

**MINUTES**  
**CITY OF COLUMBIA HEIGHTS**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING**  
**April 01, 2025**

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 pm by Chair Wolfe.

**CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL**

Commissioners present: Jeffrey Johnson, Dirk Schmitz, Karl Rehfuss, Paul Moses, Clara Wolfe, and John Gianoulis

Commissioners absent: Ahmed Maameri

Also present: Andrew Boucher, City Planner; Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant; Mitch Forney, Community Development Director; Sara Ion, City Clerk; Brenna Jansen, Community and Economic Development Intern; Laurel Deneen, Council Liaison.

**1. Oath of Office/Introductions**

Boucher asked the new commissioners to introduce themselves. Schmitz explained that he is a fifth-generation resident of Columbia Heights. Rehfuss stated he has lived in the City for three years. Johnson mentioned he raised his kids in the City.

**2. Overview of Boards and Commissions/Orientation**

Ion explained that the Community Development team is there to support the Planning Commissioners. She added that she is there to help if there are any concerns or questions regarding procedures. She reviewed what makes a good member of the Planning Commission, which includes coming to meetings on time, and reviewing the information provided by the staff to make informed decisions.

Boucher mentioned that staff provided the commissioners with an orientation PowerPoint that contains the League of Minnesota Cities guide on the role of a Planning Commissioner.

**3. Election of Planning Commission Officers**

Boucher explained that Officer Elections are held on an annual basis. In order for a member to be considered for an officer position, they must be nominated by another Planning Commission member or nominate themselves. The election process will include Commission members providing all nominations for the Chairperson of the Planning Commission. A vote is taken and counted individually for each nominated member. The member with the most votes is declared the Chairperson of the Planning Commission by the Staff Liaison. The same process will occur for the Vice Chair and the Secretary/Treasurer.

Boucher asked for nominations for the Chair of the Planning Commission. Gianoulis nominated Wolfe.

*Motion by Gianoulis, seconded by Moses, to elect Wolfe as Chair of the Planning Commission. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.*

Boucher asked for nominations for the Vice Chair of the Planning Commission. Wolfe nominated

Gianoulis.

*Motion by Wolfe, seconded by Moses, to elect Gianoulis as Vice Chair of the Planning Commission. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.*

Boucher asked for nominations for the Secretary/Treasurer. Wolfe nominated Moses.

*Motion by Wolfe, seconded by Johnson, to elect Moses as Secretary/Treasurer of the Planning Commission. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.*

## **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

### **4. Approval of February 4, 2025 Planning Commission Meeting Minutes**

*Motion by Gianoulis, seconded by Rehfuss, to approve the minutes from the meeting of February 4, 2025. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.*

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **5. Discussion on Zoning Updates and Districts**

Forney explained that staff would like to present a number of work session items and encouraged the commissioners to share their thoughts and opinions.

Jansen explained staff have been discussing ongoing challenges associated with the commercial districts defined within the City's Zoning and Development Ordinance, especially the Limited Business District (LB). The Limited Business District is currently comprised of separate clusters that are not uniform in character, use, or characteristics. Since the district is so spread out and inconsistent, staff is presenting this information to the Commission for discussion on how the Limited Business District could better fit the Comprehensive Plan, how to support and guide the LB District by identifying existing components of LB that are barriers to future development. The City's Commercial Zoning Districts are described as follows:

- (D) LB, Limited Business District provides appropriate locations for limited retail sales and services for convenience of adjacent residential neighborhoods along collector or arterial roadways near residential neighborhoods, arranged and designed to be a functional and harmonious part of the neighborhood, and accessible by public sidewalks or trails as well as by roadways.
  - Multiple-family housing is a permitted use in the LB, but single-family housing is not permitted unless it is accessory to commercial use.
- (E) GB, General Business District provides appropriate locations for general retail sales, services and other commercial developments that benefit from proximity to other commercial uses and are located away from residential neighborhoods, along arterial roadways and are accessible primarily by automobile.
  - GB does not allow for housing as a use, and there has been a City policy of purchasing

functionally obsolete single-family houses in this district along Central Avenue for future redevelopment. Medtronic and the Rainbow redevelopment sites anticipate high-density housing in the form of multifamily housing and townhouses.

