



Improving the Planning Process in Saint Paul

Accessible, Transparent, Equitable, Efficient

Introduction

The planning process in the City of Saint Paul was created in the 1970s and has facilitated important and impactful land use policies that have garnered national acclaim. However, over the years, the structure of the Commission has not kept up with changes in technology or residents' lifestyles. Planning Staff has analyzed the existing Planning Commission process and concluded that improvements can be made to increase transparency, equity, efficiency, and accessibility. Proposed changes include:

1. Reducing the size and streamlining the organization of the Planning Commission;
2. Improving and modernizing public noticing; and
3. Non-legislative policy and practice updates.

If implemented, the proposed changes will make the planning process more accessible, transparent and efficient for all, and more equitable in the attraction of Commissioners who seek to serve.

1. Reducing the Size of the Planning Commission

Existing and Proposed Operations

The Saint Paul Planning Commission (the "Commission") is a 21-member advisory body comprised of resident volunteers appointed by the Mayor and approved by the City Council. The Commission was established in the 1970s and has remained unchanged in its composition. Saint Paul's Commission is one of the largest in the country. Per the Commission's bylaws, Commissioners must serve both on the main Planning Commission and one of four subcommittees: Comprehensive and Neighborhood Planning (CNPC), Zoning,

Transportation, or Communications and Nominations. Planning Commission officers also serve on the Steering Committee.

Staff proposes a reduction from 21 Commissioners to seven primary Commissioners and two alternates. Staff also recommends that several committees be eliminated, and their business integrated into regular Commission meetings. The following table describes the proposed changes to the Commission and committees:

Commission or Committee	Existing Membership	Proposed Membership	Context
Planning Commission	21 members (code requirement) 14 (current)	7 members and 2 alternates	Staff proposes one member per City ward. Both alternates would be at-large.
Comprehensive & Neighborhood Planning Committee (CNPC)	8-10 members	Remove	The CNPC's items are of interest to the entire Planning Commission.
Zoning Committee	8 members (by code) 5 members (current)	Remove	The Zoning Committee's items are of interest to the entire Planning Commission.
Transportation Committee	4 Commission members, 8 community members	Change PC membership and appointment role	Reduce the number of Planning Commissioners on the Transportation Committee from 4 to a minimum of 1, with additional seats available. Change appointment responsibility from the Planning Commission Chair to the Mayor.
Steering Committee	Planning Commission Officers	Remove	The Steering Committee rarely meets and their items can be included in regular Commission business.
Communications & Nominations Committee	2 members	Remove	The Communications & Nominations Committee rarely meets and their items can be included in regular Commission business.

Under this plan, the Commission would continue to hold meetings at their current frequency, as would the Transportation Committee. The Commission would retain the ability to create ad hoc task forces or committees as needed (e.g. a Comprehensive Plan Task Force in 2026).

Result: Larger, Equitable Planning Commission Membership Pool

The current 21-member Planning Commission is geographically uneven across the city, with some wards having multiple Commissioners and some having just one. The proposed seven-member structure would include one Planning Commissioner per ward, representing a diversity of experiences including professional affiliation, life perspective, renter/owner status, gender, demographic, or past or current service on another board or commission that intersects with the Planning Commission's work. The Commission's two alternates would be at-large.

Result: Improved Meeting Efficiency

Given the number of items at committee meetings, the data shows that all committee business could be moved into regular Commission meetings while keeping those meetings a reasonable length. More information is available in Appendix A, Meeting Data.

The Commission typically has sufficient business to meet, but meetings are usually short, besides those that have a well-attended public hearing on the agenda. CNPC meetings are canceled often, but when meetings do occur, they typically feature a robust discussion about one or two items. This is consistent with the purpose of the committees, which seeks to foster more thorough discussions than time would allow during Planning Commission meetings. However, based on the average length of Commission meetings, there is capacity to move those conversations to the full Commission, particularly if a smaller Commission can have more focused, effective, and efficient deliberations.

Zoning Committee meetings, in contrast, usually feature more items per meeting with less discussion per item. Because Zoning Committee items also go to Commission meetings, these discussions typically end up being replicated through a summary provided by the Chair. Zoning Committee meetings are canceled about a third of the time. Typical reasons for canceling CNPC and Zoning Committee meetings in 2025 were a lack of agenda items, quorum concerns, and the cyber security incident.

The Steering Committee and Communications and Nominations Committee met only twice in 2025 to discuss the annual report and had no other business.

In summary, shifting the business of the CNPC, Zoning Committee, Steering Committee, and Communications and Nominations Committee would not excessively increase the length of Commission meetings. Consolidating those items into Commission meetings would also improve process accessibility for applicants and the public by reducing redundant review time spent on each action.

