



# NORTH BRANCH —Minnesota—

Nathan Ehalt  
Chair

Steve Cich  
Commissioner

Ross Otto  
Commissioner

Kelly Maurer  
Commissioner

**PLANNING COMMISSION  
REGULAR AGENDA  
TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026 @ 6:30 PM  
CITY HALL, 6408 ELM STREET, NORTH  
BRANCH, MN 55056**

1. CALL TO ORDER
2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
3. ROLL CALL
4. PUBLIC COMMENT  
*Provides an opportunity for the public to address the Council on items that are not on the Agenda. Please raise your hand to be recognized. Please state your name and address for the record. This section is for the express purpose of addressing concerns of City services and operations. It shall not be used to clarify individual's views for political purposes.*
5. AGENDA APPROVAL
  - a. Approve Agenda ACTION
6. CONSENT AGENDA  
*All matters listed under Consent Agenda are considered routine and/or non-controversial and will be approved by one motion. There will be no separate discussion of these items unless a Councilmember or citizen so requests, in which case the item will be removed from the Consent Agenda and considered in its normal sequence on the Agenda.*
  - a. Approval of February 3, 2026 Planning Commission meeting minutes ACTION
7. PUBLIC HEARINGS
8. REPORTS
  - a. Text Amendment to City Code Sec. 66-855 Surfacing ACTION
  - b. Comprehensive Plan Update INFO
9. NEXT MEETING - March 3, 2026 - 330 PM
10. ADJOURNMENT



**Prepared By:**

**Presenter:**

**Date: 01/06/2026**

**Board & Commission: Planning Commission**

**Subject: Approval of February 3, 2026 Planning Commission meeting minutes**

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**Voting Requirements:**

**Voting Options      Simple Majority**



# NORTH BRANCH —Minnesota—

Steve Cich  
Chair

Nathan Ehalt  
Commissioner

Ross Otto  
Commissioner

Kelly Maurer  
Commissioner

**PLANNING COMMISSION  
REGULAR AGENDA  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026 @ 6:30 PM  
CITY HALL, 6408 ELM STREET, NORTH  
BRANCH, MN 55056**

## **MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NORTH BRANCH IN THE COUNTY OF CHISAGO AND IN THE STATE OF MINNESOTA**

### **REGULAR MEETING**

**Tuesday, February 3, 2026**

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

Chair Steve Cich called the Planning Commission Meeting to order at 6:30 PM.

2. **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Chair Steve Cich led the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. **OATH OF OFFICE**

a. Oath of Office - Steve Cich

**VERBAL  
UPDATE**

The oath of office was administered to Steve Cich to the Planning Commission by Community Development Director, Nate Sondrol.

4. **ROLL CALL**

**Present:** Commissioner Steve Cich, Commissioner Ross Otto, Commissioner Nate Ehalt, Commissioner Kelly Maurer

**Absent:**

**Remote:**

**Others Present:**

**Notes:**

5. **PUBLIC COMMENT**

*Provides an opportunity for the public to address the Council on items that are not on the Agenda. Please raise your hand to be recognized. Please state your name and address for the record. This section is for the express purpose of addressing concerns of City services and operations. It shall not be used to clarify individual's views for political purposes.*

6. AGENDA APPROVAL

a. Approve Agenda

ACTION

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Nate Ehalt  
**SECONDER:** Kelly Maurer  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

7. ELECTION OF CHAIR & VICE CHAIR

a. Elect Planning Commission Chair and Vice Chair for 2026

ACTION

Commissioner Kelly Maurer nominated Nathan Ehalt for Chair.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Kelly Maurer  
**SECONDER:** Ross Otto  
**AYES:** None  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

Commissioner Ross Otto nominated Commissioner Steve Cich as Vice Chair.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Ross Otto  
**SECONDER:** Kelly Maurer  
**AYES:** None  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

8. CONSENT AGENDA

*All matters listed under Consent Agenda are considered routine and/or non-controversial and will be approved by one motion. There will be no separate discussion of these items unless a Councilmember or citizen so requests, in which case the item will be removed from the Consent Agenda and considered in its normal sequence on the Agenda.*

a. Approval of January 6, 2026 Planning Commission meeting minutes

ACTION

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Steve Cich  
**SECONDER:** Ross Otto  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

9. PUBLIC HEARINGS

a. Preliminary Plat for Essby Business Park 5th Addition

ACTION

Community Development Director Nate Sondrol presented the Preliminary Plat for Essby Business Park 5th Addition. The North Branch Economic Development Authority (EDA), has submitted a request for a Preliminary Plat for Essby Business Park 5th Addition. The site is located within the City's established industrial park area, generally west of CSAH 30, east of I-35, and south of 410th Street.