- (F) CBD, Central Business District provides for the development and redevelopment of the established downtown core, including a mix of retail, financial, office, service, and entertainment uses; residential units are allowed within this district when located above a first-floor commercial use.

Boucher noted there are two primary concerns related to legal nonconformity in the Limited Business District:

- Commercial uses in the Limited Business District have off-street parking requirements, but these parcels' lot sizes are not large enough to accommodate the required parking spaces. This legal nonconformity limits commercial growth on LB parcels such as 1601 37th Avenue NE, 604 40th Avenue NE, etc.
- Single-family housing is not permitted in the Limited Business District, but almost half of the parcels zoned as LB were grandfathered in when the district was created and are currently being used as single-family homes. Most of the nonconforming single-family homes in LB are in the 40th Avenue or University Avenue clusters. Single-family homes make up 78% of the LB parcels on 40th Avenue and 33% of the LB parcels on University Avenue.

Jansen displayed a zoning map for the commissioners.

Boucher reviewed the description of design districts.

- 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue District (mostly composed of LB zoned properties) combining housing with intuitions such as City Hall and smaller commercial businesses.
  - Single-story commercial buildings set back 5-10 feet from the sidewalk; housing is predominantly single-family, although additional townhome and multi-family is envisioned.
- Highway District (mostly General Business zoned properties) extends along Central Avenue from 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue north to the City boundary; this segment has a distinctly different character than the CBD.
  - Most buildings are set far back from the street behind large parking lots or along frontage roads. Central Avenue is a six-lane highway through most of this area, and the road width and traffic speeds combine to make the area less pedestrian-friendly.
- Central Business District extends from 37<sup>th</sup> to 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenues and include several historic or architecturally interesting buildings. Most office and storefront buildings meet the sidewalk, while shopping centers and franchise buildings are set back behind parking lots with diverse architectural styles.
  - New multifamily housing has been developed; several off-street ramps help to reduce the need for surface parking and recent streetscape improvements have enhanced the pedestrian character of this district.
- 40th Avenue contains 42 LB parcels along 40th Avenue between Washington St and Jackson St, operating most similarly to a transitional zone. They are surrounded by General Business parcels to the east and Central Business parcels to the west. Of the 42 parcels in this stretch, the majority (32) are currently used for single-family housing, one (1) for a church, and the

remaining properties are used for commercial purposes.

- Central Avenue has three separate clusters of LB parcels located along Central Avenue between 42nd Avenue and 45th Avenue, with other parcels on these blocks zoned General Business, and the 2040 Comprehensive Plan's Future Land Use Map indicates all should be commercial. For the sake of cohesion along this corridor and to comply with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, it would make sense to rezone these LB parcels as General Business. However, nine of these parcels currently contain housing (seven single-family, two multifamily), which is not a permitted use in the General Business District. The City has already purchased 4416 Central Avenue (single-family home) for redevelopment and has an established policy for purchasing functionally obsolete single-family houses in the GB District.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Johnson asked what was happening with the property taxes for the homes in the LB District. Boucher replied that it would be a valuable thing to know in order to see what the consequences are of the changes.

Gianoulis asked if the goal for changing the zoning to Limited Business was to promote business growth. Boucher replied that he could not speak to why the single-family homes were taken out of the district, but it was intended for smaller businesses to serve the neighborhoods. Forney added that the Limited Business District exemplifies how zoning can be used to future-proof an area.

Jansen explained there are several clusters containing most of the parcels zoned as LB, the Commission is urged to consider challenges and potential future direction of LB parcels within the context of these clusters and their surrounding land uses.

- University Avenue
- 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue
- Central Avenue
- Stinson Boulevard
- 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue

Jansen noted that University Avenue is comprised of LB parcels located between General Business parcels to the north and R2 parcels to the south. Six residential parcels and a General Business parcel separate the LB parcels on this stretch. Of the 24 LB parcels, eight (8) are currently used for single-family housing, 15 for multifamily housing, and one (1) for a church. Staff recommend considering the future of this segment during the reconstruction of University Avenue and the 2050 Comprehensive Planning process. Staff recommends considering the future of the segment during the reconstruction of University Avenue and the 2025 Comprehensive Plan cycle. She asked the commissioners to consider what the transition from University Avenue to the surrounding area will look like in the future.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Schmitz mentioned the University Avenue LB cluster should be its own district since there is no direct University Avenue access.

Moses asked what the construction plans were for University Avenue. Forney replied MnDOT revealed

preliminary plans and is looking at roundabouts as the main change to University Avenue. Moses mentioned that his understanding was that there would be more pedestrian crossings throughout the corridor. He asked if there is an expectation that there would be more pedestrian traffic in the commercial district as well. Forney replied that there would be the same amount of pedestrian traffic.

Wolfe asked what the plans were for the west side of University Avenue in Fridley, since it is mostly residential. Forney replied that it warrants consideration since the majority of the area is multifamily. He added that he is not sure what Fridley's Comprehensive Plan is for the area.

Schmitz mentioned that a portion of 45<sup>th</sup> Avenue is owned by Fridley and wondered how that would affect the City if the road is a shared road. Boucher replied that he would look into the road and bring the findings back to the commission.

Gianoulis asked if the frontage road could be made more pedestrian-friendly, and keep University Avenue could be kept for vehicles.

Johnson asked if there was interest in commercializing University Avenue in the same way that Central Avenue is commercialized. Boucher replied that he did not know if there was a desire to do that, since it is a hodgepodge of uses in the area and does not have a defined characteristic.

Jansen stated that 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue contains 42 LB parcels along 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue between Washington Street and Jackson Street, operating most similarly to a transitional zone. They are surrounded by General Business parcels to the east and Central Business parcels to the west. Of the 42 parcels in the stretch, the majority (32) are currently used for single-family housing, one (1) for a church, and the remaining properties are used for commercial purposes. She asked what the role of housing in the LB district was and how the reconstruction of 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue would influence that vision.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Moses mentioned he would like to see 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue be more pedestrian-friendly, since it sounds like it will be a Limited Business District.

Wolfe mentioned 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue has the potential to feel "old timey" and like a main street. She agreed with Moses' comments regarding having it be more pedestrian-friendly so that the neighborhood feels more comfortable walking to the businesses. She added that many of the homes have a storefront characteristic and would like to preserve that characteristic in the area. Johnson agreed.

Boucher explained that Central Avenue is meant to handle vehicle traffic. One of the goals of the Central Avenue reconstruction is to limit direct land use. He agreed that 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue is the City's main street.

Jansen wondered if it would serve 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue to have an off-street parking district there.

Jansen stated Central Avenue has three separate clusters of LB parcels located along Central Avenue between 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 45<sup>th</sup> Avenue, with other parcels on these blocks zoned General Business, and the 2040 Comprehensive Plan's Future Land Use Map indicates all should be commercial. For the

sake of cohesion along this corridor and to comply with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, it would make sense to rezone these LB parcels as General Business. However, nine of these parcels currently contain housing (seven single-family, two multifamily), which is not a permitted use in the General Business District. The City has already purchased 4416 Central Avenue (single-family home) for redevelopment and has an established policy for purchasing functionally obsolete single-family houses in the GB District. 800 53rd Avenue NE was recently re-guided to allow for the use of multifamily housing and townhouse development in GB. She asked the commissioners if multifamily housing should be an allowed use in the GB District.

Boucher added that when they did a Comprehensive Plan amendment for the Medtronic site, they had to change the Comprehensive Plan to allow for residential. The two redevelopment projects will include multifamily. He wondered if multifamily should be allowed in two of the three business districts and if it should be consistent with where the redevelopment projects are going.

Jansen noted that the Stinson Boulevard block contains 6 parcels being used for multifamily housing and 1 parcel with an empty commercial building. The parcels are located across the street from a mixed residential and commercial block in St. Anthony. The cluster would be relatively easy to rezone as R3, so it is worth considering whether the LB zoning serves the future vision for this block.

Jansen explained that 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue includes two small parcels on the corner of 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE and Johnson St NE are zoned LB. The two parcels are surrounded by R-2A parcels in Columbia Heights and across the street from single-family homes in Minneapolis zoned for residential and light commercial uses in mixed-use buildings. 1529 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue currently holds a business, but 1601 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue is currently vacant. It was previously used as office space and can only be used as a medical/dental clinic, office, professional studio/service, or retail sales. Both lots are legally nonconforming because they do not meet the minimum lot area requirements, and 1601 37<sup>th</sup> is below the minimum width.

Jansen stated the primary questions for the commission and staff to consider are:

- 1) Does the Limited Business District, in the present condition, function as a distinct zoning district.
- 2) Is the Limited Business District serving the City effectively as it is currently written or are there shared characteristics that should be defined within that zoning district or the design guidelines?
- 3) What clusters does the Limited Business District suit best? Should any of these clusters be rezoned?

Jansen noted that from staff's perspective, the transitional character described by the Limited Business District is most closely aligned with current conditions on University Avenue and 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Staff are contemplating how the LB zone might be edited to better encompass the vision for University Avenue and 40th Avenue. Two land use and redevelopment goals from the 2040 Comprehensive Plan are particularly relevant to this conversation:

- Create a redevelopment plan for the 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue Corridor.
  - Assemble a redevelopment plan for 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE to provide for increased neighborhood commercial development and protect existing residential properties as appropriate

- Enhance the image and viability of the University Avenue corridor while providing opportunities for transit-related uses.
  - Coordinate efforts when redevelopment opportunities arise along University Avenue.

Jansen mentioned the commission could consider how they envisioned the corridors to be developed in the future.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Reh fuss mentioned that the City should allow and push for more multifamily housing, which could spur more economic development in those areas. Wolfe added that Central Avenue makes sense to have multifamily housing on it since there is a bus line and options for food and employment.

Wolfe expressed her concern regarding changing some of the parking requirements. She gave an example of changing the parking requirements somewhere, and then a high-density business moving in, and neighborhoods getting irritated because there are a lot of cars parked in front of houses.

Schmitz asked how places of worship would fit into parking or zoning requirements for any of the locations. Boucher replied that similar language from the Central Business District could be used. The Central Business District says any residential use has to have an explicit parking requirement. Places of worship are required to provide a transportation management plan. He added that any institution that would go in would need to show the City a plan on how they will handle traffic.

Moses asked if places of worship were considered Limited Business District or Central Business District. He asked if parking for places of worship is based on the number of parking lots. Forney replied that it is based on the district. He explained that off-street parking is not allowed in the Commercial Districts.

Boucher mentioned that the 2040 Comprehensive Plan identifies the need to create a development plan for 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue and University Avenue corridors. Staff have identified that business districts should have some multifamily housing to a degree.

Gianoulis mentioned that he likes the idea of dropping the parking requirement on 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue because it would encourage development. He added he is in favor of multifamily along Central Avenue, and it would not be out of character for the area. He noted he is not against dropping the parking requirements for the Limited Business District, but would need to look into it more.

Schmitz asked if the southwest corner of University Avenue would still be zoned industrial. He asked how parking would affect that type of business and location. Boucher replied that staff are not proposing any changes to the Industrial District currently. There will not be any changes to parking requirements in the Industrial District right now.

Jansen explained a possible solution to the constraints of off-street parking on LB parcels is to remove off-street parking requirements for commercial uses in the LB district. In all of Columbia Heights except the Central Business District, off-street parking minimums are determined based on the parcel's actual use. The Central Business District has been designated an off-street parking district, meaning off-street parking is not required except for residential uses. If the Limited Business District was designated an

off-street parking district, street parking might serve 40th Avenue and 37th Avenue well, but would create complications in other LB clusters:

- University Avenue: Does not currently allow street parking or have a sidewalk. Commercial uses without parking lots would rely on side streets, raising accessibility and safety concerns.
- 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue: Currently, street parking and sidewalks are available on both sides of the street. Removing off-street parking requirements might be viable in this cluster, but the presence of Greater Life Church at 4000 Quincy St NE raises the question of whether institutional uses should be required to offer off-street parking in off-street parking districts, since they attract large numbers of people at the same time.
- Central Avenue: The LB parcels on Central Avenue are in an area that does not have street parking, so removing their off-street parking requirement would mean businesses there would have neither street parking nor off-street parking minimums.
- Stinson Boulevard: All parcels currently have parking lots, but this block does not allow street parking. If any of the buildings are converted to commercial use, removing the off-street parking requirement would allow them to remove their parking lots without being served by street parking.
- 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue: Street parking is not available directly in front of either building on 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue because of their position on street corners, but customers could park further away on 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue, or on Johnson Street sidewalks are available on the other side of 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Minneapolis.

Forney mentioned that typically, a Planning Commission will have a project presented to them, and then the project moves on. He explained that staff would like to take the opportunity to get feedback from the commissioners because they all live in the City and staff want to hear their perspective. He expressed his appreciation for the input the commission provided to staff. He added that staff would take the input and continue to do more research to bring back to the commission to consider.

Wolfe thanked staff for putting the information together. She added that the conversation has been useful in order to understand the different district areas.

Boucher mentioned some other items to consider, including LED signage. Staff brought forth changes to the City Sign Code in a previous meeting and noticed that Dynamic LED signage, signs that display a changing message every so often, require a Conditional Use Permit and are only allowed on monument signs/existing pylon signs. Staff does not have examples of conditions that the Planning Commission or City Council could add, but these signs are typically regulated by limits on the maximum area, frequency of message change, and maximum illumination. Additionally, cities are prohibited from regulating signage based on message content. Staff would like the Planning Commission to consider what type of neighborhood input is sought and if there are any conditions that could be added; if the Commission cannot come up with reasonable conditions unrelated to message content, then staff recommends bringing a future amendment forward to make Dynamic LED signage a permitted use.

Wolfe asked if there was a sound condition on signs. Boucher replied that it would be covered under prohibited signage. He added that he was pretty sure that there was something included that signs cannot make noise.

Wolfe asked if there has been a sign proposal had to go through the public hearing process. Forney replied that the most recent one was at the liquor store. The liquor store is in the only district that allows for message board signs.

Moses asked if there were any standards for the frequency of light strobing. Boucher replied that no flashing lights are allowed.

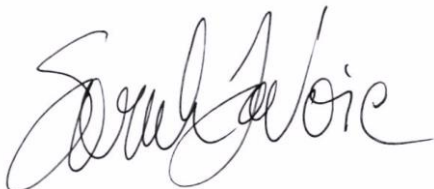
Gianoulis mentioned he thought it was a great idea to change it to permitted use.

Councilmember Deneen welcomed the new Planning Commission members. She thanked the staff for leading the discussion. Wolfe added her appreciation for staff.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

*Motion by Reh fuss, seconded by Moses to adjourn the meeting at 7:20 pm. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.*

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah LaVoie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sarah" and last name "LaVoie" clearly distinguishable.

Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant