

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM
APRIL 14, 2025 – 5:30PM**

The study session meeting of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 5:31pm.

Council Members Present: Aldred, Boleware (arrived at 5:33), Bruce, Dwyer, Knol and Rich

Council Members Absent: Bridges

Others Present: City Manager Mekjian, Assistant City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Deputy Clerk Hopper, Directors Aranowski, Kettler-Schmult, Rushlow, and Skrobola, Fire Chief Unruh, and City Attorney Joppich

DISCUSSION ON PUBLIC ART FUNDING ORDINANCE

Director of Planning and Community Development Kettler-Schmult and Planning Consultant Bahm (Giffels Webster) led this continuing discussion on the draft Public Art Funding Ordinance.

- This ordinance is separate from the ongoing Planned Unit Development (PUD) ordinance update but incorporates previous Council feedback about requiring public art through the site plan process.
- Included in the Council packet was a memorandum from Economic Development Director Brockway relative to an informal survey conducted with local businesses, gathering their opinions on the potential public art requirement.
- The draft ordinance was modeled after similar ordinances in Southfield and other communities. Key components included:
 - Definitions for art, artists, and construction costs.
 - Including a section on intent.
 - Establishing public art as a site standard, similar to landscaping or lighting, with thresholds for applicability. Guidelines could be presented as a stand-alone document.
 - Guidelines for placement and maintenance of art, with the Arts Commission serving as the review authority.
 - Limited exceptions for properties without public visibility.
 - The ordinance was structured to align with the City’s existing zoning and municipal codes.

Council Discussion:

- The informal business survey included only 6 corporate entities and provided mixed feedback: some businesses supported the concept, while others expressed concerns about costs or preferred to contribute funds rather than install art on their properties.
- Council Member Knol requested greater flexibility in the ordinance to allow businesses the option of donating to a public art fund rather than installing art on-site. This would enable the City to concentrate art installations in high-traffic districts.
- City Attorney Joppich emphasized the importance of balancing regulatory requirements with property rights. The draft ordinance includes exemptions and carefully structured donation options to ensure legal defensibility and reasonableness. The donation option is voluntary and intended to respect property owners’ rights while maintaining the ordinance’s intent.

Summary of Changes and Next Steps:

Mayor Rich highlighted major adjustments made to the ordinance:

- Non-profits are now exempt.
- A \$2 million minimum construction threshold was established.

Council reached consensus to move the draft ordinance forward to the Planning Commission for further review.

DISCUSSION ON PERMANENT CONSOLIDATION OF VOTING PRECINCTS

Referencing her April 14, 2025 memorandum *Precinct Consolidation*, City Clerk Lindahl led a discussion on the permanent consolidation of voting precincts:

- Following the passage of Proposal 2, state law now allows precinct sizes to increase from 2,999 to 4,999 active registered voters. The City currently has approximately 57,000 active registered voters, with about 54% enrolled in either the permanent absentee application list or the permanent ballot list.
- Voter turnout in the November 2024 General Election was 73% of registered voters and of that, 66% voted by absent voter ballot or Early Voting. All indicators suggest that this trend will continue over the next several years as more voters take advantage of the convenience of the various voting options.
- Consolidation would improve efficiency and yield cost savings (approximately \$234,000) in areas such as election inspector wages, equipment testing, and future election equipment purchases (anticipated for 2027).
- The current proposal focused on consolidating precincts where it would not affect ballot types due to overlapping political districts (House, Senate, County Commissioner, and school districts).

Proposed consolidation plan:

- Proposed precincts to be consolidated included 5 & 6, 7 & 8, 18 & 19, and 22 & 23.
- Precinct 8 could relocate to precinct 7's location and precinct 9 could move to precinct 8's old location, which would provide better parking and a more accessible location than precinct 9's current location (STEAM).
- The initial proposal to consolidate precincts 1 & 2 was withdrawn due to planned residential developments (Stonefield of Farmington Hills and The Emerson), which could increase voter registration by approximately 1,000 voters in that area.

