

**CITY OF NORTH ST. PAUL
PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2022
6:30 P.M.**

North St. Paul City Hall – Council Chambers
2400 Margaret Street

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Barton called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

COMMISSION

Elaine Barton, Commission Chair

John Monge, Vice Chair

Patrick Blees, Commissioner

Eric Brenna, Commissioner EXCUSED ABSENT

Rick Gelbmann, Commissioner

Andrew Wise, Commissioner EXCUSED ABSENT

Lisa Wong, City Council Liaison

STAFF

Brandy Howe, City Planner

Lisa Ritchie, Planning Secretary

III. ADOPT AGENDA

Motion to adopt agenda by Commissioner Gelbmann, and seconded by Commissioner Monge, with all present voting aye (4-0). Motion carried to adopt the January 6, 2022 Agenda.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Motion to approve minutes by Commissioner Blees, and seconded by Commissioner Gelbmann, with all present voting aye (4-0). Motion carried to approve the December 2, 2021 regular meeting minutes as submitted.

V. MEETING OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Planning Secretary Lisa Ritchie stated Candace from WSB joined the call via Zoom.

VI. PUBLIC HEARINGS

-None.

VII. COMMISSION BUSINESS, ACTION ITEMS & RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Review Park Improvement Plan

Ms. Ritchie stated the Parks & Recreation Commission has requested feedback and comments from the Planning Commission with regard to the draft Parks Improvement Plan.

Chair Barton stated the Planning Commission reviews the draft plan for consistency with Comprehensive Plan goals.

Commissioner Gelbmann expressed his appreciation for the hard work and efforts of the Parks & Recreation Commission. He added the Master Plan Review sessions included discussions regarding open space and vacant lots that could be used as informal parks. He noted there is a broad review of 3 major purposes on page 15 of 170 in the meeting packet.

Chair Barton stated the Resiliency Chapter is something totally new in the Comprehensive Plan. She added key components of the Resiliency Chapter are connecting people and places; fostering a healthy community; parks and trails access and connectivity; and multi-modal transportation. She noted some language could be taken from the Resiliency Chapter.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated the last paragraph on page 17 in the packet discusses similar components but does not set it up as a purpose or priority.

Ms. Ritchie read a chat comment from Candace from WSB: “I was asked not to do any planning work, but rather focus on revisions related to parks.”

Chair Barton stated the implementation section was a very good conclusion to the proposed plan, and provided a path going forward, which is very important.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated, on page 49 of 170, there is no mention of Casey Lake water quality and the aerator. He added it would be worthwhile to mention that issue.

Chair Barton stated there was also no mention of the retaining wall that is required at Colby Hills Park playground.

Chair Barton stated, in the chart on page 50, McKnight, Casey Lake and Silver Lake Parks should be identified as Community Parks (CP) rather than Regional Parks (RP). Commissioner Gelbmann agreed, adding they are listed as community parks in the Comprehensive Plan.

Chair Barton stated, in the list of facility types on page 49, it would be helpful to differentiate between which age groups would use each playground; for instance, ages 2-5 or 5-12.

Ms. Ritchie stated that could be added if someone can provide that information before the plan goes to print.

Chair Barton stated the Environmental Learning Center is not addressed anywhere, nor Central Park, at the corner of Seppala Boulevard and Margaret Street.

Ms. Ritchie stated there was discussion regarding whether they are actually identified as parks. Chair Barton stated they are identified as parks in the Comprehensive Plan.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated the Urban Ecology Center is referenced on page 58, and shown incorrectly on the zoning map. Chair Barton agreed.

Commissioner **Gelbmann** Blees stated he noticed some small typos, which he agreed to email to Ms. Ritchie.

Chair Barton referred to page 11. Ms. Ritchie stated that is a blank page that needs to be deleted.

Chair Barton stated page 11 in her packet refers to the parks classification “Specialty Park”. She requested clarification regarding the fourth bullet point under Prescription. She added both Rotary Park and the Urban Ecology Center are located along the Gateway State Trail, serving as an access point to the downtown area, and should be included in this parks designation.

Chair Barton stated she was happy to see that there is acknowledgement that the City has a lot of work to do on accessibility to and within the City’s parks.

Chair Barton stated the important part is getting a broad range of input. She added it is problematic to contact all the residents of a large apartment building to give them parks information.

