

From: [Jake Reilly](#)
To: [*CI-StPaul_Contact-Council](#); [CouncilHearing \(CI-StPaul\)](#)
Cc: [Yasmine Robinson](#)
Subject: Public Hearing on Ord. 25-79 Planning Commission Improvements - enthusiastic support
Date: Wednesday, December 17, 2025 4:43:10 PM

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Members of the Saint Paul City Council:

I am writing to you today to express my enthusiastic support for the changes to the City's Planning Commission makeup and related workings. I apologize it is coming to you after the hearing itself.

For those of you who do not know me, in 2008 I became a Senior Planner and Project Manager within the Department of Planning and Economic Development. I had the pleasure and privilege of working closely with the staff and volunteers at the Capitol River Council, West 7th/Fort Road Federation and WSCO early in my career. As my time and tenure in service to Saint Paul continued, I gained additional experiences working closely with the staff and volunteers at four more community councils: Dayton's Bluff Community Council, Highland Park Community Council, Greater East Side Community Council, and the Payne-Phalen District Council.

In what would become a nearly 10-year tenure as a public servant in my adopted home city, Saint Paul, I started out enamored with the really robust and thoughtful approach to community engagement and citizen-focused planning established in the mid-1970s by the exceptional public servants that came before. The 21-member planning commission and the district council system was innovative at the time. The fact that the city had 17 planners (one for each district council) was even more innovative. And in much of my time as an employee and planner in the city I have called home since 2011, it continued to serve the city very well.

Over time, however, as the city's tax base became unable to sustain the number of employees necessary to keep such a system in fine working order, our service to the community suffered. Timelines were no longer sufficient for district councils to effectively provide feedback to staff on planning and zoning applications. Staff could no longer take the time necessary to visit each district council and provide training and education on planning and zoning processes so that those groups could do their jobs as well as they once could. And, frankly, district councils could no longer financially support the staff necessary to be effective partners, especially as changes to CDBG allocations and their availability to district councils changed. This was frustrating as a staff member who could not get comments from the people who know neighborhoods best - the district councils - in time for staff reports on planning and zoning items.

Fast forward to today, this also has led to a steeper learning curve for planning commissioners, who often used to come directly from service on a district council board or committee. One big positive change to the planning commission initially in the last five or so years has been the increased diversity in membership in age, race and life experience. However, demographic shifts in our population including an increase in younger families, an increase in lower-income households, and an increase in the cost to just exist in the United States today means families of all kinds have fewer opportunities for community service, especially if and when that community service isn't tied to something they are already involved in like a school or faith

community. My anecdotal suggests that is part of why we struggle to reach a quorum for every meeting, and part of why the diversity of the planning commission is shifting away from that which gave me great joy to witness between 2018 and 2023 to a point at which we have no members representing the cultures of the Southeast Asian diaspora, a population which makes up nearly 20% of our residential population and includes the largest Hmong population in the United States.

I urge you to take this step as a positive force for change in Saint Paul. And with it I urge you consider some other related approaches to engagement in St. Paul, approaches I championed when working on the community engagement strategy for the 2040 plan, that other staff have implemented successfully in transit planning with neighborhoods, and which is what we as residents have a right to experience, approaches that my belief only has been solidified as I have served on your planning commission since 2021.

These are:

- Offering more financial support to and for the district councils to ensure their staff and boards can be effective partners in engagement initiatives and in planning and zoning evaluation.
- Taking advantage of the city's frontline staff, particularly those who work in and for the parks department, to raise up their value and experience as those who are often a person's first contact with the municipality.
- Working with your partners at the district councils and civic-oriented non-profits like the cultural business and economic development entities and NEXUS community partners' Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute to foster a pipeline to city boards and commissions from local ones.

Thank you for reading and thank you for taking this on and thank you to your most excellent Planning Director, Yasmine Robinson, for taking this step.

Sincerely,
Jake Reilly
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PED Staff 2008-2017
Planning Commission 2021 to present