

**CITY OF NORTH ST. PAUL
PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
THURSDAY, March 3, 2022
6:30 P.M.**

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

I. CALL TO ORDER

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

II. ROLL CALL

COMMISSION

Elaine Barton, Co-Chair
John Monge, Co-Chair
Patrick Blees, Commissioner
Eric Brenna, Commissioner
Rick Gelbmann, Commissioner
Andrew Wise, Commissioner
Lisa Wong, City Council Liaison

STAFF

Brandy Howe, City Planner
Lisa Ritchie, Planning Secretary

III. ADOPT AGENDA

Motion to adopt agenda by Co-Chair Barton, and seconded by Co-Chair Monge, with all present voting aye (6-0). Motion carried to adopt the March 3, 2022 Agenda.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Changes were proposed by Co-Chair Barton with the Planning Commission clarifying wording after meeting.

Motion to approve Minutes by Co-Chair Monge, and seconded by Co-Chair Barton, with all present voting aye (6-0). Motion carried to approve the February 3, 2022 regular meeting minutes as amended.

V. MEETING OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

There were no comments.

VI. PUBLIC HEARINGS

There were no public hearings.

VII. COMMISSION BUSINESS ACTION ITEMS & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Establish the 2022 Plan Commission Work Plan

Co-Chair Barton suggested addressing short-term rentals since it was mentioned last year also.

The Planning Commission discussed details of the Work Plan. Suggestions were made to discuss parklets and setting priorities to help City Council set their budget for 2022. Commissioner Blees questioned if this work plan is a public document. Co-Chair Barton noted it is and the work plan alerts the City Council of projects the Planning Commission wants to work on.

Commissioner Gelbmann wondered about zoning maps and noted decisions have to be in line with the Comprehensive Plan to maintain consistency. The Planning Commission discussed the history and provided a brief overview of how zoning maps were constructed. City Planner Brandy Howe recommended creating an ordinance and a map restructure.

Commissioner Blees questioned the rezoning process and area. Ms. Howe explained property is rezoned when a resident requests and it follows the site plan review times. Planning Secretary Lisa Ritchie stated she will provide estimates of rezoning and will bring it to the Finance Director.

Co-Chair Barton suggested the zoning maps be a separate discussion.

Co-Chair Monge questioned locations of off-street parking. Co-Chair Barton stated the City is compliant on how many spaces are designated as off street parking. Commissioner Wise thinks this is an important issue and questioned the amount available.

Commissioner Brenna mentioned motor vehicles may not be as popular later and this may decrease the need for parking. Co-Chair Barton noted people's habits are always changing and parking falls partly on the applicant.

Council Liaison Wong stated the Council's retreat focused around sidewalks, bicycles lanes, and the amount of traffic. Co-Chair Monge noted these are on the EDA's agenda and questioned how parking will be managed going forward.

Ms. Howe summarized the Planning Commission's priorities as: off-street parking, zoning maps, short-term rentals, wayfinding plan, and a sidewalk plan. Ms. Howe stated she will bring this back to City Planner Erik Weber and develop a budget.

VIII. OLD BUSINESS

A. Sign Ordinance

Ms. Howe reviewed the changes from the meeting in February. She also noted the revisions have not been amended but definitions are updated and language has been changed. The Planning

Commission discussed the definition of pylon and posts, adding a public safety portion, and discussed single-post yard signs. Co-Chair Barton shared some language changes that could be used.

Co-Chair Barton was concerned about signs promoting goods or services and revising the definition to take out the language specifying the kind of sign it is. Co-Chair Barton also questioned where murals fall in the ordinance. Ms. Howe stated the hardest part of this process is defining what a sign is and determining exemptions not regulated by the sign ordinance.

Ms. Howe clarified there is now an appeals process. Co-Chair Barton questioned the timing for submitting an appeal and response time. Ms. Howe stated the regulation currently states 30 days but she recommends 60 days, giving City Council ample time to run through its process.

Commissioner Blees noted 30 days should be enough time for the Planning Commission and then 30 more days to get it to City Council. Co-Chair Barton clarified the appeal has to be to the Zoning Administrator in 30 days. Commissioner Blees clarified the applicant has 30 days for the appeal before it goes to the Planning Commission has a time constraint to act on the appeal.

Co-Chair Barton wondered how businesses would react. Commissioner Blees suggested breaking it into 2 sections requiring the Planning Commission to see it first, move it through quickly, and then not putting a timeline for City Council.

