
Planning commission

Study Session

Members present: Jim Beneke, Christopher Caton, Mia Divecha, Matt Eckholm, John Flanagan, Avi Nieves, Sarah Strain, Tom Weber

Members absent:

Staff present: Laura Chamberlain

Guests: Beth Elliott and Kristen Baldonado with Stantec

Item 1: 2050 Comprehensive Plan Update

Ms. Elliott explained Stantec's role includes engagement, particularly reaching residents who do not normally participate. Commissioner Divecha asked about the consultants' frame of reference, citing earlier parking discussions that benchmarked against much larger cities like Portland and San Francisco. Ms. Elliott listed work in Minneapolis, Cottage Grove, Spring Lake Park, Mounds View, Moorhead, Northfield, Owatonna, Texas, and Illinois.

Commissioners shared that they had been told that major changes must wait for the comprehensive plan. They found it frustrating to arrive at the plan and be told that this was not the time, particularly after the recent zoning code update, which largely codified existing conditions. Ms. Elliott replied that the comprehensive plan would largely codify and bring up into policy the work the city had done over the last decade, including the zoning updates and the related comprehensive plan amendments. She said big ideas often emerge from public engagement. She said her goal was to give the commission clear policy direction it could rely on when making decisions and when receiving testimony.

Ms. Elliott and Ms. Baldonado reviewed the 10-year cycle, which runs from census data to regional forecasts, the Imagine 2050 plan, and city system statements issued in fall 2025. Forecasts cover population, households, and jobs, and the city must accommodate them. The city has received its minimum requirements checklist, and consultants will send a link. Notable requirements include:

- Engagement of underrepresented populations.
- Allowance of more than single-family housing in low-density land use categories.
- Affordable housing at or below 50 percent of area median income.
- Surface water, wastewater, and water supply plans, which require coordination with the city's engineering consultants.
- Climate as a required topic, with analysis of social vulnerabilities.

Neighboring jurisdictions and Metropolitan Council staff will review the plan in 2028, with approval expected by the end of 2028. Noncompliance can make a city ineligible for funding.

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Another commissioner cited the sewer dispute in North Oaks and the earlier lawsuit involving Lake Elmo. Commissioner Caton asked whether St. Louis Park would later have to compensate for other cities' shortfalls. He suggested raising the question with a Metropolitan Council representative, and Ms. Elliott said it could be asked. She added St. Louis Park is living the values the Metropolitan Council promotes.

The consultants said the plan would build on Vision 4.0 and the city council's five strategic priorities rather than begin with a new visioning phase. Staff want it concise, visual, implementation-focused, and supported by dashboards that are easy to maintain. It will also include an interactive online story map. Ms. Elliott said that a 10-page plan is not possible given the Metropolitan Council checklist, but that background material and checklist items can move to appendices or be linked. Chair Strain asked for a balance that gives enough information to explain why decisions or policy choices were made.

Stantec is partnering with Modern Day Me, which is finalizing an explanatory video. The first engagement push will include on-the-ground outreach at festivals, bus stops, playgrounds, and similar places, plus targeted online engagement. The winter newsletter is expected in early December, and online engagement will stay open until the end of the year. A second push focused on implementation is planned for late summer or early fall 2027, including two family-friendly community-wide meetings. The consultants showed a sample street-interview video from a Minneapolis project. In response to Commissioner Caton's question, Ms. Elliott explained that interviewers asked a few non-invasive questions to track audiences reached, responses are coded into themes by a data analyst, and results are shown publicly and combined with online input. Ms. Elliott acknowledged the commissioners' priorities and committed to incorporating them.

Stantec staff presented the following findings:

- Metropolitan Council forecasts show growth of about 13 percent in population and households and about 5 percent in employment between 2030 and 2050. This is roughly 3,400 added households, or about 170 per year, with shrinking household sizes sustaining housing demand. Commissioner Caton said this was a large amount of building.
- The city attracts adults aged 25 to 34 and retains older residents. Commissioners suggested that housing size, cost, and school quality may lead families to move outside the city.
- Single-person households are the largest household type. Commissioner Beneke noted that older residents often cannot find affordable places to move.
- The city is becoming more racially diverse, but language diversity is not keeping pace, which has implications for engagement and services.
- Poverty and social vulnerability are concentrated in the Aquila neighborhood. Ms. Elliott said a citywide plan can still target policies geographically.
- Housing is largely a choice between large apartment buildings and small single-family homes, mostly under 1,500 square feet, with little middle-scale housing.
- Homeownership is 58 percent overall with significant disparities by race and ethnicity and high cost burden among lower-income households.

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The full community profile is online on the project's webpage and contains more detail for a breakdown of units by owner and renter occupancy. Regarding condominium construction. Ms. Elliott cited state legislation passed after the 2000s condo boom that increased developer liability, and a commissioner cited FHA eligibility problems and rising HOA requirements. Ms. Elliott said conversions of aging apartments are more likely than new construction, and that Stantec's development economists could return to discuss these issues.

The city has a very high workforce participation rate and unemployment below county and regional levels. About 40,000 people commute into the city to work, while only about 25,000 residents leave the city to work. Commissioners asked about work-from-home effects and the effect of the coming light rail opening. Most industrial buildings predate 1990 but are well leased. Of five aging commercial properties examined, three redeveloped into mixed use and two were adaptively reused. Ms. Elliott said the future land use map could include layers such as protected industrial categories and flexibility for accessory dwelling units, duplexes and quads.

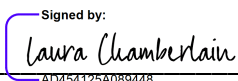
Commissioners reported that they were surprised by the number of commuters and by the share of single-person households. A commissioner asked about the fiscal and economic consequences of continued movement from industrial and commercial uses to housing with a concern that there would be nowhere to work. Other comments from commissioners included:

- Favoring industrial and commercial uses to compete with parking rather than with housing.
- Protecting small light-industrial pockets, such as small businesses near light rail stations.
- Consider daily-needs businesses alongside destination businesses.
- Emphasizing housing, supporting walkable neighborhood small-businesses, easing barriers for startup businesses, and retention of existing businesses.

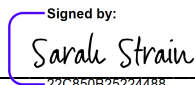
Commissioners asked that transportation (including bus transit) be included in the plan. Ms. Elliott said the community profile has transportation, parks, and climate sections and that a bus system change is open for public comment. Commissioners and consultants discussed the high rents in new mixed-use buildings and possible tools: standard preapproved building plans, a density bonus, traditional small shop-with-dwelling buildings and city financing conditions through tax increment financing or the affordable housing trust fund.

Ms. Elliott suggested that, after the plan is adopted, the commission use a checklist of plan-based discussion points to guide deliberation after public testimony.

Adjournment – 7:58 p.m.

Signed by:

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Laura Chamberlain, liaison

Signed by:

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Sarah Strain, chair member

These minutes were created with the assistance of a generative AI transcript service, then edited and finalized by a city staff person.