

City of Duluth Planning Commission Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, May 12th, 2026 @ 5:00 p.m.

Duluth City Hall Council Chambers

Call to Order

President Andrea Wedul called to order the meeting of the city of Duluth Planning Commission at 5:01 p.m. on Tuesday, May 12th, 2026, in the Duluth city hall council chambers.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chris Adatte, Josh Axelson, Nik Bayuk, Kate Ferguson, Brian Hammond, Dave Sarvela, Kate Van Daele, Andrea Wedul, Andrew Weisz

Members Absent: none

Staff Present: Amanda Mangan, Nick Bax, Jenn Moses, Chris Lee [CL], Jason Mozol [JM], Reina Owecke [RO], Christian Huelsman [CH], Ariana Dahlen, and Sam Smith

Approval of Planning Commission Minutes

Planning Commission Meeting Minutes from April 14th, 2026

MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Wedul approved

VOTE: (8-0)

Public Comment on Items Not on Agenda

No comments.

Consent Agenda

PLCUP-2603-0007 Concurrent Use Permit for Deck and Stair Access at 1712 W 3rd St by Tall House LLC [CH]

PLCUP-2604-0009 Concurrent Use Permit for a Transformer, Transition Cabinet, and Landscape Island near 602 W Michigan St by Windsor Engineers [RO]

PLSUB-2603-0002 Final Subdivision Plat at 2029 Trinity Rd by Titanium Partners [RO]

PLSUB-2603-0004 Minor Subdivision at 902 N Arlington Ave by Karl Tarnowski [JM]

PLSUP-2603-0006 Special Use Permit for Office Use at 1202 101st Ave W by Fryberger Law Firm [CL]

PLVAR-2601-0001 Variance from Shoreland Setbacks at 1226 E 2nd St by RW Fern Associates [RO]

PLVAR-2603-0006 Variance from Shoreland Setbacks at 2929 Minnesota Ave by Arrowhead Design and Drafting [RO]

PLVAR-2604-0010 Variance from Side Yard Setbacks at 838 S Lake Ave by Jason Sarver [CH]

Public: No speakers.

MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Sarvela approved the consent agenda.

VOTE: (8-0)

Public Hearings

PLIUP-2604-0002 Interim Use Permit for Expanded Parking at 1909 London Rd by Venture Pass Partners LLC [CL]

Staff: Chris Lee gave a presentation on a request from Venture Pass Partners LLC for a two-year Interim Use Permit to allow expanded parking at 1909 London Road for a proposed restaurant. The site is proposed to contain 35 total parking stalls which is over the maximum of 24. The applicant has indicated that the proposed restaurant at this location will generate a level of traffic that requires on average 13 employees to have parking as well as the customers. The applicant has indicated that this will be paved parking that is landscaped to meet the zoning code standards. Staff recommended approval with conditions and explained that the temporary permit would allow the city to reevaluate parking needs, landscaping, and stormwater requirements in the future.

Commissioners: Commissioners discussed the long-term need for the parking lot, screening requirements for nearby neighbors, stormwater management, and landscaping compliance. Staff noted that while paving and curbing are not required, the applicant plans to include those improvements voluntarily. Screening requirements and stormwater runoff details would be reviewed later during the building permit process.

Applicant: Dave Carland with Venture Pass Partners addressed the commissioners. He was joined by several colleagues who are also involved in the project. He stated that Chipotle is the proposed restaurant, and Chipotle locations typically require significant parking due to high customer traffic and the lack of a drive-thru. Carland emphasized that adequate on-site parking is important for both customers and employee safety. He also said that retaining walls, trees, shrubs, and fencing would help reduce impacts on neighboring properties. The site was chosen due to analytics that include proximity to the college and downtown.

Public: John Judd, 1924 Jefferson St – Judd is opposed to the project. He feels that the applicant had not demonstrated a need for the additional parking and expressing concerns about neighborhood impacts and possible inaccuracies in the application materials.

Karen Olesen, 1924 Jefferson St – Olson is opposed to the project and reiterated the previous speaker's comments. She expressed concerns regarding how will impacts to the neighboring residential properties will be mitigated.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked the applicant to discuss proposed mitigation measures and their willingness to maintain communication with neighboring residents if the project is approved.

Applicant: Carland stated that the retaining wall will be on the back of the site to serve as a buffer for the residential properties. They are willing to keep up with inquiries that come in from the community.

MOTION/Second: Van Daele/Bayuk approved with the added condition that the applicant will keep in communication with the most abutting neighbors in efforts to keep the neighbors up to date as the project moves forward.

VOTE: (9-0)

Adatte arrived at 5:07 p.m.

PLPR-2602-0001 Planning Review for a Multifamily Residential Building at 2029 Trinity Rd by Titanium Partners [RO]

Staff: Reina Owecke addressed the commissioners and gave a presentation on PLPR-2602-0001 and PLVAR-2602-0002 simultaneously. The applicant is proposing a 5-story multi-family residential building in the MU-I district which will provide housing for Duluth residents and students at Lake Superior College. The ground level will be a concrete base and hold a parking garage, where the upper 4-stories will be wood framed. The building will have 148 units, with three of those being accessible units. Owecke listed the staff findings found in each of the staff reports. One city staff comment was received regarding the plan review application, and no comments were received for the variance application. Staff recommends approval with conditions for both items.

Commissioners: Commissioner Van Daele referenced comments from Steven Robertson recommending a surface-level energy efficiency audit for recent large projects and asked whether staff had considered making it a condition of approval.

Staff: Moses stated that ASHRAE 189.1 are a set of building code standards that promote energy efficiency. She explained that planning staff are not experts in building energy systems and are not equipped to review those plans. After much analysis and many discussions among staff, it was decided that staff should keep the proposed sustainability standards listed in the agenda. Moses does not believe that it would be appropriate to incorporate Robertson's recommendations into a condition of approval.

Commissioners: Wedul asked staff if a variance to shoreland setbacks is needed for this project.

Staff: Owecke explained that Miller Creek is classified as a cold water stream, which requires a 150-foot setback for development unless a variance is approved. While the proposed building will not be within the 150-foot setback, it will fall within the creek's 300-foot buffer area. Because of this, a shoreland permit and erosion permit will be required due to minor ground disturbance. She added that engineering staff have already reviewed and approved the stormwater plan, and the project's engineering consultant was present to answer questions.

Applicant: Tom Pope with TJPA addressed the commissioners on behalf of the project's design architect and gave a PowerPoint presentation on the proposed development. He discussed the project's placemaking goals, including site design, grading, landscaping, and the population the development is intended to serve. He explained that the site drops approximately 30 to 40 feet beyond the parking lot, creating design challenges. Pope stated that the project includes a dense and efficient floor plan and emphasized the importance of sustainability, even though additional sustainability measures are not required. He also discussed the building placement, architectural design, amenities, and the project's role in helping meet housing needs near Lake Superior College.

Commissioners: Hammond asked the applicant what impacts the project would face if the variance request were denied. Wedul asked if the stormwater pond location could be moved out of the shoreland buffer.

Applicant: Pope answered that if the variance were denied, the project would not be feasible given the construction type and costs. The proposed height and density are ideal, and if those factors change, the rent rates for the units would need to be raised.

Trygve Lodin, the civil engineer for the project, explained that the size and location of the stormwater pond were determined by the city's stormwater requirements. He stated that the pond could not be moved farther east because the city requires access to maintain an existing pipe in that area. Moving the pond farther south would require removing additional trees and disturbing more land, while shifting it west was not possible because the property is owned by the City.

Public: Jam Helewski, 2121 Trinity Rd – Helewski expressed concerns regarding potential increases in noise and traffic. He suggested that the tenant parking be moved underground to lower the height of the building and remove the need for the height variance.

MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Adatte approved

VOTE: (9-0)

PLVAR-2602-0002 Variance from Height Limitations in the MU-I Zone District at 2029 Trinity Rd by Titanium Partners [RO]

MOTION/Second: Axelson/Adatte approved

VOTE: (9-0)

PLUTA-2510-0003* Comprehensive Amendments to Chapter 50 (Unified Development Chapter) of the Duluth Legislative Code by City of Duluth

Staff: Moses presented two memos and provided background on the proposed zoning code amendments. She explained that the Duluth City Council passed a resolution in September 2025 directing staff to review and improve portions of the zoning code. Staff evaluated the code, reviewed the council's recommendations, and previously presented draft changes to the Planning Commission in September.

The proposed amendments being considered include changes intended to support housing and development throughout the city. Proposed updates include eliminating residential-planned zone districts, allowing more by-right development, simplifying design standards, increasing height limits, reducing lot width and setback requirements, permitting additional housing types, and updating sustainability standards.

Moses stated that not all requested changes are included due to staff capacity, but the proposed amendments still align with City Council goals. The May 2026 memo includes detailed references showing where changes are proposed throughout the Unified Development Chapter (UDC), as well as findings connecting the amendments to community needs, the comprehensive plan, and other city goals. Staff recommended that the Planning Commission recommend approval of the amendments to the City Council.

Commissioners: Commissioner Hammond stated that he would like to preserve height flexibility in form districts, noting that the City Council's goal was to support housing affordability and that all housing types help meet the city's housing goals.

Commissioner Bayuk agreed with Hammond and expressed appreciation for the time and effort staff put into the proposed amendments.

Hammond also asked about a change in the permitted uses in the R-2 zone district.

Staff: Moses responded that several recommendations, including the R-2 change, were not included due to staff capacity limitations and the amount of time required to complete the work. She explained that staff plan to continue researching neighborhood-scale commercial

uses in residential zones and anticipate bringing forward additional zoning amendments later in the year, including updates related to shoreland regulations and short-term rentals. Staff will then continue reviewing the code to identify additional needed changes. She asked if commissioners proposed to make any changes to the language in front of them, that they please be clear in their amendments.

