

**Red Wing City Council Workshop
City Council Chambers
March 23, 2026**

Council Members Present: Council President Janie Farrar; Council Members Vicki Jo Lambert, Beth Snyder, Ron Goggin, Becky Norton

Council Members Absent: Council Member Kim Beise, Council Member Don Kliewer, and Mayor Gary Iocco.

Others Present: Melissa Hill, City Clerk; Chris Heineman, City Council Administrator; Mike Warner, Fire Chief; Grady Nelson, Assistant Fire Chief; Shawn Blaney, Public Works Director; Zach Regnier, Engineering Director; Marshall Hallock, Finance Director; Michelle Leise, Public Information and Engagement Officer; Nick Sather, Police Chief.

Agenda Item 1

Call to Order

Council President Janie Farrar welcomed attendees and convened the workshop at 5:02 p.m.

Agenda Item 2

Workshop Items

A. Educational Session on the Responsibility of the City Council when an Emergency Declaration has been Declared.

Fire Chief Mike Warner introduced the item and noted that Greg Hayes, Emergency Medical Coordinator for the Metropolitan Emergency Services Board, would provide an educational presentation on emergency declarations, with Assistant Fire Chief Grady Nelson available to assist. Chief Warner noted that Nelson serves as the City's Emergency Manager.

Mr. Hayes provided an overview of emergency management, including its framework, purpose, and the role of local government in disaster response and recovery. Mr. Hayes explained that emergency management is defined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a framework that operates within an emergency operations plan. He noted that the City of Red Wing has such a plan in place and that the plan addresses potential hazards, including flooding, and outlines mitigation strategies to reduce vulnerability.

Mr. Hayes described the tiered structure of emergency management, which operates at the local, county, tribal, State, and federal levels. He noted that within the State of Minnesota, emergency management authority is anchored in Minnesota Statutes Chapter 12. Mr. Hayes explained that cities have the same authority as counties under Chapter 12 and that the foundation of the City's emergency management program rests with the appointment of an Emergency Manager by the Mayor.

Mr. Hayes stated that the most important takeaway from the presentation is the declaration of emergency. He explained that a declaration is a brief document prepared with the City Attorney stating that a disaster has occurred and that the Mayor is declaring an emergency. Mr. Hayes noted that the Mayor has the sole authority to declare a local emergency and may do so outside of a formal Council meeting. He explained that the declaration must be ratified by the Council within three days.

Mr. Hayes described the practical effect of an emergency declaration, noting that it does not immediately bring in outside resources or funding, but rather enables the City to take actions it would not normally be authorized to take. He highlighted the impact on spending authority, explaining that a declaration allows staff to procure resources and spend above normal administrative thresholds without going through standard bidding processes. Mr. Hayes noted that in a significant disaster, response costs within the first 48 hours can reach approximately \$150,000, and that Finance should be engaged early to track expenditures.

Mr. Hayes also noted that a declaration enables the City to impose curfews and activate the City's emergency operations plan. He explained that the City has a right to manage its own emergency response rather than deferring entirely to the County, and that working collaboratively with Goodhue County, the State, and federal partners allows the City to maximize available resources.

Mr. Hayes described the structure of emergency response, distinguishing between the strategic role of the Council and administration, the tactical role of command staff such as Fire, Police, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and the coordinating role of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). He noted that the City's mutual aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions allow for rapid mobilization of personnel and equipment.

Mr. Hayes referenced the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association and its Fast Chiefs program, which provides experienced fire chiefs to assist communities during disasters. He also noted the availability of incident management teams that assist with planning and documentation at no cost to the City.

Mr. Hayes explained the process by which a local emergency can escalate to a county, state, or federal disaster declaration. He noted that FEMA involvement requires that costs exceed certain thresholds at both the county and state levels before a federal disaster declaration is issued. He also noted that the Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant (PINGP) falls under the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and that all related emergency coordination goes through the Minnesota Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM).

Council President Farrar invited questions. No questions were raised at that time.

Mr. Hayes offered a personal note of appreciation for the work of the Red Wing Fire Department and law enforcement, sharing that his family has a connection to the Diamond Bluff area and that City responders had provided care to his late father-in-law on multiple occasions.

Council Member Vicki Jo Lambert asked whether the Mayor is always the sole authority for declaring a local emergency. Mr. Hayes confirmed that the Mayor holds that authority and may act unilaterally, but that many mayors choose to convene the Council before signing a declaration. Council Member Lambert asked whether there are statistics on the frequency of human-made versus natural disasters. Mr. Hayes stated he could not provide exact figures but noted that man-made incidents appear to be increasing nationally, while locally, most do not rise to the level of a formal emergency declaration. He also noted that weather patterns are changing and that unusual weather events, such as tornadoes in March, are not unprecedented in Minnesota.

Assistant Fire Chief Grady Nelson added that the declaration authority rests with the Mayor or their legal successors, and that the declaration expires after 72 hours unless brought before the Council for an extension.

Council President Farrar thanked Mr. Hayes for the presentation.

B. Discussion on Retaining Wall Failures.

Public Works Director Shawn Blaney presented an overview of retaining walls located adjacent to public right-of-way throughout the City. Director Blaney noted three key points: there are a significant number of retaining walls in Red Wing, ownership and maintenance responsibility is not clearly established, and a long-term plan is needed.

Director Blaney explained that staff completed a field-based inventory identifying approximately 415 individual retaining wall segments abutting the public right-of-way on property not owned by the City. The inventory documented approximately 20,186 linear feet, representing roughly 55,559 square feet of retaining wall surface area. Director Blaney noted that the City's topography contributes significantly to the prevalence of retaining walls.

