

City of Duluth Planning Commission Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, June 9th, 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 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, June 9th, 2026, in the Duluth city hall council chambers.

Roll Call

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

Members Absent: Kate Van Daele

Staff Present: Amanda Mangan, Jenn Moses, Chris Lee [CL], Jason Mozol [JM], Reina Owecke [RO], and Sam Smith

Approval of Planning Commission Minutes

Planning Commission Meeting Minutes from May 12th, 2026

MOTION/Second: Ferguson/Sarvela approved

VOTE: (8-0)

Public Comment on Items Not on Agenda

No comments.

Consent Agenda

(Items PLSUP-2605-0007 and PLVAR-2602-0003 were removed from the consent agenda and placed under public hearings)

~~**PLSUP-2605-0007** Special Use Permit for Electric Substation at 507-511 W College St by Minnesota Power [JM]~~

~~**PLVAR-2602-0003** Variance from Shoreland Standards at 3821 W 7th St by Randy Gafner [RO]~~

PLVAR-2604-0011 Variance from Shoreland Standards along Chester Creek by City of Duluth, Parks [JM]

PLVAR-2605-0012 Variance from Shoreland Standards along a Tributary of Merritt Creek by City of Duluth, Parks [JM]

PLVAR-2605-0013 Variance to Side Yard Setback at 828 E 2nd St by Emma Hamilton [CL]

PLVAR-2605-0014 Variance from Rear Yard Setbacks at 4126 100th Ave W by Pamela and Clifford Langley [JM]

Public: Wendy Hamm, 3815 W 7th St – Hamm spoke in opposition to PLVAR-2602-0003, specifically regarding the proposed location of the fence. She requested that the fence be relocated elsewhere on the applicant's property, expressing concerns that its current placement could worsen flooding, erosion, and property damage on her property. Hamm noted that previous flooding events have caused damage and believes the fence could obstruct water flow and trap debris during future floods. She suggested moving the fence closer to the garage to

allow more room for floodwaters to pass through and reduce potential impacts to neighboring properties.

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

VOTE: (8-0)

Public Hearings

PLSUP-2605-0007 Special Use Permit for Electric Substation at 507-511 W College St by Minnesota Power [JM]

Staff: Jason Mozol presented the proposal from Minnesota Power for a Special Use Permit to construct a new electric power substation. He explained that the substation is needed to meet increasing electrical demand and maintain system reliability. The proposed location was selected because it is close to existing utility infrastructure, including distribution feeders serving the area, future vault system improvements planned along College Street, and a limited number of nearby residences. Substations within developed areas can be challenging, but this location minimizes impacts to natural resources and residential neighborhoods while remaining close to customers and existing infrastructure.

Mozol reviewed the project requirements outlined in the staff report and noted that several site plan elements were not currently in compliance but would be addressed through conditions of approval. He explained that building permits would not be issued until all required conditions were met. He also stated that the substation would not impact radio signals, television reception, or other wireless communications.

Staff received four comments in opposition to the project. Concerns raised by residents included screening and landscaping, noise, visual impacts, and potential effects on nearby property values.

Commissioners: Weisz asked whether there is any data showing that substations impact nearby property values. Sarvela asked about the height of the proposed substation equipment and which portions of the site would be paved.

Mozol responded that he was not aware of any evidence indicating negative impacts on property values and provided photographs of similar substations in the area to give commissioners a better understanding of the facility's appearance.

The tallest equipment is expected to be approximately 8 to 9 feet in height, although the applicant could provide more specific measurements. He also explained that only the driveway area would be paved, while the equipment area would consist of crushed gravel.

Applicant: Joel Hafdahl, representing Minnesota Power, addressed the commissioners and provided additional background on the project. The proposed location was selected because of its proximity to existing utility infrastructure and the limited number of suitable sites available in the area. After evaluating potential alternatives, this site emerged as the most practical option. Hafdahl also noted that the project timeline aligns with planned City of Duluth roadway improvements, allowing utility infrastructure work to be coordinated with upcoming street reconstruction projects.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked several questions about the proposed substation's benefits to the community, proposed location, and screening efforts. Bayuk asked whether the project would benefit the surrounding area and whether the applicant could comply with the

conditions recommended by staff. Commissioner Axelson asked whether alternative locations with fewer impacts on nearby residents had been considered.

Applicant: Nick Bolt, representing Minnesota Power, explained that the substation would improve electrical reliability for the surrounding area, including neighborhoods from Chester Creek to the University of Minnesota Duluth and Arrowhead Road. He stated that the facility would become part of a larger utility network serving critical facilities such as hospitals, downtown Duluth, and the Duluth Public Schools district. Bolt added that Minnesota Power would work to ensure the project meets all applicable requirements while complying with utility regulations.

Minnesota Power worked with the University of Minnesota Duluth to evaluate potential sites and determined that the proposed location was the most suitable option. He stated that no other locations met the project's needs.

Commissioners: Sarvela asked about proposed screening for the substation. Hammond asked whether the proposed substation would resemble examples shown in staff photographs.

Applicant: Joel Hafdahl stated that the site would be screened with vegetation rather than fencing. The substation would include similar equipment but would not contain utility poles and would consist of enclosed green utility boxes.

Heidi Bringman of LHB explained that some equipment would exceed the typical eight-foot height limit for mixed-use districts and would require approval from the Land Use Supervisor. She noted that grading on the site would help reduce visibility and that landscaping is intended to satisfy screening requirements. Bringman also explained that if fencing is ultimately required, it would need to be constructed from non-conductive materials due to the nature of the facility.

Public: Kathryn Johnson, 1348 Mississippi Ave – Johnson was not opposed to the project if it is designed to adequately protect neighboring properties. She noted that many of her concerns had been addressed through questions from the commissioners and responses from the applicant. Johnson encouraged the Commission to ensure that buffering and screening requirements are strictly enforced to minimize noise and visual impacts and requested additional landscaping, screening, and maximum separation between the substation and nearby homes.

Commissioners: Discussion ensued regarding project location, potential impacts to nearby properties, and screening requirements. Wedul recognized the need for electrical infrastructure but opposed the proposed location. She expressed concern that the site is next to a major draw for the city and believes a more suitable location could have been identified that would have less impact on nearby residential properties.

Hammond echoed Wedul's concerns but believes the conditions listed in the staff report addresses the concerns.

Commissioner Bayuk expressed support for the project, stating that reliable electrical infrastructure is critical for serving nearby residents, businesses, and institutions. The neighborhood concerns are valid, but he believed the proposed substation is a necessary investment and that the project has been appropriately engineered and reviewed by the project experts as well as staff.

MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Ferguson approved

VOTE: (7-1)
Wedul opposed

PLVAR-2602-0003 Variance from Shoreland Standards at 3821 W 7th St by Randy Gafner [RO]

Staff: Reina Owecke gave a brief presentation on the staff report. The applicant is seeking a variance from shoreland setbacks from the required 150' to 27' for an existing chain link fence. A zoning enforcement case was created in December of 2024 after a complaint was received regarding the location of the fence. It was confirmed that the fence was located within the 150' shoreland setback. After warning letters were sent, and a citation was issued, the variance request was submitted to bring the fence into compliance. Without a variance request, the property owner would either continue to receive citations from the planning office or be required to remove the fence.

Staff found that the application meets the variance criteria and noted that a vegetative buffer would be installed to help mitigate potential impacts. The DNR also determined the project would not affect flood elevations or the floodplain's capacity to convey water. One comment in opposition was received, and staff recommended approval with conditions.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked whether approval of the variance would allow the fence to remain in its current location, where the proposed no-mow area is, and when the fence was constructed.

Staff: Owecke confirmed that the fence would remain where it currently is. She explained that fences under four feet in height do not require a fence permit, which may be why the applicant was unaware of shoreland setback requirements. Owecke stated that the no-mow area would be limited to the space between the fence and the creek, consistent with a condition recommended by staff. The fence was installed in 2019, and an enforcement case was opened in 2024. The DNR determined the fence would not impact flood elevations or the floodplain's carrying capacity, although debris could potentially become caught on the fence during flood events.

Applicant: Randy Gafner, 3821 W 7th St – Gafner stated that he did not believe the fence would worsen flooding and argued that other structures in the area, including a neighboring garage, could have a greater effect on floodwater flow.

MOTION/Second: Sarvela/Bayuk approved

VOTE: (8-0)

PLUMA-2604-0001* Rezoning Form Districts by City of Duluth

Staff: Jenn Moses presented the proposed amendments to the City's form district regulations. She explained that the changes were developed in response to direction from the Duluth City Council and recommendations from staff aimed at supporting housing and development opportunities while simplifying the zoning code and making it more user-friendly for residents, property owners, and developers.

Staff proposed simplifying the City's form district regulations by removing many of the more detailed building standards and consolidating the existing nine form districts into four districts, designated F-1 through F-4. The changes would not affect the boundaries of any existing form districts.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked whether the previously recommended amendments to the Unified Development Chapter (UDC), including retaining the term "form district" and

prohibiting reductions in allowable building heights, were still being incorporated into the proposal.

Staff: Moses confirmed that staff is no longer proposing to rename form districts to “main street districts” and that the existing form district designation will be retained. She also confirmed that the proposed amendments do not reduce allowable building heights.

Commissioners: Wedul asked whether the proposed amendments would eliminate architectural design standards that help preserve the character of form districts, citing areas such as Canal Park as an example.

Staff: Staff propose to remove some of the more prescriptive architectural requirements, such as specific storefront and roof design standards, while retaining basic form-related standards, including requirements for building entrances and orientation. She noted that form district regulations have historically been among the most challenging sections of the code for property owners, developers, and staff to navigate, and that simplifying the standards is intended to reduce barriers to development while maintaining key design elements.

Commissioners: Wedul emphasized the importance of preserving the character of iconic areas and noted that the standards could be revisited in the future if necessary. Commissioners thanked staff for their work.

Public: No speakers.

MOTION/Second: Hammond/Weisz approved

VOTE: (8-0)

Other Business

PLEAW-2511-0002-3 Adoption of Final Review and Mitigation Plan for the Downtown Duluth Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR)

Moses presented a PowerPoint prepared by Stantec, the consultant for the project, and explained that this represents the final step in the Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) process. She summarized the comments received from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and members of the public, and reviewed the revisions made to the AUAR document in response to those comments.

Moses explained that the final AUAR will serve as a planning and mitigation tool to guide future development in downtown Duluth. She emphasized that individual development projects will still be required to obtain all necessary permits and approvals and comply with applicable City regulations. She also noted that AUARs must be updated every five years in accordance with state requirements. Staff recommended adoption of the final AUAR document.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked whether the AUAR document could be amended in the future if errors were identified or project conditions changed.

Staff: Moses explained that AUARs can be updated, but any revisions must follow the required review process. She referenced the Incline Village AUAR as an example and noted that if a future development proposal differs significantly from the scenarios analyzed in the document, the AUAR would need to be updated accordingly. However, she stated that staff does not anticipate any major changes to the current document.

Commissioners: Commissioners expressed support for the effort, noting that the AUAR is a valuable planning tool that helps facilitate development and investment in Duluth, particularly in areas of downtown that are facing development challenges. They stated that the process helps provide clarity and predictability for future projects.

MOTION/Second: Bayuk/Ferguson adopt the final AUAR document

VOTE: (8-0)

PL 26-0529 Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Designated Natural Area Management Plan

Staff: Katie Kubiak with City Parks presented the proposed Natural Area Management Plan, which would designate the area as the fourth Natural Area Management Plan site in Duluth. She noted that the concept had previously been presented to the Planning Commission and that staff were seeking approval to formally establish the plan.

Applicant: Tim Beaster, a Conservation Specialist with the South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District, provided an overview of the project. He explained that the plan is the result of several years of collaboration among conservation organizations, City staff, community members, and user groups with the shared goal of protecting and stewarding a significant natural area in Duluth. The project area encompasses approximately 1,200 acres and is intended to preserve natural resources while supporting recreation, tourism, water quality, flood resilience, wildlife habitat, and other environmental benefits. Beaster reviewed the criteria used to determine eligibility for Natural Area Management Plan designation, which includes Important Bird Congregation Area, Special Species Area, Significant Native Plant Communities, Natural Water Feature Area, and Geological Landform Area.

Commissioners: Commissioners asked why the Lester and Amity areas were not included whether the designation would affect the maintenance or use of existing trails.

Applicant: Beaster explained that developed park amenities, such as ball fields and gazebos, were not consistent with the character of the proposed natural area and therefore were not included. He also stated that the plan would not prevent maintenance of existing trails.

Commissioners: Commissioners discussed concerns related to informal, or “social,” trails. Commissioner Hammond emphasized the importance of preserving neighborhood access and expressed concern about any potential trail closures.

Applicant: Beaster explained that social trails are identified as a potential concern because they can contribute to erosion and environmental degradation. However, he noted that the intent is to study the trail system, identify any problem areas, and explore mitigation strategies rather than close trails.

Commissioners: Discussion ensued regarding the importance of social trails for recreation and community access while also recognizing the need to address potential environmental impacts through appropriate mitigation measures. Commissioners expressed support for balancing resource protection with continued public use of the trail system.

MOTION/Second: Hammond/Sarvela approved distribution of the document with the added conditions:

1. Planning commission preferences mitigation over the closure of the existing social trails.
2. Existing recreational uses that are listed in the report are not intended to be exclusive of any future recreational uses.

VOTE: (8-0)

Communications

Land Use Supervisor (LUS) Report

Moses presented a memo providing an update on the ongoing Lester Park Golf Course land use study. She reported that a public open house was held on May 27 at Lester Park Elementary School, where staff presented three land use scenarios and gathered feedback from attendees. Staff also launched a public survey and an interactive mapping tool, both linked in the memo, to provide additional opportunities for community input. The mapping tool allows users to place comments directly on a map and will remain available through June 19. Moses noted that staff have also been conducting small-group discussions with participants from previous focus groups to gather perspectives from a variety of stakeholders. All feedback collected through these efforts will be used to develop a final recommendation for the site. She added that another public open house will be held before a final recommendation is presented to the Planning Commission and several other boards and commissions for review.

Commissioner Bayuk noted that the most recent open house was well attended and characterized by respectful, thoughtful, and productive dialogue. He contrasted the in-person discussions with some online conversations and encouraged community members to participate in future public meetings, emphasizing that they provide a valuable opportunity for meaningful engagement and constructive feedback.

Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) Report

Wedul stated that the HPC met yesterday and discussed the future of the Karpeles Museum.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 6:45 p.m.