The purpose of the proposed plat is to consolidate and reconfigure existing lots, outlots, and public right-of-way areas to allow for the development of a large-scale manufacturing facility. The Preliminary Plat proposes the creation of a 120-acre lot intended to accommodate a future LP Siding manufacturing facility, along with additional industrial lots, outlots, drainage and utility easements, and associated right-of-way adjustments. The subject property consists of approximately 220.14 total acres and is zoned I-Industrial.

#### Issue(s) to Consider

1. Land Use and Zoning - Staff finds the proposed plat to be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and zoning district standards.
2. Proposed Preliminary Plat - The proposed layout provides logical lot boundaries, efficient access to existing and planned public streets, and flexibility for phased industrial development while maintaining compliance with City Code requirements.
3. Plat Standards - Based on review of the Preliminary Plat, all proposed lots meet or exceed the minimum lot area, width, and depth requirements of the zoning district.
4. Engineering and Infrastructure -

- Streets & Access

The plat relies on existing and proposed public streets, including Fletcher Ave, Goodview Ave, and access connections to 410th Street and CSAH 30. The proposed vacation of a portion of Fletcher Ave right-of-way reflects the revised circulation pattern.

- Utilities

The Subject Property is located within the City's Urban Service Area and is intended to be served by municipal water, sanitary sewer, stormwater infrastructure, and other public utilities. Existing and proposed drainage and utility easements are shown on the Preliminary Plat. Final utility design, sizing, and service connections will be reviewed and approved as part of future site plan, final plat, and engineering plan submittals.

- Stormwater & Drainage

Stormwater management will be addressed through designated outlots and drainage easements. Detailed stormwater plans, grading, and erosion control measures will be required and reviewed at the time of final plat and/or site plan approval.

Public Hearing opened at 6:42 PM. There was no public input.  
Public Hearing closed at 6:43 PM.

Motion to recommend approval to City Council, approving the Preliminary Plat for Hemingway Meadows, with the following conditions:

1. The applicant shall submit and obtain approval of a Final Plat that is consistent with the approved Preliminary Plat, City Code, and Minnesota Statutes.
2. The applicant shall submit detailed engineering, utility, stormwater, grading, and erosion control plans for review and approval.
3. All required permits, fees, development agreements, and financial obligations shall be satisfied prior to the recording of the Final Plat.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Steve Cich  
**SECONDER:** Ross Otto  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

- b. Conditional Use Permit for Outdoor Storage associated with a proposed manufacturing facility for Louisiana Pacific ACTION

City Planner Ryan Saltis presented the Conditional Use Permit for Outdoor Storage associated with a proposed manufacturing facility for Louisiana Pacific. Louisiana-Pacific Corporation (LP) has submitted an application for a Conditional Use Permit to allow outdoor storage of raw materials and finished products associated with a proposed 120-acre industrial site within the City of North Branch.

The proposed facility will receive unpainted OSB-based siding products by truck and rail, which will be temporarily stored outdoors prior to being processed inside the building. Finished products will also be stored outdoors in designated storage areas prior to shipment. Outdoor storage is a required operational component of LP’s ExpertFinish facilities and is necessary due to the volume, variety, and logistics of the materials involved.

The proposed outdoor storage areas are shown on the submitted site plan and will consist of large paved storage yards, internal forklift aisles, and truck circulation routes. Product stacks will generally be approximately 16 feet in height for inbound materials and less than 12 feet in height for finished products. Other outdoor storage will include pallets, empty paint totes, and related materials. Trash compactors and dumpsters will be located outdoors but under roof.

The site is planned to operate 24 hours per day, though shipping activities are currently anticipated to occur primarily during weekday day shifts.

Issue(s) to Consider

1. Land Use/Zoning and Surrounding Uses
2. Site Improvements and Outdoor Storage Operations
3. Consistency with City Code Requirements

Public Hearing opened up at 6:54 PM. There was no public input.  
 Public Hearing closed at 6:55 PM.

Chair Nate Ehalt asked if, for some reason, the existing tree coverage somehow gets decimated by a weather event, are there any provisions that we should be considering from a screening perspective that would be longer term or replacement? City Planner Ryan Saltis explained that we don't have any screening requirements, although Forest Boulevard, County Road 30 would act as a buffer. But there

isn't anything in our City Code related to screening industrial areas.

Chair Nate Ehalt also asked about whether there is potential for expansion, if the Company was looking at operational expansion or finishing, would the company be looking at additional outdoor storage? Nathan Roach, Regional Engineering Manager at LP, answered that they would be looking at more finishing. They're balancing how much yard they build versus what the cost of that yard is versus how much they think they can sell.

