

Planning commission

Study Session

Members present: Jim Beneke, Matt Eckholm, John Flanagan, Sylvie Hyman, Tess Machalek, Sarah Strain, Tom Weber,

Members absent: Mia Divecha

Staff present: Laura Chamberlain, Gary Morrison, Sean Walther

1. Vision 4.0 presentation

Mr. Walter presented the final report from the Vision 4.0 process. The comprehensive engagement process, conducted with consultants Forecast, and Bolton and Menk, spanned over a year and a half and engaged approximately 2,000 people through various methods including community committees, ambassador cohorts, surveys, community conversations, and mobile pop-ups.

The process identified five key themes:

- Safety: creating a community where all people are and feel safe.
- Infrastructure: building, maintaining, connected, reliable, and people-first public realm.
- Sustainability: leading as responsible stewards of natural and financial environment.
- Community and belonging: fostering a vibrant, connected and inclusive community where everyone belongs.
- Housing and affordability: ensuring a diverse and attainable range of housing options for all.

Mr. Walter noted that while there was overlap with current strategic priorities, there was also evolution and nuance added. He cited racial equity as one area where, despite years of city emphasis, it didn't emerge strongly in community feedback, though the council maintained it as part of their welcoming and safe community priority. The bulk of engagement occurred before recent federal events in Minnesota, and council felt the broad themes would still resonate both now and in the future.

City council has been working through three workshops to create new strategic priorities based on the Vision report, and arrived at five themes:

- Welcoming and safe community
- Good governance
- Connected and safe infrastructure
- Diverse, affordable and dignified housing
- Climate leadership and natural spaces.

The council is expected to adopt these priorities on April 6, 2026. Next steps include incorporating these themes into the comprehensive plan and having staff develop specific goals with timelines and success metrics.

2. Zoning Code Update – phase 2

Mr. Morrison presented updates on the zoning code update phase 2, explaining that draft articles are nearly ready for posting to the website. The new ordinance will have 10 articles, with Article 3 (neighborhood districts from phase 1) remaining largely unchanged but reformatted to match the new structure.

The reorganized code aims to be clearer and easier to read, with an electronic format likely to be available after adoption. The structure flows from introduction and general provisions through specific districts, use standards, development standards, procedures, and definitions.

Variance process

Mr. Morrison outlined proposed changes to the variance process. The board of zoning appeals will continue hearing standalone variances, while variances attached to other applications will go to the planning commission for public hearings, with both going to city council for final action.

The key change involves notification procedures. Instead of mailing notices to properties within 350 feet and publishing in the newspaper, the proposal would notify immediately adjacent properties (including those across streets and alleys, and diagonal properties) but eliminate newspaper publication. This streamlined approach aims to speed up the process while maintaining appropriate notification.

Historic Walker Lake overlay district

A new Historic Walker Lake overlay district is proposed to be established and it is tied to the Historic Walker Lake area plan. Boundaries will be identified on the zoning map. The district would eliminate minimum and maximum parking requirements, restrict parking lots and ramps as principal uses to only be allowed if owned by the city, and prohibit freestanding monument and pylon signs.

Commissioners questioned the monument sign prohibition, particularly given existing signs at the library and the community center. Ms. Chamberlain explained the prohibition was intended to encourage pedestrian-oriented rather than auto-oriented signage. After discussion, there was general agreement to consider allowing monument signs with a height restriction of six foot maximum height while maintaining the pylon sign prohibition.

Building dimensions and density standards

Mr. Morrison presented density standards for MU-2, MU-3, and B-1 districts, designed to be consistent with neighborhood districts N-3 and N-4 and comprehensive plan guidance.

Commissioner Eckholm questioned why commercial districts had relatively low maximum densities (30-50 units per acre) given the potential for large-scale redevelopment. Mr. Walter explained that current comprehensive plan limits commercial density at 50 units per acre, and increasing this would require a comprehensive plan amendment and Metropolitan Council approval process.

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Commissioners discussed the relationship between height and density bonuses, noting potential mismatches where buildings could theoretically reach 9 stories in areas with relatively low density allowances. Mr. Morrison acknowledged this needed further review.

Security screens and window coverings

Mr. Morrison presented a new topic regarding security screens, explaining current code prohibits interior or exterior bars, grills, or mesh covering any exterior door or more than 10% of any individual window or contiguous window area. The city has received requests from retailers wanting interior security screens.

The proposal would allow interior screens that must be open during business hours and maintain visibility requirements. Mr. Morrison proposed allowing interior screens but not allowing exterior screens that would detract from the pedestrian atmosphere. Commissioner Eckholm agreed with allowing both interior and exterior screens as long as they're not visible during business hours, comparing them to common features in vibrant urban areas.

Commissioner Strain raised concerns about completely opaque exterior screens creating uninviting streetscapes, while others suggested requiring artistic elements like murals if exterior screens were permitted. The discussion concluded with general support for interior screens and continued consideration of exterior options with appropriate design standards. Mr. Morrison will check with the police department to see their opinion about the lack of visibility into a closed door.

Mr. Morrison indicated the full draft ordinance would be posted by the end of the following week, with extensive public outreach planned before bringing the code to the planning commission for formal review.

2. Adjournment – 7:30 p.m.

Signed by:



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Laura Chamberlain, liaison

Signed by:



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John Flanagan, chair member

These minutes were created with the assistance of a generative AI transcript service, then edited and finalized by a city staff person.