City of Duluth Planning Commission Meeting Minutes

Thursday, August 13th, 2026 @ 5:00 p.m.
Duluth City Hall Council Chambers

Call to Order

Vice President Dave Sarvela called to order the meeting of the city of Duluth Planning Commission at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, August 13th, 2026, in the Duluth city hall council chambers.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chris Adatte, Nik Bayuk, Dave Sarvela, Kate Van Daele, and Andrew Weisz
Members Absent: Josh Axelson, Kate Ferguson, Brian Hammond, and Andrea Wedul
Staff Present: Amanda Mangan, Nick Bax, Jenn Moses, Chris Lee [CL], Jason Mozol [JM], Christian Huelsman [CH], Ariana Dahlen, and Sam Smith

Approval of Planning Commission Minutes

Planning Commission Meeting Minutes from July 14th, 2026
MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Van Daele approved

VOTE: (5-0)

Public Comment on Items Not on Agenda

No comments.

Consent Agenda

PLSUB-2607-0007 Minor Subdivision at 575 W Wabasha St by Robert and Roberta Sawyer [CL]
PLSUP-2607-0008 Special Use Permit for a Coffee Shop Drive-Through at 1 Calvary Rd by Blue Sky Coffee [JM]
PLVAC-2511-0011 Vacation of Streets, Avenues, Alleys, and Piers near 40th Ave W & Oneota St by Hanft Fride PA [CH]
MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Van Daele approved the consent agenda.

VOTE: (5-0)

Public Hearings

PLPR-2607-0002 MU-C Planning Review for a Bank at 4088 Haines Rd by HTG Architects [CL]

Staff: Jason Mozol presented the project, which proposes a one-story, 5,050-square-foot bank with a four-lane attached drive-through and associated parking. The site is currently vacant and primarily consists of trees. The dwelling that previously fronted Haines Road was relocated outside city limits, and the structure at 4088 Haines Road will be removed prior to redevelopment.
The applicant submitted a landscaping plan and tree replacement plan. The proposal includes a dense vegetative buffer between the drive-through and the adjacent residential property. The applicant proposes removing approximately 420 inches of trees and replacing them with 84.5

inches of new trees. The City Forester will need to confirm that the proposed replacement rate is acceptable. Because the site was previously developed with single-family homes, extensive disturbance to existing natural resources is not anticipated.
The landscaping plan meets or exceeds applicable requirements for parking lot tree canopy coverage, internal parking lot islands, and street frontage landscaping. The tree replacement plan also meets replacement requirements and includes fencing to protect neighboring trees. Staff also reviewed screening, sustainability, building, and exterior lighting standards. Staff recommends approval of the project subject to the conditions outlined in the staff report.
Applicant: Patt McCann and Josh Longo, representatives of the project team, offered to answer questions about the project.
Commissioners: Van Daele asked why the site was selected.
Applicant: The applicants explained that the site has been on their radar for some time, and they already have several partnerships in the area. They noted that the site presented some challenges related to utilities and watershed requirements, but they were able to work through those issues with staff. The applicants emphasized the importance of maintaining as much screening as possible.
Public: No speakers.
MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Adatte approved

VOTE: (5-0)

PLCPA-2607-0001 Comprehensive Plan Amendment to Future Land Use for the Lester Park Golf Course Land Use Study Area [JM]

Staff: Jenn Moses stated that in October 2025, City Council passed resolution 25-0845R, requesting a land use study for the former Lester Park Golf Course property. This resolution guided the Land Use Study to incorporate robust public engagement and consider the potential of the Lester Park Golf Course site for both future housing and economic development purposes and parkland or permanent protection. The purpose of the study was to assess existing conditions and develop land use scenarios that balance natural areas, dedicated recreational space, and potential development.
Mike Thompson, Principal Urban Planner with Bolton & Menk, presented an overview of the Lester Park Golf Course Land Use Study. He noted that the former golf course is a historically significant, publicly owned property with a long history of recreation and community use. Established in the 1930s and expanded in the 1990s, the course remained a public recreational asset until its closure in the early 2020s.
The Land Use Study, which began in January, is intended to establish a future land use vision that balances natural resource preservation, outdoor recreation, and development that supports a complete neighborhood. The study is organized into three phases: existing conditions, land use scenarios, and a recommended future vision. Technical analysis was combined with extensive community feedback throughout the process. The existing conditions analysis found that although the site is heavily vegetated, it has been significantly altered by its history as a golf course and is not considered to be in a natural state. Potential contamination from past golf course operations may require remediation. The site also provides scenic views of Lake Superior and opportunities to connect with nearby public assets, including Lester Park,

Amity Park, and Brighton Beach. Infrastructure capacity, including water and sanitary sewer, will be an important consideration for any future development.