Commissioner Gelbmann wondered if there would be an issue in terms of notifying the public. Ms. Ritchie stated if the appeal meets the ordinance, there would not be a need for a public hearing. Ms. Howe thought 30 days was too tight to get it on the Planning Commission agenda.

Ms. Howe stated there were no changes to the regulation section of the ordinance.

Co-Chair Barton questioned the regulations applying to all informal signs. Commissioner Blees questioned how to regulate this in the downtown overlay district. Ms. Howe stated it is in a different section.

The Planning Commission discussed removing the words ‘flag pole.’ Co-Chair Monge noted the job of the Planning Commission is not to regulate messages but to regulate the ordinance.

Council Liaison Wong wondered about sign placement on utility poles and what this means for the downtown area. Co-Chair Barton wondered if the downtown area could be exempt if it benefits the public and could this apply to banners as well. Co-Chair Barton summarized the key issue is getting the City’s permission.

Ms. Howe stated she will add language to the ordinance about requiring city approval for both utility pole signs and banners. Co-Chair Monge added using the words ‘public property’ encompasses all those areas.

Ms. Howe stated the proposed maximum aggregate signs are listed at 32 square feet for single and 2 family and 60 feet for multi-family and non-residential in all of the residential districts.

Commissioner Gelbmann found it hard to look at dimensions in the residential and non-residential tables, wondering if simplifying the tables would define those clearer. Ms. Howe summarized and stated to strike residential district rows 1-3. Commissioner Blees suggested simplifying it even further by using one table for residential and one for non-residential. Ms. Howe suggested informal signs do not adhere to this standard and further noted address signs are also exempt.

Co-Chair Barton wondered if informal signs contribute to the maximum aggregate sign area. Ms. Howe noted informal signs would have their own table. Commissioner Blees commented on the tracking of changes.

It was noted that multi-use districts are required to have the maximum aggregate sign area amount allowed. Commissioner Blees discussed creating a formula for large surface areas. The Planning Commission also discussed whether to require a maximum square foot area or a percentage of wall area.

Commissioner Gelbmann suggested adding language that adheres to the dimensional limitations defined in the table.

Co-Chair Barton inquired under applicability, does the 32-square-foot requirement exclude informal signs. Ms. Howe suggested discussing this at the next meeting.

Commissioner Wise suggested getting rid of section C and striking the whole concept of neon signs.

Ms. Howe updated the Planning Commission on changes including text size based on mph of travel and inclusion of sign manufacturing sets. She noted this is difficult for staff to know and relies on engineering guidelines and experts to make those recommendations. Council Liaison Wong noted code enforcement is used to educate the public about regulations and policies.

Commissioner Wise commented on limiting the number of electronic message signs to one per property. Co-Chair Barton suggested distance between the number of neon signs. Ms. Howe summarized the Planning Commission's suggestions stating the total number of signs cannot exceed 2 based on yard frontage. Co-Chair Barton suggested specifying the difference between the face and the structure in order to be more specific and provide clarity to the public.

Ms. Howe stated she will re-word it to provide more clarity.

Ms. Howe clarified free standing signs are required to be one square foot of surface area for every square foot of linear street frontage.

Commissioner Blees suggested a duration of 30 days on informal signs. The Planning Commission held a lengthy discussion on duration of free-standing signs and it was agreed to change the wording from informal to non-permanent.

Co-Chair Monge suggested code compliance be based on its appearance. Commissioner Wise noted using maintenance as a way to regulate compliance provides the City with options for signs that are not kept up.

After discussion from the Planning Commission, Ms. Howe summarized the Planning Commission's regulation on free standing signs including changing language, distance from property lines, ways to enforce code violations and placing, stating it under general regulations.

Council Liaison Wong stated there has been some discussion on developing the alleys in the downtown district. Co-Chair Monge wondered if residents were aware of this regulation. Ms. Howe clarified that code enforcement only applies to those that are complained about.

Commissioner Wise suggested striking the word 'permanent' or the whole section. He also suggested window signs be limited to one third. Co-Chair Monge questioned if painting on the window would qualify as a permanent sign. Ms. Ritchie stated it is based on whether it can be removed.

Co-Chair Barton suggested neon signs be placed under the illumination section, allowing them to be characterized as non-permanent. She also suggested neon signs should require a certain percentage of the area.

Commissioner Blees noted the importance of greater flexibility in the downtown district in order to grow the downtown area. Ms. Howe suggested eliminating neon sign language completely and use window sign instead.

