

MEMORANDUM

To: Village Board of Trustees
From: Village Manager Cara Pavlicek
Date: 2026-01-27
Subject: Review and Discussion of Possible Changes to Shermer-Walters Public Forum

Overview

The Village Board is asked to review possible changes to the Shermer-Walters Public Forum and tentatively set aside time the evening of February 10, 2026 to hear public input on the matter.

Fiscal Impact

While there is no fiscal impact associated with this agenda discussion, it is noted that the cost to the Village related to the maintenance of the property is de minimis. There can be a relatively high administrative cost when signs are permitted that contain speech that invokes a significant public reaction and staff spends unscheduled time to affirm the Village that the Public Forum is a location where up to two signs may be permitted for a maximum of thirty days as "the expression of Constitutionally Protected Free Speech... and that the Village of Northbrook does not Sponsor, Finance, or Endorse these expressions".

Recommendation

Discussion Only.

Background

Since 1995, the Village of Northbrook owns property at the northwest corner of the intersection of Shermer and Walters which was part of a Village public works project to improve the Shermer and Walters intersection (the "*Parkway*"). The Parkway land was transferred by intergovernmental agreement from the Park District to the Village.

In mid 1996, after considerable public discussion, the Village Board determined that it would be in the best interest of the Village to officially designate the newly created Parkway as a public forum, subject to reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions as allowed by constitutional jurisprudence. In general terms, this means that the Village cannot regulate the content (language used/image displayed) of a sign/display because they are Constitutionally

protected free speech.

This was followed in late 1996, by adoption of Resolution No. 96-R-179 designating the Parkway as a public forum (the “*Public Forum*”), and the Village Manager’s office enacted a “Standard Operation Procedure” (SOP) setting for lawful rules and regulations governing use and display.

Today, the Parkway continues to be designated as the Village’s Public Forum pursuant to the 1996 Resolution. The administratively issued SOP has been amended on several occasions after review by the Village Board. The most current version of the SOP is dated October 11, 2023 and requires that advance reservations be submitted on a form prepared by the Village in order to place a display on the Public Forum. The reservation must be submitted not less than 10, nor more than 30, days in advance of the desired installation date. No more than two displays may be installed at any one time, and no display may be installed for more than 30 consecutive days.

In a review of 2023, 2024 and 2025, the Village has had as few as ten signs reserved/permitted at the Public Forum and as many as 22 in a single calendar year. Under the SOP, it is unlikely that more than 24 signs/displays could be installed in a single calendar year.

Alternatives for Discussion

Below are three alternatives that the Board is asked to put forward for public discussion on the evening of February 10, 2026 at Village Hall (it is yet to be determined if this should be at 6 p.m. or as part of the regular 7:30 p.m. meeting.)

As part of the meeting on January 27, 2026, the Board is encouraged to ask any clarifying questions about the alternatives below, and advise Staff with any issues or research that the Board would like reviewed prior to the February 10, 2026 meeting.

1) Reconstitute and redesign the Parkway to be a Council Ring along with updated policies on the purpose of the space. The new purpose would be to provide a physical location for individuals to engage in-person and to peacefully exchange open ideas. No permanent or unattended display, sign, or banner would be allowed at any time. The Village could consider hours of operation and other reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions. The Parkway would no longer be a “public forum” for the placement of unattended displays. This would be in contrast to and discontinue the current practice of individuals or groups making an online

application for an advance reservations on a form prepared by the Village in order to place an unattended display on the Parkway.

Council Rings can be described as a circular seating area and can be found at the University of Illinois Champaign Urbana Arboretum (see attached images). Their website notes:

From The Garden Club of America - " The council ring is a signature element in many of the gardens designed by the Danish landscape architect Jens Jensen (1860-1951). Jensen developed the idea of council rings to work in both public and private spaces. The council ring is a symbolic representation of both ancient Danish traditions of village gatherings and newer ideals of American democracy. The circular design of the structure invites people to come together in an egalitarian way. Just as a circle has no beginning or end, there is no hierarchy within a group gathering around a council ring. Jensen placed council rings in the Chicago-area parks he designed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way to encourage neighbors to come together as equals to share ideas, experiences, and stories and to enjoy the beauty of nature."

2) De-designation of the Parkway as a public forum and discontinue the allowance of any and all private signs and displays at any time on the Parkway.

3) Make no changes to the use of the Parkway as a Public Forum, and continue with the current reservation practice of permitting no more than two signs/displays at any one time, and no display may be installed for more than 30 consecutive days. This action acknowledges that if the Village allows the Public Forum designation, in accordance with the Supreme Court decisions, the Village may not limit the content of the signs/display (only the size and time duration).

Under this option, it is recommended that the Village enlarge the size of the current permanent Village sign on the property which states:

This Village Owned property is a
Public Forum for the Expression
Of Constitutionally Protected Free
Speech. The Village of
Northbrook does not Sponsor,

Finance, or Endorse these
Expressions.

In the case of options 1 and 2, the Village Board may want to consider imposing a temporary moratorium on any use of the Public Forum as it considers the future of the Shermer-Walters Public Forum. If desired, the moratorium could be put in to place at the next Village Board meeting following the February 10, 2026 meeting. It is recommended that the following steps be taken to adopt a temporary moratorium:

- a. Impose the temporary moratorium by adoption of a resolution by the Village Board.
- b. The resolution must apply to all potential applicants and users, *without any exceptions*.
- c. The resolution must allow for any and all reservations that have been properly completed and submitted to the Village Manager prior to the date of adoption of the resolution to be fulfilled. The resolution can then provide that, as of the effective date of the resolution, no new reservations will be honored or accepted during the moratorium period.

Subject to discussion and consensus of the Village Board, staff will promote the February 10 public discussion and work with the Village Attorney to prepare any necessary actions for Board consideration subject to consensus of the Village Board.

[SOP Shermer-Walters Public Forum Use and Reservation Process - October 2023.pdf](#)
[Exhibit - Council Ring Examples](#)