Commissioner Monge stated the Commission had talked about adding benches to spaces that are open for redevelopment, making them aesthetically pleasing and inviting.

Chair Barton stated the Commission had discussed getting a connection from the parking lot behind K&J.

Ms. Ritchie read a chat comment from Candace: “many methods for community engagement to gather input as part of a needs analysis.”

City Council Liaison Lisa Wong stated the edges of the volleyball court are very dangerous. She added she appreciates the funding aspects of the proposed plan, which is well done, and helpful for the City Council in having budget discussions regarding parks and trails.

Chair Barton stated Polar Park is identified as a small neighborhood park, but it is shown in the Comprehensive Plan as 2.83 acres, which is larger than Tower Park at 2.67 acres.

Ms. Ritchie read a chat comment from Candace: “do you know if the category of park is off the acreage of the park? How are they classified? By acreage? Small neighborhood park is usually under 3 acres.”

Chair Barton stated the Comprehensive Plan identifies Polar Park at 2.83 acres, Tower Park at 2.67 acres, and Hause Park at 2.96 acres.

Ms. Ritchie read a chat comment from Candace: “some classifications will have neighborhood park and mini park for those around 1 acre.”

b. Review Open Meeting Law as it Pertains to Attending Commission Meetings via Zoom

Ms. Ritchie reviewed new guidelines for Commission meetings under the amended Open Meeting Law: individuals cannot vote on action items via Zoom from their home; meeting attendees’ locations must be documented in the meeting notice; meeting attendees must be in a public space and available to the public; and votes will be conducted via roll call.

Commissioner Gelbmann asked whether the legislature will be looking at changing these guidelines to ensure that meetings continue to be accessible for people.

Chair Barton stated local changes may be a possibility. She added she likes having Zoom access to meetings for everyone, and also making the videos available on YouTube. She noted, however, she understands that Commissioners have a responsibility to show up for meetings whenever possible.

VIII. OLD BUSINESS

a. Review Draft Sign Ordinance

Ms. Howe reviewed the draft sign ordinance, including specific issues for discussion: electronic signs; location of signs in the overall Code; definitions from the existing code; general sign regulations; computations and materials; construction; and maintenance of signs. Other sections have already been completed, including introductory provisions, permitting, exemptions and prohibited signs. Sections that are in progress include definitions and regulations for electronic signs and various sign types.

Ms. Howe requested feedback and comments from the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Gelbmann requested consideration of a change to the text on page 154 of 170, which recommends that message dwell time be limited to 8 seconds. He added that should be changed to a minimum of 8 seconds, and the maximum is unlimited.

Chair Barton stated, on that same page, there is a recommendation to prohibit electronic message boards on pylon signs. She asked whether there are any of this type of signs in North St. Paul.

Commissioner Blees asked whether sign definitions were taken from ISA guidelines. He added his understanding of a pylon sign is that it is on posts, while a monument sign is set on a foundation on the ground.

Chair Barton expressed concern that this would create a nonconforming sign.

Ms. Howe stated electronic message boards should be regulated for aesthetic reasons and safety considerations for vehicular traffic.

Chair Barton stated it is difficult to prohibit that type of sign because of the highway and ensuring the signs are visible. Many local businesses depend upon highway traffic. Ms. Howe stated that is a good point.

Chair Barton asked, under “Definitions”, on page 155, why there are still definitions for construction signs and directional signs. She added they are temporary signs.

Ms. Howe stated directional signage would not be temporary. She added political signs and construction signs can be removed.

Chair Barton asked whether flag signs that advertise a business or service should be prohibited. Ms. Howe stated it would be necessary to differentiate types of flags.

Commissioner Blees stated it would be necessary to define when a flag becomes a sign. Chair Barton stated it is a symbol of something, and therefore it is a form of free speech.

Ms. Howe stated, if the definition of flag sign is removed, a new definition could be added for flags that advertise a service or product. She added, however, flags can be exempt as they are not applicable to the sign code.

Chair Barton asked why a flag would be regulated if it is advertising something and not if it is expressing a view, based on what should be regulated. Ms. Howe stated people do not generally use flags as a sign.

Ms. Ritchie stated there was conversation about colorful yard signs, and blow-up signs. Chair Barton stated flags of any kind should all be allowed.

Ms. Howe stated flags should not be included in the sign code if they are not going to be regulated. Chair Barton stated her point is why should they be regulated differently.

Chair Barton asked for clarification regarding the difference between a yard sign, which is temporary, and a freestanding sign. Ms. Howe stated a yard sign is temporary because it is not meant to be permanent, but a free-standing sign could be more substantial and permanent.

Chair Barton stated temporary sign should be defined as not intended for long term use. She added the second sentence in the definition for yard sign should be removed. Ms. Howe agreed.

Chair Barton stated, under prohibited signs, non-advertising signs can be attached to mobile equipment. She added that should read “all signs attached to mobile equipment”. Ms. Howe stated this section came from the current code, prohibiting any message on mobile equipment.

Ms. Howe stated, for purposes of clarification, signage on mobile equipment would not be allowed when signage is not the principal use of the equipment. Chair Barton agreed.

Commissioner Blees asked whether flashing and rotating signs will be prohibited rather than regulated. Ms. Howe stated that provision is in the existing ordinance, and it is a policy decision for the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Blees stated the difference between message center and flashing sign should be noted. He asked whether a flashing neon “open” sign is allowed. He noted flashing signs should be defined. Chair Barton stated that would be dealt with under criteria for electronic message boards. She added the definition of changeable copy sign is being removed.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated inflatable gorillas and wavy balloon signs are not permitted. He added they are not in keeping with the quality of the community and should not be promoted or allowed.

Chair Barton asked whether flashing signs should fall under illumination standards.

Commissioner Blees stated, if the illuminated sign definition is properly categorized and regulated, then it is not necessary to reference flashing signs. Chair Barton stated that applies to rotating and moving signs as well.

Ms. Howe stated, in section B, general sign regulations computations regulate area measurements, height, setbacks and location. The setback requirement in the current ordinance is 10 feet from property line and 5 feet from driveway, which could be amended to parking area. She asked whether the setback should be the same across all sign types and districts.

Chair Barton stated the one exception could be the downtown area where there are no setbacks. Ms. Howe stated a free-standing or monument sign would not be possible in that situation.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated he would support limiting the number of districts that have criteria for size and setback. Ms. Howe stated the setback can be set at 10 feet for all signs. Commissioners Gelbmann and Blees agreed, with the exception of the downtown area. Commissioner Blees stated the criteria could read “except where building setback is zero”.

Ms. Howe stated free-standing or monument signs could be prohibited in the downtown area.

Ms. Howe stated the sign code has a signage limitation of 20% of window space. She added she drove by Neumann’s bar, and every window has a neon sign. She added it is quaint and could be a discussion for the Commission to have.

City Council Liaison Wong stressed the importance of being mindful about smaller lots, where a 10-foot setback would be a lot.

Chair Barton stated setback standards for freestanding signs are referenced in General Regulations in A4 and B3, and it is not necessary to have it in both places. Ms. Howe agreed. She added, from an administrative standpoint, setbacks should not be referenced under General Regulations.

Chair Barton stated it should be under Location, which is under General Regulations, because they apply to all signs.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated, on page 155 of 170, Chapter 157 under A4, “fourth” should be replaced with “forth”.

Commissioner Gelbmann asked, with regard to Item B, what happens if it's a local election, and how is free speech protected in that situation. He added local elections signs should be accommodated for a specific period of time.

Ms. Howe stated that can be matched up with State statute, and the language modified to include local signage.

Commissioner Gelbmann stated he would support removing the sentence on the next page regarding bench signs at bus stops. He added there could be other places besides bus stops where a bench might have a sign. He noted the Rotary bench is a good example.

Chair Barton stated there are benches downtown with people's names on them. She added bench signs should be identified differently.

Ms. Howe stated the section related to Exempt Signs stipulates that signage on benches requires a franchise authorized by the City Council. She added, if it is removed from the ordinance, then off-premises signs would not be permitted, and the restriction would apply to all benches in the public right of way.

Ms. Howe recommended leaving it as is for now. Chair Barton stated the exemption should also be left in.

Commissioner Gelbmann asked how signs are handled that are in people's yards that could be considered political messages. Ms. Howe stated they are not addressed as they are considered free speech language and should not be regulated any differently.

Chair Barton asked whether political signs as a sign type should be eliminated because they are temporary. Ms. Howe stated she is unsure.

Chair Barton stated "temporary" should be defined, and some guidelines established, otherwise it is just a freestanding sign.

Ms. Howe stated yard signs are listed as exempt from the sign code.

Ms. Howe stated there are probably requirements for temporary signs like banners. The City's sign code is fairly typical and defines every possible sign type. If it is scaled down to signs that are permanent, that would make it easier to use.

Commissioner Blees stated public safety and distractions should be considered. Chair Barton stated that gets into aesthetics and street scape.

Ms. Howe stated the City would generally want to under-regulate in residential areas. She added it would be different from other sign ordinances to say that signs are allowed as long as they do not exceed a specific size.

Commissioner Blees stated, on page 160 of the packet under Exemptions, sculptures could be added to statues.

Ms. Howe stated perhaps the exemptions list is not necessary, if a list of sign types that requires permits is included.

Commissioner Blees stated the amount of area of the sign should be restricted, and that is all the regulation that is necessary. Chair Barton agreed.

Commissioner Blees asked whether signs for home businesses are regulated in residential districts. Ms. Howe stated that might be the kind of sign that would require a permit, as it is regulated in the zoning ordinance under Home Occupations.

City Council Liaison Wong thanked Ms. Howe for spending time reviewing the sign code.

IX. REPORTS FROM STAFF

a. Downtown Patio Furniture Design Style Standards

Ms. Ritchie stated downtown businesses who would like to have outdoor patio furniture will be required to purchase and maintain the furniture without financial support from the City. The Planning Commission is being asked to review outdoor seating to determine design standards.

Commissioner Blees stated it would be appropriate to have Candace at WSB provide options for review, as it is a landscape architecture issue. He added she probably has sources and can provide ideas.

Ms. Ritchie stated she would need to talk to Mr. Winek about budgeting. She added she agrees this project will involve more detail, and the downtown design manual can be referenced for standards and guidelines.

Chair Barton stated she would support providing options to guide businesses, so they have different styles to choose from and the seating is not identical. She added it does not have to be too detailed. Commissioner Gelbmann stated there is value in that.

Ms. Howe stated it might be more appropriate to determine what the City does not want in terms of design, instead of providing options.

City Council Liaison Wong stated the design standards should be revisited, especially with all the development that is going on. Chair Barton agreed. She added the downtown revitalization plan will be a good guide.

City Council Liaison Wong stated the City Council is interested in having more sidewalks. Chair Barton stated that is an integral part of the Comprehensive Plan.

b. Funding for Downtown Improvements

Ms. Ritchie stated she spoke with Finance Director Daniel Winek regarding funding for downtown landscaping projects. Mr. Winek indicated that funding of \$142,000 has been allocated in the 2022 CIP Plan.

Chair Barton requested that the Commissioners review the packet including the downtown design information and provide comments to Ms. Ritchie within the next week. She added she did not have time to read the Minneapolis document.

City Council Liaison Wong stated the Minneapolis document shows the applicant's role and the City's role and includes information on timelines and permits.

X. REPORT FROM COUNCIL LIAISON

City Council Liaison Wong stated there was discussion at the City Council meeting regarding a Highway 36/Highway 120 interchange with mayors and County and State officials. A survey was reviewed that highlighted amenities that people want, including sidewalks and bike lanes. Federal infrastructure funding is being explored.

XI. REPORTS FROM COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Gelbmann stated the Silver Lake Improvement Association will have its annual meeting on February 7, 2022 at 6:30 p.m. on Zoom. Additional information will be posted on the Association's webpage on the City website, and via email notifications.

Chair Barton stated Planning Commission position elections can be done at the February 2022 meeting.

Ms. Ritchie stated a Task Force meeting is scheduled for January 20, 2022.

XII. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, motion to adjourn by Commissioner Gelbmann, and seconded by Commissioner Monge, with all present voting aye (4-0). Motion carried to adjourn the meeting at 9:10 p.m.

The next regularly scheduled Planning Commission Meeting is Thursday, February 3, 2022 at 6:30 p.m.

Members, please notify any planned absences to: Lisa Ritchie
Planning Commission Secretary
651-747-2400
lisa.ritchie@northstpaul.org