Council discussion:

- Council expressed support for the consolidation plan, noting the clear data supporting the approach. Also, consolidation is a common trend across cities following redistricting. There were minimal downsides, given the decreasing number of in-person voters.
- The Clerk's Office is coordinating outreach with local Republican and Democratic clubs, with meetings scheduled to explain the proposed changes.
- The changes would not be implemented until after the November 2025 election, allowing time to evaluate impacts. The adjustments could later be reversed if necessary, though no major issues were anticipated.
- The changes would not alter any district boundary lines. All voters will receive updated voter ID cards and details regarding their polling location. The City's communications team would also assist in spreading information. Minimal public impact was expected since most precincts already shared polling locations.

Next steps:

No objections were raised. Council members supported proceeding with the planning and outreach process for the proposed precinct consolidation.

DISCUSSION ON THE 2025 PUBLIC SAFETY MILLAGE RENEWAL BALLOT LANGUAGE

Overview of the Draft Resolution and Process:

City Attorney Joppich introduced the draft resolution regarding a charter amendment for the renewal of one of the City's two public safety millages. This millage, originally added to the City Charter in 1995 and last renewed in 2015, is due for renewal, which requires a charter amendment.

The renewal process requires City Council approval of a resolution, which includes the ballot language for voter consideration in November. The ballot proposal would extend the millage authorization from July 1, 2026, through July 30, 2036.

City Attorney Joppich explained that the draft language underwent an informal non-binding review by the Attorney General's Office to ensure compliance; a formal word by word review will follow submission.

Millage Rate and Financial Implications:

City Manager Mekjian reviewed the financial details of the renewal. The current public safety millage rate is 1.4764 mills but is projected to decrease to 1.3596 mills in 2026 due to the Headlee Amendment rollback. The proposal seeks to restore the millage rate to its original 1.4764 mills, which would equate to an estimated \$14.77 annual increase for a property with a taxable value of \$126,503.

If the millage is not fully restored, the City would face an annual revenue shortfall of approximately \$575,000. The total projected revenue for 2026 with the restored millage is estimated at \$7.268 million.

Finance Director Skrobola confirmed these figures and explained that the revenue helps fund public safety services, including staffing for police officers and firefighters.

Council Discussion:

- Council Member Dwyer reviewed the historical context of the millage and asked the portion of public safety staffing funded by it. Finance Director Skrobola estimated that the millage supports salaries for approximately 50 police officers and firefighters (combined).
- Council Member Boleware raised concerns about the impact of incremental tax increases on residents, seeking clarification on how the Headlee rollback and property value changes might affect future tax payments. Skrobola explained that while the \$14.77 annual increase is the initial impact, property value growth or sales (uncapping events) could influence future rates.
- Council Member Knol further clarified that although property values may rise, the Headlee Amendment caps the City's overall tax revenue, leading to millage rate reductions over time when growth occurs through new development or property transfers.
- Council Member Bruce emphasized the importance of maintaining the millage to ensure adequate public safety funding, noting that the \$14.77 increase translates to just four cents per day and helps preserve emergency response times and staffing levels.

Council reached consensus to move forward with this ballot proposal and language.

Next Steps and Public Outreach:

The ballot language will be finalized and brought back for a Council vote in April, requiring a three-fifths supermajority for approval.

Fire Chief Unruh indicated that the City would engage in its usual public outreach, providing neutral data and information to homeowners associations and civic groups.

City Manager Mekjian and Attorney Joppich stressed that the City's role is limited to sharing factual information. Any advocacy for or against the millage would come from independent groups.

DISCUSSION ON THE USE OF CITY FACILITIES POLICY REGARDING SIGNATURE GATHERING

City Manager Mekjian, City Clerk Lindahl, and City Attorney Joppich led this continuing discussion regarding signature gathering at City-owned facilities. Background documentation had been provided to Council in the packets, including minutes of recent discussions regarding this issue.

- Previous updates to the City's consolidated facility use policy, adopted in 2018, explicitly prohibited signature gathering at most City facilities. However, recent changes have allowed signature gathering at specific locations, including outdoors areas of the amphitheater and traditional public forums within parks (excluding parking lots).
- Tonight's discussion focused on whether to expand permitted locations for signature gathering at additional City facilities and, if so, to define appropriate conditions such as distance from entrances and enforcement procedures.

Legal Considerations:

- Attorney Joppich explained that allowing petition gathering at additional City facilities—beyond traditional public forums—requires careful consideration of constitutional free speech protections.
- Opening non-traditional public forums (such as City buildings) for petitioning could raise legal questions regarding consistency and fairness, which would need to be addressed through clear, enforceable policies.
- Expanding access for signature gathering does not automatically open facilities to all forms of First Amendment activity, but the policy would need to be carefully structured.

Council Discussion:

Mayor Rich outlined the options before Council:

1. Open all remaining City facilities to signature gathering.
2. Open only some additional facilities.
3. Maintain the current restrictions with no additional openings.

Council Member Bruce expressed support for expanding access, emphasizing the importance of free speech and political engagement. He suggested establishing clear guidelines for distance from building entrances with posted signage to inform both petitioners and the public. He also recommended a trial period of one year to assess the effectiveness of the policy. More flexibility regarding signature gathering would align Farmington Hills with other municipalities, allowing reasonable accommodations for signature gathering at public facilities. Regarding enforcement, he thought that any issues relative to rules violations or uncooperative petitioners should be referred directly to the police.

Council Member Knol supported expanding signature gathering rights at City facilities, emphasizing that Farmington Hills is more restrictive than most surrounding communities. She supported establishing reasonable distance requirements from entrances. She shared examples from other municipalities, including Farmington, where signature gathering is allowed in designated areas without significant issues. She underscored the importance of balancing free speech rights with public accessibility and safety, and believed any issues with aggressive petitioners could be managed by contacting law enforcement.

Council Member Boleware agreed, supporting allowing signature gathering at key locations such as City Hall, the Costick Center, and the Hawk. She noted that requiring petitioners to remain far from entrances, such as at public sidewalks, is impractical at some facilities due to distance and parking lot layouts. She reaffirmed her support for free speech and democratic participation.

Council Member Aldred also voiced support for expanding access, particularly at City Hall, referencing past peaceful protests that demonstrated the community's ability to engage responsibly. However, he also expressed practical concerns about how signature gathering could function at the Hawk and Costick Center due to multiple entrances and parking lot configurations. He questioned how to effectively implement distance requirements at these facilities without disrupting regular users, such as families attending events or classes.

Mayor Pro Tem Dwyer expressed broad support for expanding signature gathering rights, endorsing a flexible approach that could be reassessed if issues arise.

Council Consensus on Facilities and Implementation:

Council discussed whether signature gathering at City facilities should be governed by the specific layout of each building, or whether a general rule not to block entrances would be sufficient.

City Manager Mekjian recommended excluding the police station and fire headquarters due to safety and operational concerns. It was also noted that the Court House and the Library were governed independently and had their own policies and rules.

City Manager Mekjian cautioned Council to proceed with eyes open, acknowledging the potential for disruptions or confrontational situations, particularly from paid petitioners or groups with external funding. He cited past incidents involving aggressive signature gathering.

City Clerk Lindahl reminded Council that City Hall becomes a voting precinct 40 days before each election, and the Costick Center serves as an early voting site. During these periods, the state-mandated 100-foot rule restricting petition activities near entrances will apply.

Council supported the general rule of not blocking entrances (without applying a strict measurement) of each of the three buildings under consideration (The Hawk, Costick Center, and City Hall). However, there should be an opportunity for someone to enter the building without engaging with the signature gathering activity. For instance, petitioners could be permitted on sidewalks adjacent to entrances but prohibited from blocking the immediate walkways leading to those entrances.

City staff will bring aerial views of each building back to Council that will show potential allowable areas for signature gathering, as discussed this evening.

It was suggested that the expanded signature gathering policy could be implemented through 2026, with a review scheduled for early 2027, after the next midterm election cycle, to assess the program's effectiveness and make adjustments if necessary.

ADJOURNMENT

The Study Session meeting was adjourned at 6:42pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk