

**MINUTES
CITY OF COLUMBIA HEIGHTS
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING
February 04, 2025**

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

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Commissioners present: Eric Sahnou, Tom Kaiser, Paul Moses, and John Gianoulis

Commissioners absent: Clara Wolfe, Ahmed Maameri

Also present: Andrew Boucher, City Planner; Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant; Mitch Forney, Community Development Coordinator; Laurel Deneen, Council Liaison, Connie Buesgens, Councilmember

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. Approval of January 7, 2025 Planning Commission Meeting Minutes

Motion by Kaiser, seconded by Moses, to approve the minutes from the meeting of January 7, 2025 All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

2. Zoning Ordinance Amendments to amend Chapter 9 – Land Use:

9.101 Purpose

9.103 Definitions

9.106 General Development Standards

9.107 Specific Development Standards

9.109 Residential Districts 9.110 Commercial Districts

9.111 Industrial Districts

9.113 Planned Unit Development Districts

9.114 Overlay Districts

9.115 Public and Open Space Districts

Introduction: Boucher explained staff discussed potential updates to City Zoning Code – Chapter 9 Land Use at the January 7, 2025 Planning Commission Workshop based on the work related to the City’s efforts to implement a Complete Streets Policy for public and private development, SolSmart technical review and progress through their designation program, and incorporating these along with other recent zoning code updates into the City’s Design Standards. These amendments are described in each applicable zoning section as follows:

- A. 9.101 Purpose, Authority and Jurisdiction (B) Purpose amended to include (B)(11) “Encourage and strengthen solar development and use of renewable energy while protecting public health, safety, and welfare of its residents and furthering progress towards specific community goals and plans.”; amend (B)(2) to reflect other specific goals defined in plans such as the Energy Action Plan and other guiding documents.

- B. 9.103 Definitions amended to include the following definitions:
- a. Amending Accessory Building/Structure, Building and Structure definitions to explicitly state that solar equipment and installations are not considered to be structures.
 - b. Adding Community-scale solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system that qualifies for the Community Solar Gardens identified by the State of Minnesota Commerce Department's Energy and Utilities.
 - c. Adding Grid-connected solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system that is connected to an electric circuit served by an electric utility company.
 - d. Adding Ground-mounted solar energy system (Accessory Use): A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack or pole that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the ground and the system is accessory to the primary use.
 - e. Adding Ground-mounted solar energy system (Primary Use): A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack or pole that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the ground and is the primary land use for the parcel(s) on which it is located. Primary use systems are permitted through a discretionary approval process.
 - f. Adding Roof-mounted solar energy system: A solar photovoltaic system mounted on a rack that is ballasted on, or is attached to, the roof of a building or structure. Roof-mount systems are accessory to the primary use.
 - g. Adding Solar energy system: A device, array of devices, or structural design feature, the purpose of which is to provide for generation or storage of electricity from sunlight, or the collection, storage, and distribution of solar energy for space heating or cooling, daylight for interior lighting, or water heating.
 - h. Adding Solar photovoltaic system: A solar energy system that converts solar energy directly into electricity, the primary components of which are solar panels, mounting devices, inverters, and wiring.
- C. 9.106 General Development Standards amended to include the following provisions:
- a. Removing language from (B) Lot Controls (13) Height limitations establishing a roof area maximum for mechanical and electrical equipment and adding language to include solar and other renewable energy equipment to allow equipment to exceed the maximum height limitation by up to 50%.
 - b. Amending (C) Accessory uses and structures (1)(c) to include solar and other renewable energy equipment are subject to the setback requirements for accessory structures, but are not considered buildings or structures.
 - c. Amending (H) Performance Standards (1) Purpose to exempt solar and renewable energy equipment and installations from performance standards.
 - d. Amending (P) Sign Regulations to include (8) Sign Design Standards Table containing standards related to types of signage allowed by zoning district, maximum area, height, illumination, setbacks, and any other applicable information in a form-based table.
 - e. Including (S) Table of Uses showing the permitted, conditional, and accessory uses for all residential, commercial, industrial, and public districts.
- D. 9.107 Specific Development Standards amended to include the following provisions:

- a. Including Roof-mounted solar energy system as a use and including as a specific development standard that the system “shall comply with applicable state and local fire codes to ensure emergency access to the roof, provide pathways to specific areas of the roof, provide areas for smoke ventilation, and provide emergency egress from the roof.
 - b. Include Ground-mounted solar energy systems (accessory use) as a use and including as a specific development standard that “if the area under the system contains vegetative ground cover such as grass, native planting, and vegetations, or pollinator habitats as the tilt and spacing allows for precipitation to drain into the pervious ground cover.”
- E. 9.109 Residential Districts, 9.110 Commercial Districts, 9.111 Industrial Districts, and 9.115 Public and Open Space Districts are all amended to remove the permitted, conditional, and accessory uses and relocate these into a form-based table in 9.106 General Development Standards (S) Table of Uses.
- F. 9.113 Planned Unit Development amended to include “solar, renewable energy systems, and beneficial electrification” as part of (C) Areas of Flexibility as well as (D) Review Procedure to include references to guiding documents in Planned Unit Development consideration.
- G. 9.114 Overlay Districts (D) Design Overlay District is amended to include a reference in (1) Purpose, supporting the goals of the comprehensive plan, Energy Action Plan, Safe Streets for All, and the City’s Complete Streets Policy. Other amendments included are to (2) Establishment and (3) Design Guidelines of the Design Overlay Districts to read as follows:
 - a. Central Avenue Design District. The Central Business District, extending from 37th to 42nd Avenues, includes a number of historic or architecturally interesting buildings, including the Heights Theatre. Most office and storefront buildings meet the sidewalk while shopping centers and franchise buildings are set back behind parking lots. Architectural styles are diverse, from historic commercial or Mediterranean Revival (the theater) to 20th-century modern. Several off-street ramps help to reduce the need for surface parking. Recent streetscape improvements and developments of the Public Safety building as well as the mixed-use City Hall redevelopment project have enhanced the pedestrian character of this district. This district contains numerous neighborhood-oriented multi-tenant shopping centers including restaurants, personal and professional services, retail, and multi-family developments. Redevelopment of the City’s Public Safety and City Hall has contributed to the character of this district.
 - b. 40th Avenue Design District. Fortieth Avenue has its own character, combining housing with institutions such as City Hall John P. Murzyn Hall, smaller commercial businesses including restaurants, multi-tenant buildings with professional and personal services, as well as housing and places of worship. Commercial buildings tend to be single-story, set back 5 to 10 feet from the sidewalk, and have extremely limited parking options that cause some properties to have legal nonconforming status. Housing is predominantly single-family, although additional townhouse and

multifamily development is envisioned in the Downtown Master Plan (2000). Future redevelopment and reconfiguration of 40th should take into consideration of the parking needs of the existing businesses and seek opportunities to enhance street parking.

- c. Highway Design District. The Highway District extends along Central Avenue from 42nd 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. The Highway District has issues related to stormwater quality and quantity that are apparent when there is significant or torrential rainfalls. With these conditions in mind for future redevelopment and reconfiguration of Central Avenue, Complete Streets elements shall be implemented when these are feasible and there are identified conflict points, stormwater issues, areas that are “under-lit”, barriers to pedestrian/bicyclist movements, or referenced in guiding documents such as Complete Streets, ADA Transition Plan, and Safe Streets for All. (3)(c). Support the implementation of city-wide guiding documents and standards.

Boucher reviewed the findings of fact. Section 9.104 (F) of the Zoning Ordinance outlines certain findings of fact that must be met in order for the City to grant approval for a zoning amendment. The findings are as follows:

a) The amendment is consistent with the comprehensive plan.

The City’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan identifies strengthening the identity and image of the community as a desirable place to live, work, and play as well as preserving and enhancing the existing viable commercial and industrial areas within the community. The zoning code amendments proposed will help achieve more consistency with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

b) The amendment is in the public interest and is not solely for the benefit of a single property owner.

The zoning text amendments are in response to recommended best practices from technical staff with SolSmart to support public and private development of renewable energy resources as well as incorporating city-wide guiding documents and consolidating sections of code to be more streamlined and readable.

c) Where the amendment is to change the zoning classification of a particular property, the existing use of the property and the zoning classification of property within the general area of the property in question are compatible with the proposed zoning classification.

The amendment is not to change the zoning classification of a particular property.

- d) Where the amendment is to change the zoning classification of a particular property, there has been a change in the character or trend of development in the general area of the property in question, which has taken place since such property was placed in its current zoning classification.***

The amendment is not to change the zoning classification of a particular property.

Recommendation: Boucher mentioned that staff recommend approval of Draft Zoning Ordinance Amendment No. 1711 amending City Code 9.101 Purpose, 9.103 Definitions, 9.104 Administration and Enforcement, 9.106 General Development Standards, 9.107 Specific Development Standards, 9.109 Residential Districts, 9.110 Commercial Districts, 9.111 Industrial Districts, 9.113 Planned Unit Development District, 9.114 Overlay Districts, and 9.115 Public and Open Space Districts as presented.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Moses noted what a fabulous job staff have done on the amendments. The amendments are detailed and thorough. Kaiser agreed and added that staff have been proactive. Gianoulis agreed.

Public Hearing Opened.

There were no public comments.

Public Hearing Closed.

Motion by Moses, seconded by Gianoulis, to waive the reading of the draft Ordinance amendment No. 1711, there being ample copies available to the public. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

Motion by Gianoulis, seconded by Moses, to recommend City Council approve draft Ordinance amendment No. 1711, a Zoning Ordinance Amendment, as presented. All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

3. Discussion on Design Guidelines

Introduction: Boucher stated it has long been a priority for the Community Development Department to update the City's Design Standards Guidelines reflecting the changes that have taken place in the community since the guidelines were established in 2003. There are significant upcoming opportunities including Central Avenue reconfiguration, 40th Avenue NE reconstruction, and implementation of City-wide policies, plans, and ordinances updates such as Complete Streets, Safe Streets for All, tree preservation and replanting standards that should be incorporated into the guidelines.

Boucher noted currently, the design guidelines are broken down into three separate districts:

1. The Central Business District, extending from 37th to 42nd Avenues.
2. 40th Avenue Design District, extending from 40th Avenue from University to Central.

3. Highway District, extending along Central Avenue from 42nd Avenue north to the City boundary.

Boucher explained the Design Guidelines go into more detail about the three districts, but there has been discussion about whether those descriptions are accurate or if there should be edits to incorporate the development and trends that have occurred over the last 20 years. One item to consider is the establishment of a University Avenue District as this is a portion of the City that has a unique combination of commercial and housing uses along with a frontage road that could be better served by having design guidelines tailored to the needs of those properties.

Boucher mentioned other items that should be included in any discussion about updates to the Design Guidelines:

- Building Placement
- Primary Facades and Roof Treatments
- Building Height, Width and Façade Articulation
- Transparency: Window and Door Openings
- Window and Door Design
- Entries
- Rear Facades and Entries
- Building Materials
- Rooftop Equipment
- Building Colors and Architectural Detailing
- Site Design Guidelines including parking, screening, lighting, landscaping, and site improvements
- Signage
- Pedestrian and Bicycle Access

Forney asked the commissioners for their feedback to identify which businesses off of University Avenue should be used in order to create the guidelines for the district. He mentioned that University Avenue would go through a similar process as Central Avenue and mentioned it would be a good time to create the guidelines before the process begins.

Questions/Comments from Members:

Kaiser mentioned one of the challenges with University Avenue is that there is such much that could be redesigned and there are not many properties that showcase what that could be.

Moses asked if the guidelines would include how the roadways are being done too. Boucher replied that the guidelines would be more towards the buildings and the site development. He mentioned that anything that he would like to include in any design guidelines updates are references to complete streets since it has an impact on how the roadways are configured. The complete street guidelines also address trails, sidewalks, bike lanes, and pedestrian access.

Moses asked what the design guidelines were for University Avenue currently. Boucher replied that

there are no current design guidelines for University Avenue and they would be subject to whatever the regular zoning code requirements are. There are several separate zoning districts in the area. Staff are considering adding a University Avenue District.

Sahnaw agreed that University Avenue should be a separate district in the design guidelines since it is a unique district. He agreed with Kaiser that he does not have a parcel in mind on which to base the guidelines. He added that Complete Streets and other resources could be helpful documents when creating the design guidelines.

Boucher asked if there were any characteristics that could be noted from University Avenue. Kaiser mentioned he likes that there are areas that have nature and a number of trees. He added that he would like to see standards for that district to call out preservation for what nature remains. He added that there are multi-family parcels which is a great example of "missing middle housing". He encouraged to use of nature for redevelopment and for screening instead of sound barriers. He added a unique characteristic of University Avenue is the rail infrastructure and how it is of historic importance to the history of Minneapolis. He suggested signage in order to signify that.

Gianoulis explained he liked the idea and added that during the planning of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, someone had the idea of using shipping containers as a building structure. He agreed that there should be something to signify the industrial roots in the City. He mentioned it would be welcomed to have a cohesive area since University Avenue currently feels like a hodgepodge. He wondered how people could feel welcomed into Columbia Heights after coming off of 694. He stated his support for making University Avenue its own district. He noted that University Avenue has the fastest speed limit in the City.

Moses mentioned Central Avenue flows well and by having University Avenue as its own district it could flow well too. He added he is in support of having it be its own district.

Kaiser explained that University Avenue goes through many districts and mentioned that there could be subtle traffic calming measures that could be implemented since the roadway is not just for vehicles, it is also for pedestrians and bikes. He wondered if there could be an opportunity for additional signage to direct people who are going through the corridor to other destinations within the City.

Boucher summarized that the commissioners are pointing out characteristics of University Avenue such as the frontage road, acknowledging that it is the street where people travel the fastest, the need for multi-mobile consideration for different land uses, focusing on the railyard and the history in the City, signage, and a public art component.

Forney asked if there were any architectural styles that would help mix in the University Avenue corridor. Sahnaw replied that it is more volume-related than what kind of roof lines there are. The thing that is missing from the middle missing housing type is that it can serve many purposes such as a higher density use of housing that is needed, and it can serve as a buffer between a transit-oriented highway and the neighborhoods. He stated he could see the corridor being a transition area. He suggested scaling some setbacks so there are not six-story buildings right on the edge.

Kaiser mentioned that the ongoing apartment building north on University Avenue is an example of what the Planning Commission would not want to do. Even though it has a lot of missing middle housing, it looks like it was plopping in with little thought.

Moses explained that it would be helpful to have LED environmental Fridley considerations along the corridor and have it as a standard.

Boucher noted that there are soil volume requirements now for tree planting. If there are trees that are planted, staff want to ensure that the trees will be able to thrive and produce mature canopies. He added that if the Planning Commission would like more tree plantings, then soil volume should be prioritized instead of just focusing on stand-alone tree plantings.

Forney mentioned some of the setbacks have some green space between the building and the frontage road and could be a consideration.

Kaiser asked the commissioners if they could think of a frontage road that had some positive design qualities. Sahnaw replied that the frontage road is where pedestrian facilities are because they should be separated from the street. Therefore, the frontage road becomes a buffer and transition space. He added that the frontage road is a part of the neighborhood and should be treated as such.

Kaiser mentioned he could see a rapid transit down University Avenue. Any sort of design guidelines might want to take into account the BRT style bus stops or traditional suburban bus stops. Boucher noted that a new BRT route would come in 2028.

Boucher mentioned that at some point the City adopted the tone of beige for building colors. There is a desire for more vibrancy. He asked the commissioners if districts should follow a specific standard esthetic or loosen the standards and give businesses more flexibility. Sahnaw replied he did not know if a defining palette for a district helps create cohesiveness of a district and that it is more about the quality of the building.

Moses asked if there were currently regulations on the colors of buildings. Boucher replied that there used to be but the City got rid of it when there was more of a focus on local art.

Sahnaw recommended striking all references to EFS which is an outdoor insulation and banning it from being in the City. He added that there is talk at the International Building Code level to ban it. He explained that it is horrible for the environment.

Gianoulis stated he is in favor of fewer design restrictions and more creativity for businesses.

Moses asked if there was any code for buildings that had shiny bright colors and shone into neighbors' buildings. Boucher replied that the business would still be subject to performance standards and referenced the sections on glare. Moses explained that if there are standards in place for those kinds of considerations, then it would be fine to have more flexibility for businesses

to design.

Forney noted that it was good feedback and staff would put together some language for the University Avenue design guidelines and continue the workshop during the next meeting.

Kaiser mentioned that Country Road 96 in Shoreview could be a helpful road to look at since it is similar to University Avenue.

OTHER BUSINESS

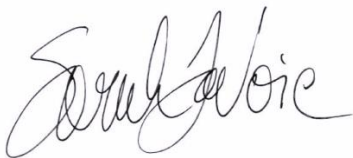
ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Moses, seconded by Kaiser, to adjourn the meeting at 6:59 pm.

Councilmember Buesgens stated that the BRT is not planned.

All ayes. MOTION PASSED.

Respectfully submitted,



Sarah LaVoie, Administrative Assistant