



PLANNING COMMISSION

City Hall—Council Chambers, 3989 Central Ave NE

Tuesday, April 07, 2026

6:00 PM

MINUTES

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

Members of the public who wish to attend may do so in-person, or by using Microsoft Teams Meeting at <http://www.columbiaheightsmn.gov/joinameeting> ID **234 643 985 190 91**, Passcode **2cw7ew3d**.

For questions, please contact Administration at 763-706-3610.

Auxiliary aids or other accommodations for individuals with disabilities are available upon request when the request is made at least 72 hours in advance. Please contact Administration at 763-706-3610 to make arrangements.

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Commissioners present: Dirk Schmitz, Paul Moses, Clara (Wolfe) Christopherson, Ahmed Maameri

Commissioners absent: Jeffrey Johnson, Karl Rehfuss, John Gianoulis

Also present: Ursula Brandt, City Planner; Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant; Mitch Forney, Community Development Director; Rachel James, Council Liaison

1. Oath of Office (One Commissioner; April 2026 - March 2029)

Christopherson mentioned that the commissioner who was going to take the Oath of Office was not present, and items 1-3 would be tabled until the next meeting.

Motion by Moses, seconded by Maameri, to table items one through three until the next Planning Commission meeting. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

2. Overview of Boards and Commission Orientation

This item was tabled.

3. Election of Planning Commission Officers

This item was tabled.

APPROVE MINUTES

4. MOTION: Approve March 3rd, 2026 Planning Commission Meeting Minutes as presented.

Motion by Maameri, seconded by Schmitz, to approve the minutes from the meeting of March 03, 2026 All ayes. MOTION PASSED

PUBLIC HEARINGS

This is the public's opportunity to speak regarding this matter. Speakers that are in-person are asked to complete a Speaker Form and submit it to City Staff. Speakers attending virtually should send a request to speak with this information to the moderator using the chat function and wait to be called on to speak. When speaking, virtual attendees should turn their camera on. Speakers should limit their comments to five (5) minutes. Any comments made after the public hearing is closed will not be considered by the Planning Commission and will not be included as part of the formal record for this matter as the item will have been voted on and the item formally closed by the Commission.

5. Vacation of Existing Drainage and Utility Easement at 1515 44th Avenue NE

Introduction: Brandt stated in 2025 that Duffy Development Company, Inc was selected by Anoka County, the property owner of 1515 44th Avenue NE, to redevelop the lot into an affordable apartment building. The applicant approached Staff to discuss possible options that would be compliant with the current City Code. During this discussion, the applicant noted that the lot had existing easements that, if maintained, would hinder the process of redevelopment.

Brandt explained that upon review, the applicant and staff determined that the "utility and drainage easement" labeled Easement 'B' is the fire lane easement that allowed fire truck access around the assisted living facility on the adjoining property. A land survey was conducted it was determined that the constructed fire lanes are misaligned with the easements.

Brandt reviewed the current status and noted that staff have coordinated with City Engineering and the City Fire Chief to confirm the findings. Comments are attached to the Agenda Packet. Staff will continue to work to ensure that all requirements will be met in the redevelopment of the site for access to the buildings on the adjoining properties. Attached to the Agenda Packet is the plat and land survey identifying the easement to be vacated. Once approved, the applicant is responsible for filing the vacations with Anoka County.

Brandt stated the Zoning Ordinance requires the Planning Commission to hold a public hearing on the application for the vacation of a street, alley, or other public right-of-way and submit its recommendation to the City Council. The subject property at 1515 44th Ave NE is zoned R-3 Limited multiple-family residential. The surrounding area is zoned residential, R-3 to the east, R-2A - two-family residential to the west, and R-1 - single-family residential to the south, with open space to the north.

Brandt noted that the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan guides the subject sites as "High Density Residential" as well as the area to the east, "Low Density Residential" to the south and west, and "Park" space to the north. She reviewed the findings of fact. Section 9.104 (J) of the Zoning Ordinance outlines certain findings of fact that must be met in order for the City to grant approval for an easement vacation. The findings are as follows: The City Council shall make each of the following findings before vacating a street, alley, or other public right-of-way:

- a) No private rights will be injured or endangered as a result of the vacation. This is correct.*

b) *The public will not suffer loss or inconvenience as a result of the vacation. This is correct.*

Questions/Comments from Members:

Schmitz asked if the proposed easement would affect the easement in block two. Brandt replied that it would not affect the block, and the request was strictly for block one.

Maameri asked if the Fire Department had any concerns that were resolved. Brandt replied that there were no concerns. Maameri pointed out that the applicants have determined utility and drainage easement and wondered if the fire lane easement allows fire truck access to the assisted living facility. Brandt replied that the Fire Department is still using the paved fire lane, and they will work with the applicant to ensure that the fire lane can be used during construction.

Public Hearing Opened.

Christopherson opened the Public Hearing. There were no public comments.

Public Hearing Closed.

(Commissioner comments, if any)

Motion by Christopherson, seconded by Moses, to close the public hearing. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

Motion by Moses, seconded by Schmitz, to recommend that the City Council approve Resolution 2026-019, vacating the drainage and utility easement, easement 'B' at 1515 44th Avenue NE as presented. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

Motion by Christopherson, seconded by Moses, to waive the reading of draft Resolution 2026-019 there being ample copies available to the public. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

6. Variance for reduced parking requirement for 999 50th Ave NE

Introduction: Brandt stated in 2016 that the last remaining tenant, a dental office, vacated the property at 999 50th Avenue, resulting in the building remaining fully vacant to the present day. Over the past decade, City staff have received multiple inquiries regarding potential redevelopment of the site; however, none have advanced to an approved or completed project.

Brandt noted that in 2022, A & A Properties acquired the subject property and initiated an evaluation of potential uses for the existing building. The applicant has engaged in ongoing discussions with City staff to identify site constraints and applicable regulatory requirements. Staff has advised that any proposed use would require the building to be brought into compliance with current building and fire codes, including accessibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the installation of an approved fire suppression system.

Brandt explained that based on these discussions, both staff and the applicant have concluded that establishing a viable use within the approximately 12,000 square foot building would present significant challenges. Specifically, compliance with applicable health and safety standards, in combination with the need to maintain a parking demand not exceeding 41 spaces, substantially limits feasible reuse options for the property.

Brandt stated A & A Properties is requesting approval of a variance from the off-street parking requirements for the property located at 999 50th Avenue NE. The applicant is proposing to establish a café/restaurant (food service, full-service) within the existing building. For this use, City Code 9.106 (L), requires off-street parking equal to 30 % of the building's occupant capacity, which results in a requirement of 53 parking spaces. The subject property currently contains 41 parking spaces, resulting in a deficiency of 12 spaces. The applicant seeks a variance for the following:

1. Variance to allow a 12-space reduction in required parking, from 53 to the existing 41 parking spaces.

Brandt noted that the Zoning Ordinance requires the Planning Commission to hold a public hearing on the application for the variance and submit its recommendation to the City Council. The subject property is zoned GB (General Business), and the surrounding area is zoned GB to the east and north, with R-2B (One and Built as Duplex Residential) to the south and R-2A (One and Two Family Residential) to the east. The use of the property as a business and food service complies with the Zoning Code and is otherwise code-compliant.

Brandt mentioned that the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan guides the subject site as "Commercial" as well as the area to the south, east, and north, and the west as "Medium Density Residential". The proposed use and parking variance is consistent with the goals and intent of the Comprehensive Plan.

Brandt stated that staff have reviewed the variance materials submitted, including floor plans, applicant narrative, and site plan illustrating the proposed use of the building and its relation to adjacent properties and structures, as well as the existing parking associated with this property.

Brandt reviewed the findings of fact. Section 9.104 (G) of the Zoning Ordinance outlines required findings of fact that must be met for the City to grant approval for a Variance. The findings are as follows: The City Council shall make each of the following findings before granting a variance:

- a) Because of the particular physical surroundings, or the shape, configuration, topography, or other

conditions of the specific parcel of land involved, strict adherence to the provisions of this article would cause practical difficulties in conforming to the zoning ordinance. The applicant, however, is proposing to use the property in a reasonable manner not permitted by the zoning ordinance.