Commissioners: Commissioner Sarvela asked questions about cottage homes and townhouse regulations, including whether there is a maximum number of cottage homes allowed per lot and whether ownership requirements were changing.

Commissioner Adatte asked why minimum lot size requirements are necessary in residential districts.

Staff: Moses answered that there is currently no maximum number of cottage homes permitted per lot and that no changes were being proposed to townhouse unit limits or ownership standards. She added that cottage homes are allowed on a single lot depending on lot size and referenced the Fairmont Cottages project as an example, where the Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) of Duluth owns and rents the units.

Moses explained that removing minimum lot sizes can create problems by allowing property owners to divide lots into pieces that are too small to function properly. She stated that the standards are intended to ensure that lots remain usable and practical for development.

Public: Shannon Laing, 5031 Colorado St – Laing she serves as the Minnesota Main Streets Manager for Rethos, the state coordinating partner for Main Street America. She expressed opposition to the proposed renaming of form districts to “main street districts,” stating that the change could create confusion and undermine the credibility of nationally recognized Main Street communities. Laing said that having both a zoning designation and a community development program share the same name could create confusion for property owners, developers, grant funders, and the public. She recommended selecting an alternative name. Riley Barnhardt, 4031 Grand Ave - Barnhardt is in favor of the proposed UDC changes as they help address the housing crisis in Duluth.

Jim Starr, 1145 Mississippi Ave – Jim Starr expressed concerns about where cottage homes would be permitted, the potential impacts on neighborhood character, the removal of design standards, and the proposed reduction of height restrictions. He stated that the full impacts and long-term consequences of the proposed changes should be clearly understood before the amendments are approved.

David Schaforth, West Duluth – Schaforth expressed concerns with approving code changes that would make the city less desirable to live in.

Kim Roufs, 1006 Mississippi Ave – Roufs expressed concerns regarding the increase of rental homes in her neighborhood. She hopes to see more affordable housing options.

Denise Lavoie, 55805 – Lavoie is in favor of more affordable housing. She spoke about the housing crisis, food distribution crisis, and transportation disparities.

Commissioners: Weisz asked why form districts are being renamed. Ferguson supported using a different name than “main street” districts.

Staff: Moses stated that the term “form districts” can be intimidating and confusing for the public. She explained that staff often describe these areas as “main street” districts because they are intended to support walkability and buildings located closer to the street. The proposed name change is intended to make the districts easier for people to understand and

reduce confusion. Moses also stated that she appreciated the alternative naming suggestions provided by Shannon Laing, although staff were unsure whether those options would be the best fit. She noted that the Planning Commission could add a condition of approval related to the naming issue.

Commissioners: Commissioners discussed the approval process for the proposed zoning code amendments and the wording of potential recommendations and conditions. Sarvela asked when the proposed zoning amendments would move to the Duluth City Council, and Moses stated that the ordinances would likely not be considered until June. Moses also clarified that existing connectivity standards for cottage homes would remain unchanged and that townhomes are currently limited to three to eight units per building, though the Planning Commission could recommend changes.

Sarvela expressed disappointment about eliminating planning districts, stating that he was concerned the change could reduce opportunities for community input and that additional issues may still need review. Commissioners Adatte and Weisz expressed support for simplifying the zoning code, stating that the changes could encourage development, investment, and make the code easier for the public to understand.

MOTION/Second: Hammond/Adatte approved with the added conditions that form districts be named something other than “main street” districts, and that there will be no decrease in allowable heights in any zone districts.

VOTE: (9-0)

Other Business

PLEAW-2511-0002-2 Downtown Duluth Final Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR)

Moses reviewed the Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) process and explained the steps leading up to the current stage of the project. She stated that public comments had been received and that only minimal changes were made to the document, with those revisions identified on page 331. Staff also prepared written responses to the submitted comments. Moses explained that the next step in the process is to send the document to the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board for a 10-day distribution period. After that, staff will prepare a record of decision and return to the Planning Commission for final action. Staff requested approval from the Planning Commission to distribute the document to the EQB.

MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Sarvela approved distribution of the document

VOTE: (9-0)

Communications

Land Use Supervisor (LUS) Report

Moses welcomed the three new commissioners and presented a memo regarding the Lester Park Golf Course land use study. She explained that the study began in January and that four boards and commissions have representatives serving on the steering committee. Moses announced that a second public open house would be held on May 27 and stated that consultants are currently developing different land use scenarios for the site. She encouraged the public to review the concepts and provide feedback about what they like and dislike.

Commissioner Van Daele asked about additional ways for the public to learn more about the project and submit comments. Moses responded that the project website includes a comment section and that another public survey and interactive map will be released soon. She also encouraged patience throughout the process, noting that staff spend significant time reviewing public input, conducting research, and coordinating with other governing entities to ensure the process is thorough and intentional.

Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) Report

No report.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:32 p.m.