Thompson presented three potential land use scenarios developed around guiding principles of natural resource preservation, recreation, and thoughtful development. The emerging preferred vision would preserve approximately three-quarters of the site for natural areas and recreation, while concentrating development in the southern portion. The developed area could support a walkable, mixed-use neighborhood centered around a main street, with a mix of housing types and approximately 700 to 900 potential housing units. Limited commercial development could be introduced initially and expand over time based on market demand.

The vision emphasizes restoring natural landscapes, integrating recreation throughout the site, preserving important views, and creating connections to surrounding parks and neighborhoods. Significant infrastructure improvements would be needed for development in the central and northern portions of the property. The study is intended to establish guardrails for future development rather than committing the city to a specific project, while allowing flexibility for future parks planning and continued public input.

Thompson reiterated that the proposed vision seeks to balance the site's natural and recreational value with opportunities for housing and economic development, while maintaining Duluth's identity as a nature and recreation-oriented community. He then reviewed the anticipated next steps following the Planning Commission's action.

Staff: Moses reminded the Planning Commission that it was being asked to either recommend approval of the Land Use Study to City Council or recommend amendments for Council to consider. If approved, the study would become an amendment to the Comprehensive Plan and would update the Future Land Use Map.

Commissioners: Sarvela asked what changing the Future Land Use Map would and would not accomplish.

Staff: Moses explained that, like other long-range planning documents, the study would become part of the city's adopted vision for the future of the area. It provides an analysis of what the city and community envision for the site and identifies a range of potential future land uses. However, it does not guarantee that any particular use or development will occur. The actual outcome will depend on future development proposals and other processes.

Commissioners: Sarvela clarified that the study is not a rezoning proposal and that any future rezoning would be a separate process that would need to consider the recommendations of the Land Use Study.

Van Daele commented on the extensive public engagement throughout the process and asked how much community input was received. She also asked how this study's level of participation compares with similar city planning efforts.

Staff: Thompson answered that there were at least 2,000 community "touch points" through surveys, open houses, and other engagement opportunities.

Moses added that participation varies depending on the type and size of the project. For comparison, the Imagine Duluth 2035 Comprehensive Plan survey received more than 4,000 responses over several months. While the Lester Park study was smaller in scope, it received more engagement than is typical for a planning effort of this size.

Commissioners: Sarvela asked what level of environmental remediation might be required in areas proposed for development and asked whether environmental remediation would also be considered within the areas proposed to remain open space.
Staff: Thompson stated that remediation is likely necessary, but additional analysis is needed to determine the extent.
Moses added that it was unclear whether DEDA had completed any environmental sampling on the portion of the property it owns, but future sampling will likely be necessary.
Commissioners: Weisz asked whether the Parks and Recreation Department has the capacity to maintain and provide a high quality experience for the additional open space, particularly given the city's current budget constraints.
Staff: Moses explained that staff from multiple city departments participated in the study and discussed the issue extensively. Although she is not Parks staff, conversations with the Parks Department indicated that the property was not originally intended to remain a park, and the city has not been spending General Fund dollars to maintain it as a park. However, public engagement showed strong support for preserving open space and concerns about fragmented natural areas resulting from future development. Staff recommended that the areas remaining as open space be addressed through a future parks plan. Moses acknowledged that funding and timing for such a plan are uncertain but said staff would like to begin the process as soon as possible. She noted that the recommendation to preserve open space is consistent with the public input and data collected during the study.
Moses confirmed that remediation would be needed for the open space areas, although the scope and timing would depend on available funding and potential partnerships. Additional studies and analysis will be needed.
Commissioners: Bayuk noted the significant cost of infrastructure and asked whether the scenarios assumed the city would be responsible for funding future infrastructure improvements. He also asked whether there could be a scenario in which developers fund the necessary infrastructure.
Staff: Moses stated that the study does not assume the city would bear all infrastructure costs, particularly because the city cannot afford to fund all of the improvements. Each scenario has different infrastructure requirements. For example, one scenario would require a new reservoir and pumping stations, in addition to roads, streets, and utility extensions. DEDA would need to pursue funding opportunities and work with future developers to determine what portion of infrastructure costs could be supported by development. Moses said the goal is to minimize financial risk while maximizing the potential for appropriate development. Based on the analysis, staff did not recommend a scenario that would require significant infrastructure extensions up the hill. She emphasized that public input and focus group feedback were incorporated into the final recommendations.
She noted that the Land Use Study cannot make a determine the projected costs at this stage because there is not yet a specific development proposal. The city does not know the exact location, type, or scale of future buildings, streets, utilities, or other infrastructure that would be required.
Thompson added that infrastructure costs would ultimately be reflected in the cost of development and could be passed on to homeowners or renters. He noted that development is already challenging in Minnesota and that adding additional financial barriers could make

development more difficult. The current study did not go into the level of detailed financial analysis necessary to determine specific infrastructure costs.
Commissioners: Bayuk asked how a more detailed analysis would be conducted.
Staff: Moses explained that staff would need a specific development proposal identifying the location and type of housing, number of units, street layout, and infrastructure needs. A detailed analysis cannot be completed until a development proposal is submitted, which is still several steps away.
Commissioners: Weisz asked whether the Planning Commission's role that evening was essentially to accept the preferred scenario.
Staff: Moses reiterated that the study represents a long-range vision that could take decades to fully implement. The recommendation considers what is realistic, what the city has the capacity to support, and what was heard through public engagement. Staff recommends preserving the upper three-quarters of the site for open space and recreation while guiding the lower portion toward a mixed-use neighborhood. Moses noted that previous city infrastructure analyses have consistently shown that higher-density development with a limited street network is more financially sustainable because the resulting tax base needs to support long-term infrastructure maintenance. She emphasized that the site could help address a portion of the city's housing needs but cannot solve the city's housing challenges on its own. Careful consideration should be given to extending infrastructure, while public engagement remains important because the community places significant value on the site and its viewsheds.
Commissioners: Adatte acknowledged that he and many others value the site's open space but noted that the Parks and Recreation Department is already underfunded, understaffed, and stretched thin. He emphasized the need for the city to balance preservation of open space with the need to address housing and property tax concerns.
Public: Michael Bernstein, 1114 Chester Park Dr – Bernstein compared the Lester Park site to a recently developed golf course property in St. Paul. He noted that the 120-acre St. Paul site was relatively easy to develop because it had nearby utilities, flat terrain, and no bedrock, yet the project still cost approximately $450 million and resulted in about 1,000 mixed-affordability housing units. In contrast, Bernstein noted that the Lester Park site is significantly more challenging due to its steep slopes, bedrock, and infrastructure requirements, including potential pumping stations and reservoirs that would cost millions of dollars to construct and maintain. Bernstein said he sensed some skepticism from commissioners regarding the Land Use Study's recommendations and the conclusion that development opportunities on the site are limited by these challenges. He also noted that, despite the golf course closing years ago, the property continues to be used by the public for walking, recreation, and enjoying views of Lake Superior. Bernstein encouraged the Planning Commission to respect the study's recommendations and recommend that City Council do the same, including regarding the parcels owned by DEDA.
Denise LaVoie, 55805 – LaVoy clarified that she is opposed to the recommendations of the Land Use Study, rather than the study itself. She specifically objected to the recommendation to allocate an additional 22 acres to DEDA, stating that she would prefer the city transfer the property to an organization whose primary mission is not economic development. She suggested entities such as St. Louis County, the Duluth HRA, One Roof, or other nonprofits focused on affordable housing. She emphasized the need for development that supports and

nurtures the people who will live there, noting Duluth's high poverty rate and significant need for additional affordable housing.

James Hanson, 1320 N Arlington Ave – Hanson stated that he is in favor of the proposed recommendations.

Commissioners: Commissioners discussed the three scenarios developed through the Land Use Study and how each could influence the future of the Lester Park site.

Bayuk described the property as a significant and uncommon opportunity for the city. He emphasized the need for additional housing and the importance of creating an opportunity for future development. He noted that the Planning Commission was not committing the city to a specific development but rather making a recommendation to City Council. Bayuk supported forwarding the Land Use Study to Council but proposed an amendment directing the city to evaluate a development model in which developers would be responsible for future infrastructure costs. Bayuk asked whether adding the amendment would prevent the Land Use Study from moving forward to City Council.

Weisz said the amendment could encourage further discussions with potential developers about how infrastructure costs could be addressed.

Staff: Moses clarified that an amendment encouraging the city to explore a development model in which developers pay for utilities and infrastructure would not prevent the study from being forwarded to Council.

Commissioners: Van Daele expressed concern about the challenges of development in Duluth, including bedrock, the site's topography, and the city's limited Parks and Recreation budget. She supported moving forward with the recommendations as presented and questioned whether Bayuk's amendment was realistic.

