventures Reading registered 422 youth who completed 3,380 hours of reading.



Raptor Encounter with the University of Minnesota Raptor Center



Static Electricity with the Bakken Museum



DIY Teen: Art of Indigo Dye

SATURDAY SCRIBES AUTHOR SERIES

The library hosted a series of Saturday Scribes events featuring Minnesota authors Kao Kalia Yang, Chad Corrie, Lorna Landvik, Mindy Mejia, Blue Deliquanti, David Housewright, and Alison McGhee.

From left: authors Chad Corrie, Kao Kalia Yang, and Lorna Landvik.



POLICE DEPARTMENT

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

- Chief Lenny Austin retired after a 35-year career, and Captain Matthew Markham was promoted to Police Chief.
- CHPD created a new full-time crime analyst position. Nick Fedor filled this role, and his IT support responsibilities shifted to the City's IT Department.
- CHPD hosted several community engagement events including the Eat and Greet, Kunafa with a Cop, Tea with a Cop, Ice Cream with a Cop, the Basketball Mentorship program, the Internship program, we held multiple meetings with the Multi-Cultural Advisory Committee, Iftar with a Cop, Shop with a Cop, Meet and Greet with the new Chief, Pool with a Cop, National Night Out, National Constitution Center project with Adult Basic Education, landlord meetings, and neighborhood watch meetings.
- CHPD continued many youth engagement initiatives which included Teen Academy, Bike Rodeo, Pizza with a Cop at the high school, Badges and Ball Basketball Camp, the Boys Basketball Mentorship Program, Cuts with a Cop (plus free backpacks and school supplies!), the anti-bully reading program, Truck or Treat, and Open Gym.
- Investigator Tabitha Wood was presented with the VFW's National Law Enforcement Award.
- Sergeant Vaughn attended the Professional Law Enforcement Community Engagement Training Conference in Atlanta.
- Officers Mohammed Farah, Troy Vaugh, and Guy Juran were promoted to Sergeant.
- Sergeant Jackie Urbaniak was promoted to Captain.
- Office Supervisor Karen Olson retired after over 35 years of service, and Lead Records Tech Becky Romanik was promoted to Office Supervisor.
- CHPD began partnering with Quita Curtis from the Salvation Army to help people experiencing homelessness.
- All CHPD staff attended a full-day course focusing on overall wellness.
- CHPD received a grant to fully fund a Traffic Safety Officer, Sanjin Boskovic.
- Captain Urbaniak graduated from the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety School of Police Staff and Command.
- CHPD recorded five "Roll Call" podcast episodes in 2024. Guests included former Columbia Heights Boys Basketball Head Coach Willie Braziel, the President (Brian Hubbard) of the Minnesota Law Enforcement Memorial Association, now-retired Office Supervisor Karen Olson, and Heidi Kopischke from the Alexandra House.
- We welcomed several new staff members, including Officer Manuel Alvarez, Officer Joseph Poublanc, Officer Jennifer Cortes, Officer Ahmed Abdullahi, Officer Taylor Swangstue, Records Tech Brenda Pilego-Geniz, Records Tech Christine Okerstrom, CSO Alyssa Erickson, CSO Destiny Mallett, CSO Hunter Deinhammer, CSO Akram Alsalihi, Cadet Thaddeus Newby Jr., and Canvas Health Social Worker Andrew Baur.
- Brenda Pliego-Geniz began providing Spanish language training to across several City departments.

2024 POLICE DEPARTMENT AWARDS

ABOVE & BEYOND

Sergeant Jason Piehn

ABOVE & BEYOND

Officer Airreon Austin

MEDAL OF COMMENDATION

Officer Airreon Austin, Officer Sanjon Boskovic, Officer Patrick Baumgardner

T. NIGHTINGALE AWARD

Quita Curtis (Salvation Army)

Sergeant Troy Vaughn



CITIZENS AWARD OF COMMENDATION

Willan Morocho Torres

AWARD OF MERIT

Officer Tim Dougall, Officer Airreon Austin, Sergeant Jackie Urbaniak, Officer Bill Monberg, Officer Tim Dougall, Officer Guy Juran, Officer Shelby Tombers, Officer Jennifer Cortes, Officer Joseph Poublanc, Officer Tony Miller, Officer Trevor Norlien

POLICE CHIEF LENNY AUSTIN RETIRES, MATT MARKHAM SELECTED AS CITY'S NEXT POLICE CHIEF

After nearly three decades with the Columbia Heights Police Department, Police Chief Lenny Austin retired April 26, capping off a 35-year career in law enforcement.

When Chief Austin landed a job with the Columbia Heights Police Department in 1995, he was one of several hundred vying for police officer positions in the metro area. Austin recalled that the pool of candidates hoping to become police officers was so large that applicants were filling gymnasiums to take written tests. Austin was one of three police officers hired by the CHPD at the time, marking the beginning of a 29-year career with the department.

Before joining Columbia Heights, Austin started as a part-time police officer in Ellsworth, WI. "On my second shift, we had a couple of really interesting calls," Austin said. "I just fell in love with it. And the rest is history."

Despite the challenges Columbia Heights was facing when Austin started, he appreciated the resources that came with a larger department in the metro. "Coming from a smaller town, we were in a much better position to help people," he said.

When Austin arrived in Columbia Heights, the City was grappling with distressed neighborhoods and high crime rates.

Over the past nearly three decades, he has enjoyed seeing the City evolve and says it's great to see it on an upward trajectory. "I would say the City as a whole is in a much better spot than it was in the 90s," Austin said. "It's been great to see."

-continued on next page

POLICE CHIEF, CONTINUED

Austin held several roles as he climbed the ranks within the department, becoming captain in 2008. While serving as captain, Austin earned his master's degree in Police Leadership from the University of St. Thomas in 2011. When former Police Chief Scott Nadeau left the department in 2017, Austin was selected as the next police chief.

When Chief Austin is asked about his time with the City, his answers revolve around the people. He has enormous respect for the people he's worked alongside at the police department, noting his time working under the leadership of former Chief Nadeau.

Beyond the police department, Chief Austin has enjoyed partnering closely with Fire Chief Charlie Thompson, City staff, and elected officials. As the police chief, Austin has enjoyed being part of the City's leadership team and witnessing everyone working together for the betterment of Columbia Heights, which ultimately benefits public safety. "Everything really does matter when it comes to public safety," he said. "Having the people we have working in leadership positions makes a world of difference." Austin also credits the support of the City Council over the past several years.

As for life after the CHPD, Austin says he'll miss seeing the department move forward as newer officers grow into their careers. "We've got a younger department right now. Some of these officers are just starting out and will do great things. I'll miss watching that."

Following Austin's retirement, Matt Markham was officially sworn in as the 12th Columbia Heights Police Chief on April 26.

"As Mayor of Columbia Heights, it is my privilege and honor to announce Matt Markham as the City's next Police Chief," Márquez Simula said. "I extend my heartfelt congratulations to him on his appointment as our new Police Chief. I thank him for his past contributions to our City and eagerly anticipate his continued dedication. Matt's inclusive approach and visionary leadership make him the ideal candidate to lead our police department."

A member of the CHPD since 1998, Markham



Police Chief Matt Markham (left), and retired Police Chief Lenny Austin.

brings over 25 years of experience to the role. Most recently, Markham served as Police Captain since 2018. In his time with Columbia Heights, he has built a wealth of experience in community policing, training, recruitment, and mentorship.

"First off, I'd like to thank Mayor Márquez Simula and the community for their due diligence during the interview process," Markham said. "I'm honored and proud to be named the next Police Chief of Columbia Heights. I'm looking forward to building upon the positive relationships established in Columbia Heights. I can't wait to continue working with staff, elected officials, and community members to make Columbia Heights a place for everyone."

Markham holds three degrees in law enforcement: an Associate of Science in law enforcement from Rochester Community College, a Bachelor of Science in criminal justice, law enforcement, and correction tracks from Winona State University, and a Master of Arts in public safety and law enforcement leadership from the University of St. Thomas.

CHPD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Left: National Night Out

Right: Truck or Treat



Above: Eat & Greet

Right: Cuts with a Cop



Left: Teen Academy

Right: Cone with a Cop



Above: Ride to School



Above: Kunafa with a Cop

PUBLIC WORKS

REFUSE

- In April, the Refuse Department partnered with Better Futures MN to start a new curbside organics collection service; 465 households signed up for the program by the end of year.
- Columbia Heights residential properties recycled 1,323 tons of curbside single sort material, 69 tons of curbside bulk materials (appliances, electronics, mattresses, bedsprings, scrap metal, etc.), plus 56 tons at the Recycling Center (scrap metal, plastic bags/films, Styrofoam, tires, oil & filters, fluorescent bulbs, and household batteries).
- The City composted 1,144 tons of yard waste and 47 tons of food organics.

PARKS

- Due to consistently warm temperatures, ice rinks at McKenna, Ostrander, and Huset Park could not be maintained for skating.
- In partnership with the DNR, the Park Department received two new aerators for Silver Lake. However, the installation was postponed as the warmer temperatures did not necessitate their use.
- In the fall, the Park Department demolished and removed the old water fountain and surrounding sidewalk at Wargo Park, then filled in the site, graded the area, and overseeded it to restore the landscape.
- Worn-out park trash cans were replaced with trash carts that can be dumped mechanically with Public Works equipment to improve efficiency and employee safety.
- To improve soil health and turf quality, the department applied biochar and compost, aerated, and overseeded at Keyes, Huset, and Labelle Park.

UTILITIES

- In December, the Utilities Department launched a citywide water meter replacement project.
- Sanitary sewer line maintenance: the department televised 43,223 feet of lines, and jetted 130,814 feet of lines.
- Five water main breaks were repaired.
- A total of 565 fire hydrants were flushed and inspected.

FORESTRY

- The Urban Forestry Department planted 204 new trees in 2024, sold a record 57 trees for the Arbor Day Tree Sale, and treated 124 ash trees to prevent Emerald Ash Borer.

STREETS

- Throughout the winter, 171 tons of salt were applied to maintain safe road conditions. The department also used 525 tons of asphalt to complete major street repairs.
- Citywide street sweeping operations took place in both spring and fall, collecting 790 cubic yards of leaves to keep streets clean and storm drains clear.

ROAD PROJECTS

Alley Reconstruction: 2024 was the first year of a two-year alley reconstruction program with five alleys reconstructed from deteriorated bituminous to concrete. Six additional alleys are planned for 2025.

Central Ave Reconstruction: MnDOT led both the public outreach and corridor layout designs for the full reconstruction of Central Ave from 37th Ave NE to 53rd Ave NE. Work will shift to full design in 2025 and 2026 with the start of construction planned for 2028.

40th Ave Reconstruction: Anoka County led both the public outreach and corridor layout design for the reconstruction of 40th Ave NE from Main St to Central Ave NE. A final layout was selected and design work has begun for the first phase from Main St to University Ave NE to be constructed in 2026.

2024 BY THE NUMBERS



WATER METER REPLACEMENT PROJECT



In 2024, the City of Columbia Heights launched a citywide water meter replacement project, a significant infrastructure upgrade to improve water usage accuracy, operational efficiency, and customer service. This initiative involves replacing over 6,000 outdated residential meters with Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) meters, which provide real-time water usage data, enhance leak detection capabilities, and allow for remote meter readings.

To carry out the installations, the city partnered with HydroCorp for meter replacements and Core & Main for equipment procurement.

Meter installations began in December 2024 and continued into 2025. By the end of 2024, several hundred meters had been successfully installed. Once fully implemented, the AMI system will enhance billing accuracy, eliminate the need for manual meter reads, and improve the city's ability to detect leaks and monitor system performance in real time.

IN THE COMMUNITY



Left: Public Works brought a variety of City vehicles to Truck or Treat and handed out candy.



Right: Public Works gave a local student a ride to school in a snowplow. Truck or Treat attendees can enter a drawing to win a ride to school in a City vehicle.



Left: Employees from the Streets and Utilities Departments visited Immaculate Conception School to demonstrate some of their heavy equipment and answer questions.

RECREATION

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

ACTIVE AGERS 50+

- Seniors from Columbia Heights and beyond continued to fill up Active Agers programming. Van trips continued to be popular; outings to unique venues, boat cruises, educational experiences, and more were often full with additional dates added by popular demand.
- In-house offerings included art classes, card and book clubs, BINGO, fitness classes, and more.
- Seasonal special events included Soup's On! in January, a spring Tea Party, Christmas in July, and a fall Harvest Dinner.
- The Active Agers community is actively involved in making programming successful with donations and volunteer time.
- Total 2024 attendance was 5,991 (Exercise Classes: 171; Art Classes: 144; Special Events: 136; AARP Safe Driving and Tax Preparation: 502; Day Outings: 497; Pre-registered Outings (theater, concerts, excursions, etc.): 241; Regular Occurring (in-house activities, movies, video exercise, etc.): 4,300).

YOUTH ENRICHMENT

- Summer Park Programs had full rosters, with a waiting list for programming for 6th-8th graders.
- New programming included summer soccer camps, engineering, volleyball, Toy Theater, basketball, and dance. Some of the camps were offered at times that coordinated with our park programs to allow participants to have more programming during the day, rather than a half-day option.
- A new Nature Camp was offered during the summer. The camp was full, and the kids learned about tree identification, created nature journals, pond study, fire-building, and more.
- Mini-Tumblers gymnastics for 3-5 year olds and soccer saw growth in participation in 2024.
- Youth Enrichment attendance was 817 (Summer Park Programs: 201; Summer Trips/Enrichment: 296; School-year Youth Enrichment/Trips: 320).

ADULT & FAMILY EVENTS

- We had several Adult/Family Events throughout the year with approximately 426 participants. The Holiday City Tour, Recreation Open House, Bunny Disco Events were particularly popular.

YOUTH ATHLETICS

- Total participation for 2024 was 642 (Volleyball: 11; Baseball: 52; Soccer: 76; Martial Arts: 138; Softball (Fast Pitch): 90; Basketball: 43; Other (Sports Camps/Classes): 232).

ADULT PROGRAMMING

- Adult Softball had 240 participants in 2024 (16 teams with 15 players on each team).
- Total participation for other adult programs was 288 (Adult Exercise: 77; Total Body Conditioning: 140; Yoga: 49; Crochet: 22).

RECREATION RENTALS

MURZYN HALL

- Murzyn Hall had 82 paid rentals in 2024. The main hall along with several rooms were used extensively throughout the year for various community groups and classes.

EVENT WAGON

- The Neighborhood Event Wagon had 15 rentals in 2024.

PARK RENTALS

- In 2024 we had 60 park rentals at the four parks that are available for rental (Huset East, Ramsdell, McKenna, and Keyes). Other City parks are available on a first come, first served basis.

GARDEN PLOTS

- All 48 garden plots were reserved in 2024.

ACTIVE AGERS 50+



Top left: a participant with their work at a barn quilt art class.

Bottom left: a packed van for an outing to Bachman's.

Top right: participants at a day outing to Paisley Park.

YOUTH PROGRAMMING



Above: youth summer baseball programming.



Above: a youth day trip to Nickelodeon Universe.



Above: horseback riding at a youth day outing.



Above: a Creative Movement class at Murzyn Hall.