

# Minutes - Cooper Playground Community Meeting

<p>Nov 28th, 2023 – 7pm – 8:30 Bethlehem Covenant Church 3141 43rd Ave S Minneapolis, MN 55406</p> <p><b>Purpose of the Meeting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To ORGANIZE</li><li>• To discuss next steps</li><li>• To get community feedback</li><li>• Form initial working groups</li></ul> <p><i>Note that these minutes are maintained in the order of events in the meeting.</i></p> <p><b>Next Meeting Jan 16th.</b></p>	<p><b>Attendees</b></p> <p><u>Meeting facilitators</u> Lisa Priest, Community Member; Sarah Robinson, Community member and LCC volunteer; Ben Howery (LCC Staff); Andrea Tritschler (LCC staff); John Jones, community member</p> <p><u>Community Residents (self reported)</u> Ryan Drake, Justin Kader, Emily Houser and Robert Hest, Jen Kader, Jen Vanek, Marye Knudson, Jesse McClelland, Kimberly Sandbulte Drake, Sheila, Catherine Hennessy Wolter, Amelia Goetz, James Schoeberl, Brienne Olson, Tommy Drake, Deb, Elizabeth Lincoln, Ali Schwalbe, Kris Felbeck, Jane Kretzmann, Hannah Ludden, Tim Kretzmann, John Lauber, Pat Vauk, Lauren Drake</p>
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## Welcome and introductions

Tom Pryor welcomed meeting attendees and expressed appreciation to Jill and Bethlehem for the use of the space and to Longfellow Community Council (LCC) for technical support and facilitating the meeting.

Tom asked participants to write their name and contact information on the cards on tables to keep in touch with everyone as we organize toward shared goals, and share their interest in contributing.

## Historical Perspective Gathered Thus Far

Lisa Priest provide an overview of the playgrounds history:

- Playground constructed in 1996
  - Neighborhood activists applied for grant funding
  - Playground was installed using grant funds and volunteer hours
- School closed in 2005, playground remained standing
- Bethlehem Preschool notified of playground demolition October 3rd, 2023
- Community meeting at Howe School at November 2, 2023
  - MPS has no plans to replace the playground and the current playground is slated for demolition in the spring of 2024.

## Proposed Goals and Strategies, as Presented

### Short-term

- prevent demolition of the playground

- by enabling a non-profit organization or interested party to take on a short-term lease of the playground and assume liability insurance. We would need to figure out which entities would grant the lease and what the details of both the lease and the liability insurance would be. Rochelle Cox (interim MPS superintendent) reached out to potential partners who might take over the playground.
  - LCC, depending on the exact terms and ability to fundraise, is open to partnering for a short term option.
  - Bethlehem Covenant Church uses the playground frequently but reported that any limited liability insurance Bethlehem purchased can only insure themselves when they use the playground.
- by working with MPS to either repair Priority 1 issues identified in the [inspection report](#) or continue to hold the limited liability and maintenance

#### Long-term goals

- Local community replace, maintenance + liability
  - Draw on local resources - like those utilized by Howe and Hiawatha - to repair and replace Cooper Playground
- State and/or city funding to replace and/or maintain
  - This may involve three other parks in Minneapolis, and may become a much bigger project
- MPRB funding

#### How

- Some goals will be quicker turnaround – fund raising – may be a lot of work in the beginning, with slower pace later. For context, Hiawatha playground took about 3 years from the community’s decision to put in a new playground to completion.
- join Slack channel and all conversations
  - Third option – make phone calls and project-based involvement.
  - Context:

### **Discussion**

#### Initial points before opening to floor

- Governing committee
  - those folks who have been active so far – operate on Slack. Slack is an online or app-based platform for organizing teams through a text chat interface. Useful features include conversation “threads”, separate topic-based channels, easy document attaching/linking, and voice chats. *Not all are expected to join, and absolutely not required to contribute to any working groups or wider effort.*
  - There is a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/594023486107302>
  - and website: <https://www.plaympls.org/>
- Working groups
  - Immediate tasks include scouting grant opportunities and even applying (grants generally open in January). Also looking for folks familiar with leases and liability insurance to have conversation with MPS about those topics.
  - Involvement can be fluid as availability allows.
- Soliciting feedback on everything already said, including short vs long term goals, the working-group/committee model, and anything else.

Open Discussion (in chronological order)

Jen – Misgivings about sustainability of ad hoc group taking on liability and operating costs. Who's the holder of liability insurance and how much does that cost? How is that cheaper than MPS keeping that insurance.

John J – if playground was in perfect condition it still wouldn't match MPS requirements for accessibility/safety. Their insurance will cost more for everything because of that. Even if they did repair it – it will not meet their standards. Other entity taking it over may not have the same standards for that and could insure it individually.

Andrew Johnson – minimum repair may be as low as \$500. Sand is one of the biggest items – MPRB can drop off wood chips for that.

My take on the situation – Cooper school is closed – they are covered by state law for liability. Exception is because they have inspection reports – issue has been brought to their attention. Recommendation was to pull it out

Only after seeing community response did MPS relate concerns about accessibility and safety standards. They floated these points to test communities willingness to take it on.

For governance committee – right to look at all pieces, but politically, avenues are not exhausted yet. MPS – interim superintendent is on the way out, with two new candidates coming onboard soon. School Board member Lori Norvell expressed openness through school board to keep playground open as is. MPRB – 4-5 vote for funding an special acquisition fund. Meanwhile, one dissenting person left the board and there is a new 'at-large' commissioner [Charles Rucker]. When there are consistently people coming to you with the same concern that something is important – signals lots of community interest. Think there's a lobbying, political component to keep alive in this.

Lisa P – MPRB would fall under city to repair/replace – we still have issue of spring time. I also think it's possible MPS can keep limited liability longer term. WE don't have to find someone to take on limited liability now – but then we do need to keep lobbying going. Would still need to complete basic repairs.

Sarah R – speaking to Jens' comment – how idea went from MPS to this primary idea of finding another organization to assume liability insurance and lease the property. Was a way forward that folks who have been most active could see as a way forward. We're not as familiar with MRPB and MPS and School Board. Open to hearing from others with more familiarity.

John - SE Como neighborhood – Tuttle Elementary school – During that process, the neighborhood association and school district were in ongoing discussions about what to do over weeks, then a construction crew demolished it unbeknownst to neighbors and some school district staff. Agree this is a school thing, but having an alternative option in our back pocket will be helpful.

Zoom question – Katie Simon - Explain that 4 - 5 vote at MPRB.

John – MPRB meeting – that vote was put forward by Becky Alper – first meeting after we found out playground was to be removed. It was an amendment to another proposal – about storm water drainage in Minnehaha Creek. City was asking for permission and if city should pay parks board for that. Becky proposed charging city, but put those funds into a special fund to purchase future properties – with special attention to school properties facing this issue. My impression was that opposition was that this doesn't relate to stormwater drainage – and if there is a larger issue to be addressed – we can do that through other means. Surprised to get 4 votes. Those against it were not anti-playground or idea – but against the process at that time. One of the 5 dissenters will be representing Cooper area starting in 2026 (Nov 2025 election cycle).

Aurin Chowdhury - Vacancy in parks board – Charles Rucker – maybe a good way to welcome him.

James Van Sloun - with short term priorities – issue MPS had was that it didn't meet specifications or regulations. If community can create a playground that meets requirements and specifications – that would remove reason for them to not carry liability. If we can repair priority 1 issues and then develop plan to replace playground. Can be more focused on equipment itself – will reduce need to focus on leases or liabilities.

Sarah – we were not able to discuss with MPS about needs for repairs.

\_\_\_\_ - saw it as a liability, doesn't meet specs, solution from them was to remove everything. If we repair issues – will they keep it. Any playground, equipment manufacturers will know that.

John – Playground built by community members. There's a rule in School board charter that doesn't allow it. If we as a community raise \$50K to get us a new playground or retrofit of it, it raises equity issues across district. May be concern of school district.

\_\_\_\_ - MPS administrator role and NRP board liaison – Was a huge funding mechanism that allowed for a great amount of wonderful things throughout the city including school playgrounds. Cooper school was the first community build playground – community members and parents successfully argued for that. NRP money was under 5 jurisdictions – city, county, school district, park board, and \_\_\_\_\_. All entities were invested in making this happen -including parents and community.

Sarah – LCC has agreed to act as fiscal agent should anyone decide to right a grant for National Revitalization Project – original grant written in 1995 – still source material there for anyone good at grant writing.

James S – MPS decided not to destroy playground right now – but slated for demolition in spring. Purpose of this meeting is to get everyone’s ideas about what different avenues we have. How do we get MPS to commit to not demolishing it in the spring before there is an alternative. Then, lease and liability are hand in hand – Want to avoid being in crisis mode.

Working group for folks with past and current professional experiences.

Getting park board behind a solution is another

Try to use this meeting now to come up with long term goals.

With list of long-term goals -get folks assigned to working groups and governing committee can move forward.

Tom Pryor – [to Aurin Chowdhury] Minneapolis budget is in process now – have you heard anything about appetite for helping to address issues like this.

Aurin C – budget markup is tomorrow. Like anything with our community – always room for these types of conversations and to see what our options are. I’m going to be looking for opportunities to share this issue with other commissioners – have shared some already about Cooper School specifically. I plan to attend these meetings as well to stay connected.

James – vision going forward:

Save the school – short term priority – whether we go with it or not – need to explore lease option. LCC has willingness to take on lease, not sure about liability piece. We would need to do short term fund raising about that. We would need volunteer efforts to fundraise, review leases, etc.

Skills – property leases, realty, etc.

Folks dedicated to work with MPS – elected leadership would be helpful for that. Would be helpful to figure out what MPS’ appetite is – if we address priority 1 issues – will that suffice? What about woodchips? What else?

Public outreach group – Help for some folks to get information we’re coalescing out to everyone through slack, Facebook, plaympls.org. Here’s who you need to contact on the boards.

Folks organizing to keep working groups connected.

Lisa – curious if people feel we need to look at repairing playground as an immediate need – or sit and wait until we hear back from MPS or MPRB. If we get funding for new playground – still don’t’ anticipate it going in in the spring. Hiawatha playground was 3-3.5 years from first contact about fundraising to in the ground.

Should we attempt repairs in the interim?

John – should get commitment from MPS about what their cutoff date is in the spring. Tuttle elementary – it was gone. We need commitment in writing – we’re not going to move or do anything until May 1 – example. Otherwise, feels like we could put a lot of work into it – someone could file complaint against to move MPS to remove it again. Then talk about timelines. If fixing issues – can get MPRB to drop off sand and mulch. Equipment is “game time play equipment” and “landscape structures inc” – both have refurbishment abilities. Posts are in great condition – platforms can be stripped and recoated. Repaint is possible as well. That’s an option – they do it on a fairly regular basis with dealers in the twin cities. Talking to them is an easy first step. Could request them to come out and provide quote – what can they or can they not do. Then we can let MPS know.

Andrew Johnson – can have consolidated group focused on lobbying – or split between MPS and MPRB for separate conversations. Goal is still the same to activate as many residents – building support and getting more support and openness to yes on saving the playground.

James – Cooper is not an isolated issue – happened in other parts of city. Anyone with appetite – what are SMART goals here -should we focus on Cooper playground, but important to consider the whole city as well. Capture information we have here and then get it out to other activists? Would be nice to get community buy-in on that.

Sarah – Lobbying for city/state level as separate.  
Representative Samantha Sencer-Mura – mentioned state might be interested in looking into funding playgrounds, but that is playgrounds plural – Cooper, Tuttle, and two others in North Minneapolis, but are now in poor condition.

Jesse McClelland (he/him) - 08:02 PM Samantha Sencer-Mura Is our state rep, she suggested she was interested in a focus group to address this Cooper site among others... I don't have specifics, just that she was curious about that option since it is not a district-specific problem

Aurin Chowdhury – any specific way I can help or plug in on this. One of my top priorities was making our city more accessible for families and kids – this is a part of that – I care about this project.

Lisa – once we have long term goal – reaching community members about what is happening will be critical – e.g., date for potential demolish.

John – Communicating with other city council members – are you having this issue in your districts as well? SE Como neighborhood reached out to me after the Star Tribune article. Are there other schools slotted for

Jane Kressman – “to be paranoid is to be fully aware” – want to be sure we say that what happens to Cooper is still a worry. This school could be sold and developed. I want to know. We have a lovely neighborhood – this

park has been so valuable. School is closed – could be an artist colony, etc. We're all paranoid about what's on the docket. Our new councilperson will have access to that – transparency is a huge issue. We need to be supporting LCC and other Neighborhood associations. What is in the works for Cooper School, I want to know.

**Working Groups:**

- Lobbying group: MPS, MRPB, city council, and State
- Short term lease options: ID a leaser and liability insurance holder
- Estimating Repairs and contacting playground construction companies
- Info distribution: template for emails, flyering, newsletters, etc.
- Fundraising: grant writing, researching old NRP grant, etc.
- Governing committee

Slack can be a place for the committees to work. Goal to be as inclusive as possible. If someone is not familiar or comfortable working with slack – have one person on slack committed to discussing with governing committee.

**Next community meeting in-person is January 16, 2024. Will do our best to be hybrid again. May be at Bethlehem.**