Bayuk said he was uncomfortable leaving such a large portion of the site undeveloped given the city's housing needs. He believed the Planning Commission and city should remain open to considering additional development scenarios.

Commissioners continued discussing the balance between having developers pay for infrastructure and preserving a large portion of the site as open space. Some commissioners expressed concern that preserving too much land could limit housing opportunities during a housing shortage, while others noted that extending infrastructure would create additional long-term maintenance costs for the city. Commissioners also discussed whether Scenarios B and C could remain viable options if the recommended Scenario A did not ultimately work.

Staff: Moses explained that the Land Use Study takes a long-range approach and does not establish specific future phases of development. Any future changes to the adopted land use vision would need to go through the appropriate process for amending the Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use Map.

Commissioners: Van Daele noted that significant work and public engagement had gone into developing the recommendations and questioned why the commission would not simply support the recommendations as presented so the process could move forward.

Bayuk responded that the Planning Commission had an opportunity to add amendments at this stage and believed it was appropriate to do so.

Weisz asked whether the city could shift from Scenario A to Scenarios B or C if Scenario A proved unworkable, and whether another Land Use Study would be required to make such a change. He also asked whether the Future Land Use Map could be amended in the future

without conducting another full land use study if the site remained undeveloped for an extended period.
Staff: Moses explained that, under state law, zoning decisions must be consistent with the Future Land Use Map and Comprehensive Plan. The findings and recommendations presented to the commission were developed primarily around Scenario A. After the Planning Commission acts, the matter will go to City Council, which will make the final decision and may accept, reject, or modify the recommendations and any amendments proposed by the Planning Commission.
Commissioners: Van Daele reiterated that she did not support Bayuk's amendment because of the extensive work that had gone into the study. She said she trusted the guidance of city staff and the consultant and believed the final recommendations appropriately reflected the community input received throughout the process.
Weisz asked how the three scenarios were developed and evaluated.
Staff: Thompson explained that the first phase involved technical analysis of existing conditions and extensive public feedback. That information was used to develop three potential future land use scenarios. The scenarios were then evaluated further, ultimately leading to the recommended vision and associated policy recommendations. Thompson said the final recommended vision most closely aligns with Scenario A.
Commissioners: Van Daele asked how often developers are willing to pay for infrastructure costs without Tax Increment Financing (TIF).
Staff: Moses said she is not an economic development staff member but noted that TIF was also on the evening's agenda and is commonly used to provide financial assistance for development projects with high construction costs.
MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Bayuk motion to recommend the proposed future land use map amendments and adoption of the Lester Park Golf Course Land Use Study and Vision Plan

Amendment: Bayuk/Adatte motion to add the additional amendment that the land use study recommend that the city evaluate a development model where the infrastructure and utility improvements necessary to support the future developments are funded by the developer or the development benefitting from those improvements to the greatest extent possible.

VOTE: (3-2)
Van Daele and Sarvela opposed

MAIN motion approved with one amendment

VOTE: (5-0)

PLCPA-2607-0002 Comprehensive Plan Amendment to Future Land Use for the Becks Road Land Use Study [KD]

Staff: Kyle Deming presented a memo regarding the Becks Road Land Use Study. The City of Duluth, in partnership with MSA Professional Services, has been studying approximately 1,000 acres along the Becks Road corridor, which connects I-35 at Midway Road to Highway 23 (Commonwealth Avenue) in Gary-New Duluth.
Claire Stickler with MSA Professional Services provided an overview of the study. She explained that the area has received limited comprehensive planning in the past, despite growing interest in potential development. The corridor presents several challenges, including steep and varied

topography, unique natural features, existing industrial uses, major recreational areas, and limited utility infrastructure. The area also contains significant open space, wooded areas, trails, creeks, and a mix of public and privately owned properties.

The purpose of the study was to take a proactive approach to future growth rather than address development on a parcel-by-parcel basis. The study identifies where development is realistically feasible, establishes potential future growth patterns, and seeks to preserve the corridor's scenic, wooded, and recreation-oriented character. Staff developed concept maps to help visualize potential growth areas and conducted technical analysis of infrastructure, transportation, environmental conditions, topography, watersheds, parks, and other community amenities. Staff also interviewed major landowners and worked with a technical committee to develop draft policies and concept-level maps. Two public meetings were held as part of the community engagement process.

The study establishes a vision for Becks Road as an important gateway to Duluth's far western neighborhoods and a connection to regional recreational trail opportunities. Future investment should respect the area's scenic beauty and open space resources while allowing for context-sensitive and sustainable development that maintains the function of Becks Road as an arterial corridor.