This is correct. Strict adherence to the off-street parking requirements would result in practical difficulties due to the specific conditions of the subject property. The existing building occupies a significant portion of the site, and the parcel is further constrained by surrounding development, limiting the ability to expand or reconfigure the site to accommodate additional parking. In addition, since the construction of the building, the City's zoning ordinance has been amended, resulting in increased parking requirements. As a result, if the entire building is utilized only three uses allowed in the General Business District could meet current parking standards on this property. Despite these constraints, the applicant is proposing a reasonable use of the property by establishing a café/restaurant within the existing structure, which is consistent with the intent of the zoning district.

- b) The conditions upon which the variance is based are unique to the specific parcel of land involved and are generally not applicable to other properties within the same zoning classification.

This is correct. The site contains an existing building that occupies a substantial portion of the parcel, limiting opportunities for site modification. In addition, physical constraints, including a change in elevation between the subject property and adjacent parcels, restricts the ability to expand parking or establish shared parking arrangements with neighboring properties. These site specific conditions distinguish the property from others in the General Business zoning district.

- c) The practical difficulties are caused by the provisions of this article and have not been created by any person currently having a legal interest in the property.

This is correct. The practical difficulties are not caused by the current property owner or any person having legal interest but due to changes in the zoning code.

- d) The granting of the variance is in harmony with the general purpose and intent of the Comprehensive Plan.

This is correct. The Comprehensive plan calls for reinvestment, renovation, and modernization of the City's commercial districts.

- e) The granting of the variance will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or materially injurious to the enjoyment, use, development or value of property or improvements in the vicinity.

This is correct. The granting of this variance will result in a new restaurant in a building that has been left vacant for more than a decade.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Moses asked staff if there was concern about overflow into the Aldi parking lot. Brandt replied that there have been no comments from Aldi, and Aldi received a notice.

Maameri asked if there was an ability to have on-street parking. Brandt replied that on-street parking is available outside of the building. She added that staff could work with the Engineering Department to discuss any concerns with the intersection.

Moses asked how long the process would take. Forney invited the applicant to speak. Daniel Shay explained that they have not done much planning since they were waiting for approval from the City. The design process will begin after the approval.

Maameri clarified that the applicant is asking for a reduction of 12 parking spaces. Brandt agreed. Christopherson added that it is based on the occupancy.

Public Hearing Opened.

Christopherson opened the Public Hearing. There were no public comments.

Public Hearing Closed.

Motion by Schmitz, seconded by Christopherson, to close the hearing and waive the reading of draft Resolution No. 2026-026, there being ample copies available to the public. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

Motion by Maameri, seconded by Moses, to recommend that the City Council approve Resolution No. 2026-026, a Variance allowing a 12 parking space reduction for 999 50th Ave NE, Columbia Heights, MN 55408. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

OTHER BUSINESS

Brandt stated that the May Planning Commission meeting has been cancelled. She added that there are no new applications. Staff is looking to schedule the kick-off meeting for the Planning Commission and the Advisory Committee for the Comprehensive Planning process for May 6th. Forney added that the City has pushed forward a Parks Master Plan. He mentioned that the 4300 Central Avenue project is moving forward, and the developer is currently working on the Environmental Assessment Worksheet.

Christopherson asked if there had been any progress with the Medtronic site. Forney replied that the brokers are in conversation with other developers for the site. City staff is meeting with the brokers and MnDOT to see if a portion of the property could be used for stormwater ponds.

Maameri pointed out that the building across the street from City Hall had been sold. Forney agreed and explained that the Fairview building has been sold, and the new building is proposed to be a clinic.

Councilmember James mentioned that there would be a Boards and Commission reception at City Hall on April 15th at 5:00 pm.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Christopherson, seconded by Moses to adjourn the meeting at 6:24 pm. All ayes. MOTION PASSED

Respectfully submitted,



Ursula Brandt, City Planner