Result: Reduced Quorum Issues and Recruitment of a Strong Commission

In order to act, the Commission must achieve a quorum of members. Historically, due to its large size, it is common for Commissioners to miss a meeting without notice under the assumption that because there are so many Commissioners, there will be enough in attendance for quorum. However, when Commissioners routinely miss meetings, it is more difficult to reach quorum. At least once in 2025, the Commission failed to meet quorum on the day of the meeting, with multiple Commissioners calling out the morning of the meeting, and some not calling at all. Applicants waiting for decisions, including a locally owned coffee shop, the Union Gospel Mission bed expansion, and the Sandbox School, were impacted by delays.

A reduction and consolidation of Committees would reduce the amount of work time asked of Commissioners outside of official meetings, which would improve Staff's ability to attract a more diverse and dynamic pool of applicants. In recent years, the time commitment has dissuaded quality candidates from applying for the Commission, and thus decreased equitable representation across career fields, stages of life, and level of access to childcare.

With fewer, more engaged Commissioners, better policy and streamlined decision making could occur. Staff capacity is also limited in ability to coordinate and provide adequate attention to the existing number of Commissioners.

Result: A Clear and Accessible Process for All

Fewer committees mean fewer stops for a development application, which results in a simpler process for applicants. Members of the public will have less trouble knowing which meetings are the ones where they can have an impact on the process, where and when those meetings are, and what it means when an application receives a recommendation at any given stage of the public process. The proposed process would retain the same level of community input and would allow Staff more flexibility to check in with District Councils and other interested parties. Holding a public hearing for a zoning application at Planning Commission would also allow all Commissioners access to the testimony in real time, rather than having to watch or read it on their own.

Applicants who enter a clear and efficient public process benefit from improved customer service across fewer meetings and reduced project costs. There are fewer opportunities for a project's outcome to swing back and forth based on committee recommendations that may be overturned by a Commission recommendation, improving predictability. Finally, applications that are likely to be denied receive Commission feedback sooner, meaning

applicants can react, adjust, and reapply on an accelerated timeline with an improved proposal.

Result: A Shorter Public Process

Typical Zoning Case

The Commission would absorb the operations of the Zoning Committee, eliminating the need for a second meeting. Applicants and members of the public who are interested in following cases would benefit by reducing the approval time and removing the confusion of two meetings.

Current (2 meetings)	Proposed (1 meeting)
Zoning Committee reviews the zoning application, holds a public hearing, discusses the matter, and votes on a recommendation to the Planning Commission. At Planning Commission, the Zoning Committee reports their recommendation. The Planning Commission votes to approve or deny the zoning application.	The Planning Commission reviews the zoning application, holds a public hearing, and discusses the matter. The Planning Commission votes to approve or deny the zoning application.

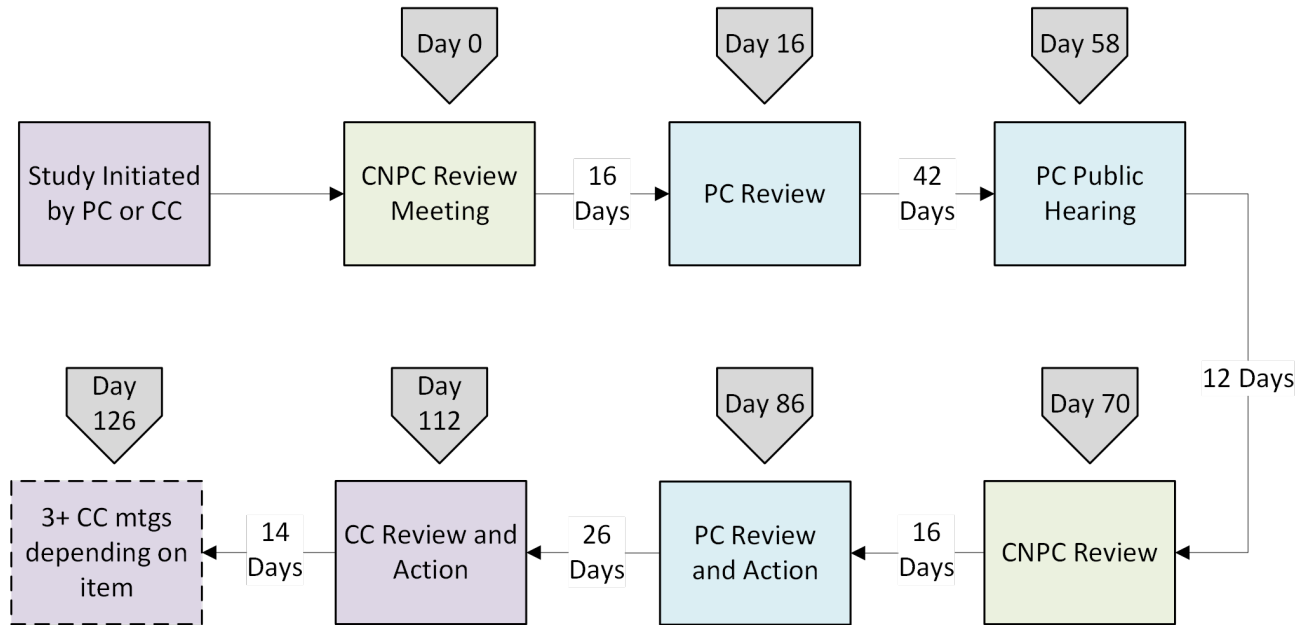
Typical Zoning Study

In the current process, the public has the opportunity to comment at one meeting (the public hearing held at a Planning Commission meeting) out of six and during the public review period. A study goes to CNPC twice and Planning Commission four times before moving on to Council adoption, with at least a week between each of the six meetings. Removing CNPC will dramatically reduce the time it takes for zoning studies to reach City Council, while keeping the same opportunities for the public to participate.

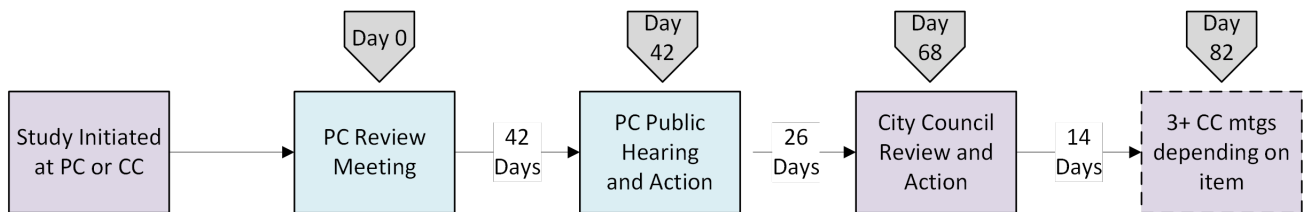
Current (6 Planning Meetings)	Proposed (3-4 Planning Meetings)
1. Planning Commission or City Council initiates the study and Staff executes the study. 2. CNPC reviews the study. 3. Planning Commission reviews the study and initiates the public comment period. 4. Planning Commission holds a public hearing. 5. CNPC reviews the results of the public hearing and makes a recommendation.	1. Planning Commission or City Council initiates the study and Staff executes the study. 2. Planning Commission reviews the study and initiates the public comment period. 3. Planning Commission holds a public hearing. a. If there are no public comments or proposed changes, the PC can recommend approval at that meeting and send the study to City Council. b. If there are proposed changes, PC can close the public hearing and consider an

6. Planning Commission receives the CNPC's recommendation and makes their own recommendation to the City Council, who reviews and adopts over 1-3 meetings.	amended study at the next available meeting, then recommend approval and send the plan to City Council. c. City Council then reviews and adopts over 1-3 meetings.
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Existing Typical Zoning Study Process Diagram



Proposed Zoning Study Process Diagram



Result: Improved Administration and Efficient Use of Staff Resources

Staff administration of a 21-member Commission, with five subcommittees, presents a variety of challenges and inefficiencies. Staff time, communication with Commissioners, scheduling and other administrative tasks are more time-intensive. Coordinating the Commission and five subcommittees takes at least five staff members to schedule,

coordinate and document. Much of the work is repeated for both committees and the Commission – delivering presentations, answering similar questions, etc. Streamlining to one Commission meeting would reduce the personnel required to administrate meetings by half (two or three). This would allow Staff to dedicate more time per week to individual Commissioner communication and other work. Having fewer meetings and fewer people coordinating reduces opportunities for miscommunication and delays.

Result: Improved Participation for All Abilities

Existing City facilities are insufficient for holding public meetings with 21 Commissioners, as almost no room within City Hall or the Annex is large enough for 21 Commissioners and the public. As such, Commission meetings are held in the basement of City Hall in Room 40. This room does not have an audio/visual system, or a table that can accommodate 21 people. When Staff give presentations, a mobile television screen is borrowed from the Courts when available, but must be positioned too far from the audience in order for Commissioners and a presenter to see it. Because there is no audio system, most of the audience cannot hear the Commission's discussions. The Commission is positioned in two rows facing one another in order to hear each other, but not facing the audience, which further impacts the public's ability to hear and understand. Lastly, the room is not under the control of City Staff and solving audio/visual issues is nearly impossible as a result. With seven Commissioners, holding meetings in the City Council chambers would be an option and Staff would have the proper capabilities to ensure that all audience members can see, hear, and participate.

2. Modernize Public Noticing

Noticing requirements for most actions are set by state statute ([Sec. 462.357](#) and [Sec. 462.358](#)) and the city goes above and beyond the minimum requirements through the Early Notification System (ENS) which residents can sign up for on the City's website.

Per State statute, notices for public hearings are published in the Pioneer Press. This provision was created before the widespread use of the internet. Now, the Pioneer Press has a pay wall that prohibits non-subscribers from viewing. In addition to Pioneer Press publication, Staff recommends the more transparent practice of posting public notices on a central City website so that residents can see all of the past and upcoming hearings, locate documents and access past hearing videos. This is a modern and accepted form of communication, as many people use the city's website and social media to get information about projects they are interested in.

Land use actions typically fall under 30- or 45-day noticing under the ENS policy and push out lead times enough to impact that the time allowed for decisions. Staff proposes to reduce the required ENS notice for subdivisions from 45 days to 30. This will streamline subdivision approvals while still providing sufficient public notice. No changes are being made to the required Pioneer Press noticing for subdivisions.

3. Non-Legislative Policy and Practice Changes

In addition to the preceding recommendations, the following updates are also recommended by Planning Staff but do not require approval by the City Council:

- Planning Staff will draft updated bylaws for the Commission to approve that reflect updated membership, operations and conduct, etc.
- The Commission will have the option to approve items at the same meeting as the item's public hearing, in the event that comments made at the hearing do not prompt further analysis and discussion of the item.
- Staff and the Commission will investigate moving the regular meeting time and/or location to increase accessibility for the public and improve the pool of potential Commissioners.
- Staff will actively manage Commissioner attendance under the current attendance policy, which is now feasible with fewer Commissioners.
- Staff will improve planning process accessibility by creating a centralized public notice webpage, as well as other necessary updates to the website needed after these changes are implemented.

4. Implementation of Commission Changes

Staff proposes transitioning to the new, smaller Commission membership gradually as terms expire. The total number of Planning Commissioners is anticipated to conform to the ordinance by 2027.

Changes to the meeting structure of the Planning Commission require updates to the Commission bylaws and to internal Staff processes. These changes will be made following the conclusion of the ordinance adoption process and after any additional feedback from the City Council, if applicable.

5. Staff Recommendation

Staff overwhelmingly recommends and supports these changes to better facilitate the Planning Commission's important work by increasing accessibility, transparency, equity, and efficiency in the land use decision making process.

Attachments

1. Ordinance 25-79 Improvements to the Planning Commission processes.
2. Draft Resolution 25-1906 Updating the Early Notification System Policy and Procedures regarding subdivisions.
3. Draft Resolution 25-1907 Updating the Transportation Committee organization in accordance with Planning Commission organizational changes and established practice.

Appendix A: Meeting Data

January 1 – October 23, 2025

Commission or Committee	Cancellation Rate and Absence Rate	Agenda Length and Discussion Information	Average Meeting Length
Planning Commission	3/22 meetings canceled (14%); scheduled to meet every other week	Average of 3 items per meeting, including informational presentations (15 minutes per item)	46 minutes
	3-6 members absent		
Comprehensive and Neighborhood Planning Committee (CNPC)	8/20 meetings canceled (40%); scheduled to meet every other week	Average of 1.3 items per meeting	Insufficient data
	2-5 members absent	Discussed 8 unique items; most returned for more than one meeting	
Zoning Committee	8/22 meetings canceled (36%); scheduled to meet every other week	Average of 1.8 items per meeting (28 minutes per item)	57 minutes
	0-2 members absent	Discussed 23 unique items; 3 returned for more than one meeting	
Steering Committee	Met twice in 2025 to discuss the annual report.	Insufficient data	Insufficient data
Communications and Nominations Committee	Met twice in 2025 to discuss the annual report.	Insufficient data	Insufficient data

Appendix B: Typical Planning Commission Items

The following is a list of typical items that go in front of the Planning Commission.

- A. Conditional use permits
- B. Variances
- C. Rezoning
- D. Nonconforming use permits
- E. Certain site plans
- F. Zoning code amendments
- G. Zoning map studies
- H. Comprehensive plan amendments
- I. Master plan amendments
- J. District plans
- K. Commercial development districts
- L. Other planning studies