Much of the study area is expected to remain open space. The southeast portion of the corridor was identified as having greater potential for residential development, while the northern areas present greater challenges due to infrastructure and other site constraints. Overall, the recommendations seek to preserve open space while allowing limited, appropriately located development. The plan also emphasizes preserving and enhancing natural features such as creeks and wooded areas and encouraging sustainable development practices.

Staff recommended that the Planning Commission recommend approval of the study to City Council, with the changes outlined in the staff memo and the presentation maps.

Commissioners: Bayuk asked about the amount of open space shown in the study and how topography influenced the recommendations.

Staff: Deming explained that much of the study area consists of steep, rocky terrain, which limits its development potential. The flatter areas along Becks Road provide the greatest opportunities for development. He noted that topography was a major factor in determining the recommended future land uses.

Commissioners: Adatte asked whether future development would affect the existing gravel pit.

Staff: Deming clarified that the study does not recommend eliminating or restricting the quarry's existing operations.

Commissioners: Sarvela asked why the northern industrial area was shown as shorter and wider than in previous maps and whether the change was intended to better reflect existing uses.

Staff: Deming confirmed that the change was based on a closer review of individual parcels and site topography. The study does not propose increasing the overall amount of industrial land, but rather locating industrial uses in areas with the physical characteristics needed to support them.

Public: Grant Forsyth – Forsyth is the zoning administrator for the Town of Midway and chair of its Planning Commission. He said residents are concerned about industrial uses being located too close to residential properties. He asked that the area retain its rural character and that adequate buffers be provided between industrial and residential uses. Forsyth noted that the

area contains numerous ski and hiking trails and parkland, which have contributed to its limited development. He clarified that he was not necessarily opposed to or in favor of the study, but wanted residential areas protected from potential industrial impacts.
Jeff Carlson, 1634 Highway 210 – Carlson is president of Ulland Brothers Company. He provided additional clarification regarding comments he had previously submitted. He emphasized the importance of incorporating recreational and industrial uses into the study and raised the possibility of a future land exchange. Carlson noted that approximately 80 acres outside the quarry are licensed to the city and currently receive significant recreational use. He also stressed that any future development should not interfere with ongoing quarry operations.
MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Adatte approved as per staff recommendations.

VOTE: (5-0)

Other Business

PLOR-2608-0007 Housing TIF District Conformance to Comprehensive Plan for Legacy Flats

Staff: Moses presented a memo regarding the proposed development. She explained that when a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district is proposed, the city is required to certify that the development is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. The memo outlines how the proposed housing development aligns with the Comprehensive Plan and is supported by the existing zoning and land use designations.
Applicant: Daniel Fanning, Vice President of Titanium Partners, addressed the commissioners and explained that the project has been in development for several years. The proposal would provide 148 housing units, including 30 units affordable for households at 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI). Fanning noted that the project is primarily geared toward college students and would help address the need for additional housing near Lake Superior College.
Commissioners: Van Daele asked about the anticipated timeline for construction and completion.
Applicant: Fanning said construction could begin as early as this fall, with an anticipated construction period of approximately 18 months.
MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Bayuk approved

VOTE: (5-0)

PL 26-0804 Magney-Snively Natural Area - Updated Management Plan

Staff: Parks staff member Kate Kubiak presented an update to the Magney-Snively Designated Natural Area Plan (DNAP). She explained that Magney-Snively is the oldest of Duluth's four DNAPs, and the existing plan is more than 20 years old. The area is considered one of the highest-quality natural areas in the city, and the updated plan is intended to bring it in line with the city's other natural area plans.
Kubiak reviewed the five criteria required for designation as a DNAP and discussed the area's native plant and wildlife species, creeks, and other significant natural features. She also reviewed potential threats to the area, noting that many of these concerns are citywide and not unique to Magney-Snively.

The updated plan includes more specific action items than the original 2003 plan and is intended to provide clearer guidance for future management of the natural area. The Planning Commission may recommend approval as presented or recommend approval with amendments before forwarding the plan to City Council.
Commissioners: Van Daele asked about the purpose of the DNAP.
Staff: Kubiak explained that the plan provides direction to city staff for managing the natural area, establishes a foundation for applying for grants, and demonstrates that the area has been evaluated and has an established plan to guide future funding and management efforts.
MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Adatte approved

VOTE: (5-0)

Communications

Land Use Supervisor (LUS) Report

Moses stated that staff member Sam Smith will be leaving the city at the end of August, so commissioners should expect to see other staff rotating tasks until a new person is hired.

Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) Report

No report.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:20 p.m.