Commissioner Wise wondered why the Planning Commission as a whole is concerned with the dimensions of a window sign. Co-Chair Barton noted it is a visual and safety issue to see into the store.

Council Liaison Wong suggested over regulating could deter new businesses and asked the Planning Commission to consider some flexibility. Ms. Howe reiterated the downtown area should be a mix of residential and commercial properties.

Ms. Howe and Co-Chair Barton suggested waiting until next meeting to discuss neon flashing signs.

Ms. Howe suggested when an ordinance is changed, businesses are essentially grandfathered in and do not need to make changes to meet the new requirements.

Co-Chair Barton discussed specifying banner regulations to specific events and the duration of time they can stay up. Ms. Howe stated non-permanent signs do not require a permit.

Commissioner Brenna noted the only way to enforce these types of signs is through maintenance. Co-Chair Barton wondered if enforcement is possible when a permit is not required.

Commissioner Blees wondered how the state defines a political sign and suggested using that definition in our ordinance. Ms. Howe suggested deleting the duration period of 10 days after the election, letting it default to section B, and adhering to the square footage requirement.

Commissioner Brenna discussed various options for size, number, and duration of political signs and agreed to review it again after Ms. Howe makes the current adjustments.

Ms. Howe added prohibited flashing signs to list.

Ms. Howe stated flags were removed from the exemptions section.

Co-Chair Barton questioned how seasonal inflatables are defined and how they apply to this regulation. She wondered if they could be called something else Commissioner Blees questioned prohibiting inflatables versus allowing seasonable inflatables. Commissioner Wise suggested defining inflatables according to their movement. Commissioner Blees also suggested restricting size. Ms. Howe suggested waiting on this regulation until she can do some more research.

Commissioner Wise wondered if the Planning Commission has ever run these ideas past the Code Enforcement Department. Ms. Ritchie stated there is currently not a review process by any other department except City Council. Council Liaison Wong will share this information with City Council. Co-Chair Barton and Ms. Ritchie mentioned the code is a reflection of what is in the Comprehensive Plan and that code cannot conflict with the Comprehensive Plan.

Council Liaison Wong stated the City wants to attract businesses and regulations could cripple the development of new businesses.

Co-Chair Monge noted the downtown area is a blank slate waiting to be expanded. Co-Chair Barton suggested loosening the sign ordinance. Council Liaison Wong mentioned City Council wants to allow new businesses to develop here and grow. Co-Chair Monge questioned if these regulations would deter future business developments.

Council Liaison Wong wondered if enforcing the code could be defined as showing signs of wear and tear. Co-Chair Monge suggested cleaning up the code makes it easier for businesses to understand. Co-Chair Monge thanked Council Liaison Wong for her help and perspective on this item.

B. Downtown Furniture Design Review Standards

Ms. Ritchie provided a variety of options when implementing design standards for outdoor furniture. Co-Chair Monge questioned the City's liability if outdoor furniture was not up to commercial grade. Ms. Ritchie added the purpose of these standards is to set a style in the downtown area and would recommend WSB for the design information.

Council Liaison Wong suggested most restaurants have their own regulations regarding table top surfaces, etc. Ms. Ritchie suggested allowing businesses the freedom to make those decisions and deciding on what the Commission does not want versus stating what is required. Co-Chair Monge suggested restaurant and bar owners be responsible for purchasing and storage of the outdoor furniture.

Commissioner Brenna mentioned providing simple parameters for businesses to work within. Co-Chair Barton noted giving businesses guidance so they can begin ordering now, if desired.

Commissioner Wise wondered if the Planning Commission wants to put another expense on these businesses, some who have not yet recovered from COVID.

Ms. Ritchie will get direction from City Manager and City Staff and will provide more information at the next meeting.

IX. REPORTS FROM STAFF

There were no reports from staff.

X. REPORTS FROM COUNCIL LIAISON

Council Liaison Wong provided updates on the Highway 36/120 project gaining traction with local cities and legislators. The City is also looking at renovating 120 all the way to I-94, elevating its urgency.

XI. REPORTS FROM COMMISSIONERS

Co-Chair Monge wondered if the K and J building remains sold.

XII. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, motion to adjourn by Co-Chair Barton, and seconded by Commissioner Blees, with all present voting aye (6-0). Motion carried to adjourn the meeting at 9:46 p.m.

The next regularly scheduled Planning Commission Meeting is Thursday, April 7, 2022 at 6:15 p.m.

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