MINUTES
The City of Crystal Lake
PROCEEDINGS OF THE YOUTH COMMISSION AND CITY COUNCIL
October 8, 2026 Special Meeting
Aaron T. Shepley City Hall, 100 W. Woodstock Street, Crystal Lake, IL

1. Call to Order

Commissioner Johnston called the meeting to order at 4:03 p.m. Thursday, October 8, 2026.

2. Roll Call

Commissioners Alexa Clark, Lucy Thome, Olive Barrigan, and Aly Mae Johnston were present. City Councilmember Denise Smith, Director of Community Development Katie Cowlin, Capital Engineering Manager Paul Walter, Deputy City Manager Nick Hammonds, and Assistant to the City Manager Ryan Oates were also present.

3. Approval of Minutes from the September 10, 2026 Meeting

Commissioner Johnston moved to approve the minutes of the September 10, 2026 meeting. Commissioner Barragan seconded. Upon voice vote, motion passed.

4. Introductions

None

5. Public Presentation

None

6. Civic Education: Depot Park Development

Assistant to the City Manager Oates introduced the presenters Director of Community Development Katie Cowlin and Capital Engineering Manager Paul Walter. Assistant to the City Manager Oates reviewed the City of Crystal Lake organizational chart and discussed how departments play a role when working on a project.

Community Development Director Cowlin introduced herself and her role with the City. Director Cowlin shared that this presentation will focus on the Depot Park project and will explain how multiple departments played a role in its creation. Director Cowlin shared that the first steps in a large project include collecting ideas, finding the right location, and starting a development plan. For the Depot Park project, the City solicited feedback from residents through an online survey. The survey, which was open for a little over a month, received 835 responses. From the survey, the City then finds the right location which they have control over and for this project, Depot Park was picked through feedback from residents. Director Cowlin shared that the survey results showed that many residents visit downtown for events such as Farmers Markets, community events such as Johnny Appleseed Fest, and that they would like to visit for concerts and performances. There was an additional question in the survey asking the respondents to rank different functions of what they would like to see at Depot Park with the largest response being an events lawn and band shelter.

Director Cowlin stated that this feedback from the residents helps to create the design and conceptual plan for the park. Director Cowlin stated that while Community Development spearheaded the project, many other departments were involved, including Public Works and Engineering. City staff worked with consultants, planning, and architectural planners to help create the conceptual plans.

After the plans were created, the City held a public open house to receive further feedback from residents. Residents were able to view the plans, make comments, or ask questions. After the open house, City Staff and the City Council worked to design and create a final plan. Once the final plan is created, the next step is to start construction.

Director Cowlin introduced Capital Engineering Manager Paul Walter. Capital Engineering Manager Walter shared that once the conceptual drawings are converted into construction plans, they can start working. He explained that with this project there was a lot of consideration of the work as the City was doing construction in an active downtown. He also shared that he had to work together with other agencies to ensure that other agencies will be able to continue to work within Depot Park. An example that he mentioned were Pace Bus, Metra, and Union Pacific. He also mentioned working with the Police Department and Fire Department to ensure that safety needs were being met. Another area that Public Works and Engineering assisted with is looking at the existing utilities within the park area. These utilities included water main and storm sewer, which were added into the construction plans to upgrade.

Capital Engineering Manager Walter stated that after finalizing the design, the City moved onto the bidding process. Engineering and Community Development work together to ensure that the right information is in the bid documents and the contracts. Finance also plays a role through the City's purchasing policy. He shared that the bids are posted online and kept open for a few weeks for prospective bidders to ask questions. He also stated that it is a public opening for the bids where the bids are read aloud at the same time. Once a bidder is chosen, City staff will recommend the contract be awarded by the City Council.

Once the bid is awarded, there is still work that needs to be done before the City breaks ground. The first thing that is done is to set up a schedule with the contractor. Next the contractor will order materials with approval from City staff. Community outreach was a key aspect of the project. The Depot Park project in particular was very impactful for the downtown area. There are also environmental requirements that were performed by Public Works. This includes trees and landscaping.

The Depot Park project was broken into two phases. The first phase was to work on the parking lot to minimize the impact on businesses. Phase two involved underground work. After the underground work, they started working up to flat work which included sidewalks, benches, structures, fountain, and brick work. A couple challenges included specialized architectural work, work being performed in a tight space, scheduling issues, and having to extend the water main from the original plans. There were also the challenges of having events planned before the work was completed.

Director Cowlin stated that the City is continuing to coordinate special events with the Downtown Association and that the park meets a lot of the goals that were desired. She shared that this was a big investment for the City and the downtown, and that the park is already being used for events such as the Johnny Appleseed Fest, Farmers Markets, and Arts and Crafts events. Director Cowlin highlighted the Downtown Association and shared their role in the new Depot Park. She also shared some special events that will be coming up later this year. Director Cowlin stated that with more special events taking place, it will put more wear and tear on the park and will add to more responsibilities for City Departments.

Director Cowlin shared that the project is almost complete. The remaining work is the fountains, some brick work and the signage.

Commissioner Johnson asked why ice skating was not involved in the plans. She also asked that with larger projects such as Depot Park and HealthBridge, how do you know who to consult with first before a project is introduced to the public. Director Cowlin stated that every project is different as sometimes public outreach comes first, but the City communicates with all interested bodies from the start. The City meets with key people from the organizations to discuss the ideas and programming. There is a possibility to still have temporary ice skating, but with the recent winters trending with warmer temperatures, there has not been a high level of interest in adding such a feature.

Director Cowlin asked the Youth Commission about early release days for middle schoolers on Wednesdays and the impact of foot traffic downtown. She asked for feedback on how the City could help with events for the middle schoolers in Depot Park. Commissioner Johnston stated that there could be window signs for businesses aimed at middle schoolers asking them to be polite. Commissioner Johnston also recommended working with The Break to have homework sessions in the park or have bag sets that they can play in the park.

Commissioner Clark asked if Director Cowlin is recommending setting boundaries or redirecting the middle schoolers to a different place. Director Cowlin asked how we positively redirect them from disruptions in downtown. She also asked if there were any other games that the youth would be interested in. Commissioner Clark stated that at the Barrington Arboretum, there are big chess pieces that kids can play with and big connect four. She also said that there may be opportunities to incorporate key clubs or NHS for high school students to get volunteer hours. The high school students can help with homework sessions as well. Commissioner Clark recommended having different clubs from schools create games for the Youth. She also recommended having a career or fun fair and having City officials, including Police and Fire, attend and hand out candy.

Commissioner Barragan stated that in her hometown, she had interactive art pieces. She mentioned that there were musical instruments like walking pianos that were fun to utilize. Commissioner Thome added that one way to attract middle schoolers to go downtown would be through live music or live action shows. She recommended having smaller bands come and perform. She also recommended having sidewalk art where the youth can decorate the sidewalks. Commissioner Barragan recommended having a scavenger hunt. Commissioner Clark recommended to open it to more people than just middle schoolers. Commissioner Barragan recommended having competitions between schools. Commissioner Johnston stated that High Schools and McHenry County College can have choirs sing in the park for a performance. Commissioner Johnston stated that McHenry County College choir is a class, so they usually only have one performance.

Councilmember Smith added to Director Cowlin and Capital Engineering Manager Walter's presentation. She stated there was a question regarding whether the library was consulted. She stated that there are times that maybe the Executive Director was consulted, but the rest of the staff may not have been consulted. She shared that there are some projects where not everyone gets to provide their input in right away. She shared that there may be a lot of people with ideas, but they might not be asked directly right away, but as time goes on, everyone's input will be received. She further asked, what surprised you about the process of creating Depot Park? Commissioner Clark stated the money that it cost. Commissioner Johnston stated the amount of teams that were involved. Deputy City Manager Hammonds stated that HealthBridge will be similar to Depot Park. He stated that the City bought Depot Park in 2023 and there was a Downtown Survey in 2022. He shared that there was a lot of planning and he shared that with HealthBridge, the City had to act very quickly because they had six months to come up with cost estimates and concepts for the project. He shared that the

City has a general concept of what can be used there and at the October 20th City Council meeting, the Council will be able to decide whether to purchase it or not. He further shared that after a decision is made, the Youth Commission will be able to provide input into areas such as teen spaces or general community center type space. Commissioner Clark stated that after reviewing the video that was shown at the last meeting, it seemed clear that the building was not going to be used for just a library. Councilmember Smith shared that libraries are not just libraries anymore and they are more than just books.

Councilmember Smith stated that she wants to make sure that the young people have their voices heard. She asked: How do we communicate to your peers about input into these spaces? Commissioner Clark recommended reaching out to student council clubs or principals at the schools. She also recommended posting on social media and encouraging the youth to repost on their stories. Commissioner Barragan recommended having schools announce it on their social medias or their newsletters. Commissioner Johnston stated that Crystal Lake Central also has social media pages and newsletters. Commissioner Thome also added that the City can reach out to NHS for each school.

Councilmember Smith asked: What does the Commission think the City staff and City Council will need to consider? Commissioner Clark recommended having workshops for people to provide their input. Councilmember Smith shared that she would like the Commission to look into funding.

7. Open Discussion

None

8. Adjourn

There being no further business, Commissioner Thome moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:04 p.m. Commissioner Clark seconded the motion. On voice vote, all present voted yes. Motion passed.