
Planning commission

Study Session

Members present: Jim Beneke, Christopher Caton, Mia Divecha, John Flanagan, Tess Machalek, Sarah Strain, Tom Weber

Members absent: Matt Eckholm

Staff present: Laura Chamberlain

Item 1: Comprehensive plan 101

Ms. Chamberlain provided the Commission with an introductory overview of the comprehensive planning process in advance of the city's upcoming multi-year effort to update its Comprehensive Plan. Ms. Chamberlain described the Comprehensive Plan as a long-range document providing a 20-year vision for the city, encompassing high-level goals and policies to guide future decision-making across land use, utilities, transportation, and related city services.

The city is required by state law to update its plan every 10 years in alignment with the Metropolitan Council's regional framework. The Met Council issues system statements to each jurisdiction with population, household, and employment projections through 2040 and 2050, to which the city must respond. The city had no objections to the current projections. The city's local controls, including ordinances and policies, cannot conflict with the adopted comprehensive plan, which is how the Met Council ensures jurisdictions across the seven-county metro area act consistently.

The current 2040 Comprehensive Plan, which was based on the 2010 census, is organized around five strategic priorities: racial equity, environmental stewardship, livable communities, mobility, and community health and safety. Ms. Chamberlain noted the document exceeds 400 pages and acknowledged that the upcoming plan would aim to be more concise, visual, and plain language in its presentation. Staff identified several other priorities for the new plan: a stronger emphasis on measurable implementation metrics as requested by the City Council, and alignment with the recently completed Vision 4 process and updated strategic priorities. Ms. Chamberlain noted that "good governance" and safety have been elevated in the new strategic priorities.

Commissioner Weber reinforced the significance of the comprehensive plan explaining that the plan functions as the foundational legal basis for land use decisions—every development application before the commission is evaluated against the plan's policies—and that it is the appropriate vehicle for establishing the policy groundwork before pursuing specific zoning or ordinance changes. He cited the recent zoning code update and the discussion around parking minimums as examples of matters that belong in the comprehensive plan first.

Role of the Planning Commission

Ms. Chamberlain outlined the commission's expected role, which includes participating in policy discussions, identifying gaps in existing policy, engaging in community outreach, interpreting community feedback through a strategic priority lens, reviewing individual plan chapters, conducting the public hearing on the final draft, and making a formal recommendation to city council.

Commissioner Divecha raised the importance of joint sessions between the planning commission and city council during this process, expressing that greater connectivity between the two bodies had been a standing desire. Ms. Chamberlain confirmed that joint sessions would be a possibility as the process unfolds.

Comprehensive Plan Schedule

Ms. Chamberlain outlined a multi-year schedule:

- 2026: Project kickoff, existing conditions analysis, and initial goal and policy drafting
- 2027: Topic analysis, plan drafting, and implementation metric development
- 2028: Finalization of the plan document followed by a required six-month adjacent jurisdiction review period, a planning commission public hearing, city council adoption, and final Met Council approval.

Policy Discussion: Topics for the 2050 Plan

Ms. Chamberlain invited the Commission to discuss priority policy areas for the upcoming process, referencing topics previously identified during the October 2026 work plan session. The discussion covered a broad range of ideas, including:

- **Parking minimums and transportation alternatives**
 - Interest in advancing parking minimum reforms on an accelerated timeline while also promoting cycling infrastructure, traffic calming, and a broader shift away of car-centric design.
- **Walkable commercial nodes and small businesses**
 - More small-scale, locally-oriented commercial nodes throughout the city to support walkability, third-place gathering, and economic vitality.
 - The plan could more explicitly connect livable communities goals to small business support.
- **Design for children, families, and universal access**
 - Concerns about how little the built environment is designed with children in mind, advocating for infrastructure that supports child independence, such as safe cycling routes to parks and recreation facilities.
 - Use universal design; disability-accessible design benefits all residents at every stage of life.
- **Community identity and equitable policy review**
 - Propose an audit of existing policies and ordinances rooted in outdated or exclusionary norms that may not serve immigrant communities or communities of color, citing nuisance ordinances like tall grass-noxious weeds, which may not reflect a welcoming community.

- **House and building quality, aging stock.**
 - Acknowledgment that while some older homes hold historic or community value, others impose significant maintenance burdens on residents.
 - Preserve neighborhood character and ensure that the housing stock remains viable, energy-efficient, and affordable to maintain.
- **Resiliency and anticipating change.**
 - Remain nimble in the face of shifting technologies, economic conditions, and work patterns, drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Road design and county/state jurisdiction**
 - It is difficult to improve pedestrian conditions on county roads such as Excelsior Boulevard. Explore whether state legislative engagement could help unlock changes currently outside the city's jurisdiction.
 - Traffic calming measures and a rebalancing of road design priorities away from vehicles.
- **Employment patterns and amenity access**
 - Understand commuter inflow and outflow patterns and ensure that major employment centers, such as the hospital, are better connected to walkable amenities. Ms. Chamberlain noted that similar feedback had been heard during the Arrive and Thrive planning process.
- **Business engagement**
 - Include business owners and employers as stakeholders in the engagement process, given their interest in retaining employees nearby during the workday.

Ms. Chamberlain closed by encouraging all commissioners to document their ideas and share them with staff or the incoming consultant team, noting that the early stages of the process are the most opportune time to introduce new directions. She indicated that the consultant team would be present at the next relevant meeting to present their approach.

3. Adjournment – 7:24 p.m.

Laura Chamberlain, liaison

Sarah Strain, chair member

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