Director Blaney described the variety of wall materials identified, including retaining wall block, limestone block, concrete, wood timbers, limestone stacked rock, boulders, combination materials, and concrete masonry unit (CMU) block. He noted that the Woodland Drive and West Maple Street area contains the most deteriorated wall segments and represents the most immediate area of concern. Director Blaney explained that many of the walls in that area were installed as part of a sidewalk project in the early 1990s and that current City Code places maintenance and repair responsibility on the abutting property owner, though the memo provided to the Council indicates that language is subject to debate.

Director Blaney described a failed wall section on West Maple Street that prompted the current review. He noted that the wall is located within the right-of-way but that the current Code language assigns responsibility to the adjacent property owner. Director Blaney explained that in older areas of the City, determining the origin and purpose of individual walls is extremely difficult due to the age of the infrastructure and the lack of available records.

Director Blaney discussed the complexity of determining responsibility, noting that factors such as whether a wall was installed for public or private benefit, whether a sidewalk or street project prompted its construction, and whether records exist to document that history all affect the analysis. He noted that in some cases, regrading or slope reconstruction may be a viable alternative to wall replacement and that temporary easements from property owners would be required in those situations.

Director Blaney presented three options for Council consideration: identifying the most precarious walls and developing capital projects for those; directing staff to investigate responsibility and incorporate wall construction into future street reconstruction projects; or establishing a recurring Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) amount to fund a retaining wall project every three to five years. He noted that a very high-level cost estimate, not incorporating stairs or other features, placed the total replacement cost in the range of \$3.5 to \$5 million, spread over several decades.

Council Member Becky Norton expressed support for including retaining walls in the CIP and suggested that a cost-sharing structure or flowchart could help determine City versus property owner responsibility based on the circumstances of each wall. Council Member Norton noted that some walls may be in areas where street reconstruction is not imminent, and that a case-by-case approach combined with some level of standardization may be appropriate. Council Member Norton also suggested that other river communities with similar topography, such as Winona, may have explored this issue and that regional collaboration or a governor's committee could be a resource.

Council Member Ron Goggin agreed that clear, objective criteria are needed to determine responsibility and avoid setting inconsistent precedents. Council Member Goggin asked whether better wall materials are available today compared to those used in the Woodland Drive project. Director Blaney confirmed that technology has improved significantly over the past 40 years and that the Woodland Drive block was believed to have been subject to a manufacturer's settlement due to poor material quality. Council Member Goggin asked whether a standard City wall specification could be established so that property owners requesting upgrades above that standard would bear the additional cost. Director Blaney acknowledged that conversation will likely arise in the future.

Council Member Goggin also asked whether any retaining wall projects could be completed using the City's public works staff. Director Blaney stated that smaller

walls and regrading projects may be feasible in-house, but that larger or more complex walls would require outside contractors.

Council President Farrar asked whether an assessment or rating system similar to bridge inspections would be needed. Director Blaney agreed that an evaluation process would need to be developed, either in-house or through a contracted effort. Council President Farrar also raised the role of the Heritage Preservation Commission in the Downtown area and noted that removing sidewalks in some locations could represent a significant policy change.

Council Member Lambert asked about the City's responsibility for stairs associated with retaining walls. Director Blaney stated that, based on conversations with the City Attorney, past court cases suggest that stairs connected to public improvement projects may also be the City's responsibility, though proving the origin of those improvements for walls that are 75 to 100 years old is extremely difficult.

Council Member Lambert also referenced a specific property on East 7th Street where a homeowner replaced a failing retaining wall with boulders and chicken wire and asked how the City would communicate its role and obligations to property owners in similar situations. Director Blaney noted that the current Code would assign responsibility to the abutting property owner, but that the more recent legal analysis suggests a different outcome may apply.

Council Member Beth Snyder asked whether the failed wall on West Maple Street would be repaired. Director Blaney explained that the section near Featherstone Park could be addressed by removing the wall and regrading the slope, but that the adjacent section would require a temporary easement and is not currently budgeted. Council Member Snyder raised the question of City liability if a pedestrian were to trip and fall near a partially failed wall encroaching on the sidewalk. Council Member Snyder also noted that the sidewalk in that area does not appear to meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility standards and suggested that some streets with sidewalks on both sides might be evaluated for consolidation to one side.

City Council Administrator Chris Heineman noted that from an engineering and building code standpoint, walls exceeding four feet in height are required to be engineered walls, and that many of the walls in the City's inventory likely were not engineered. Administrator Heineman also noted that in modern practice, permanent easements are typically obtained when retaining walls are required as part of public improvements, and that the City did not obtain such easements in many of these areas. He stated that evaluating which walls were installed for public benefit and pursuing permanent easements for those would be part of the recommended next steps.

Engineering Director Zach Regnier noted that the four-foot engineering requirement also applies to walls two feet or taller that support a surcharge, and that the measurement is taken from the bottom of the wall, not the visible surface. Director

Regnier stated that much of the design and construction work will likely need to be contracted out due to the geotechnical engineering requirements involved.

Administrator Heineman noted that the Capital Improvement Plan workshop is scheduled for Monday, June 1, 2026, and that retaining walls would be included as a line item for the 2027 CIP. Director Blaney stated that no walls require immediate action in the current year and that the West Maple Street area can be managed with available options in the near term. Director Blaney noted that staff will need to determine internally how to carry this work forward collaboratively between Public Works and Engineering.

Council President Farrar acknowledged the complexity of the topic and noted that it will be a long-term workshop item. She thanked Director Blaney for the presentation.


Agenda Item 3

Adjournment

The workshop adjourned at 6:02 p.m.


Janie Farrar, Council President

ATTEST:


Melissa Hill, MCMC, City Clerk