Motion to recommend approval/denial to City Council, for a Conditional Use Permit for Outdoor Storage associated with a proposed manufacturing facility for Louisiana Pacific, with the following conditions of approval:

1. The applicant shall comply with all applicable city, state, and federal regulations, including but not limited to building, fire, and environmental requirements.
2. Outdoor storage materials to be stored shall limited to the areas shown on the approved site plan unless amended by the City.
3. Outdoor storage materials to be stored shall be consistent with applicant's narrative unless otherwise approved by the City.
4. Maximum storage heights shall be consistent with the applicant's narrative unless otherwise approved by the City.
5. Any substantial expansion of outdoor storage areas beyond what is approved shall require an amended Conditional Use Permit.
6. All conditions of approval are subject to modification by the City if necessary to protect public safety, health, and welfare or to meet future code requirements.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Steve Cich  
**SECONDER:** Ross Otto  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

c. Variance for Lot Width reduction at PID 16.00482.10 ACTION

City Planner Ryan Saltis presented the Variance for Lot Width reduction at PID 16.00482.10. Dennis Christ (Applicant) has requested approval for a Variance from the City of North Branch Zoning Code Sec 66-210 minimum lot width requirement for an R-2 zoned parcel with 3-6 attached units. The subject property is legally described as PID 16.00482.10 and is generally located West of Oakview Ave and South of Pecan St. The parcel is currently 120 feet in width, while the zoning ordinance requires a minimum lot width of 150 feet for the proposed development. The variance is requested to allow construction of a four-unit residential building consistent in size, scale, and orientation with the existing adjacent multi-family building immediately to the north.

The subject property and the adjacent parcel were historically under common ownership and were developed at a time when zoning standards permitted the existing configuration. The lot has remained vacant for several years, and all necessary public utilities (water and sewer) are already installed and sized to accommodate a four-unit building.

Issue(s) to Consider

1. Land Use/Zoning and Surrounding Uses - The Subject Property is zoned R2 – Medium Density Residential and guided LUR-2 - Land Use Medium Density Residential, per the Comprehensive Plan. The subject site is surrounded by similar zoned R-2 townhomes to the north, B-Business zoned parcels to the west, and R-3 High Density Residential developments to the east. The proposed use is permitted within the zoning district, and the variance request relates solely to lot width, not use or density beyond what already exists in the immediate area.
2. Variance from Lot Width Requirements - It's consistent with the comp plan.

Public Hearing opened up at 7:08 PM. There was no public input.  
Public Hearing closed at 7:08 PM.

Motion to recommend approval to the City Council for a Variance from the minimum lot width requirement to allow a lot width of 120 feet where 150 feet is required, for property located at PID 16.00482.10 subject to the following conditions:

1. The development shall substantially conform to the plans submitted with the variance application for a 4-unit townhome development.
2. All other applicable City Code requirements shall be met unless otherwise modified by this variance.
3. Any future expansion or reconfiguration of the lot shall comply with current zoning standards.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Steve Cich  
**SECONDER:** Ross Otto  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

d. Hemingway Meadows Minor Subdivision

ACTION

City Planner Ryan Saltis presented Hemingway Meadows Minor Subdivision. Reliable Land and Trust (Applicant) has submitted a request for a Minor Subdivision for a new residential subdivision known as Hemingway Meadows, located generally east of Hemingway Ave and south of 372nd St. The undeveloped Subject Property consists of approximately 40.08 acres and is guided and zoned RR “Rural-Residential”. The Preliminary Plat proposes the creation of 4 single-family residential lots that are each approximately 9.7 - 9.8 acres in lot size.

The applicant has submitted a complete application, including preliminary plat drawings, wetland delineation, and septic locations.

Issue(s) to Consider

1. Land Use and Zoning
2. Proposed Minor Subdivision Preliminary Plat
3. Plat Standards
4. Engineering

Public Hearing opened up at 7:16 PM. There was no public input.  
Public Hearing closed at 7:16 PM.

Motion to recommend approval to City Council, approving the Minor Subdivision for Hemingway Meadows, with the following conditions:

1. Chisago County approval of the Wetland Permit Application and Wetland Delineation Report is required prior to construction on the lots.
2. The application shall provide the required Park dedication in the form of land or fees prior to release of the Final Plat for recording.
3. The Applicant or the future owner of the lots shall obtain all necessary approvals, including submittal and approval of a site grading plan, and pay all applicable fees prior to commencing construction on the lots.
4. All fees and financial obligations shall be received by the City prior to releasing the approval documents related to this project for r

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Ross Otto  
**SECONDER:** Kelly Maurer  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

e. Text Amendment to City Code Sec. 66-855 Surfacing ACTION

City Planner Ryan Saltis presented the Text Amendment to City Code Sec. 66-855 Surfacing. City staff has been reviewing the City Code to clarify sections that may be confusing or misleading. One section that has repeatedly come up in discussions with developers is the surfacing requirement in Section 66-855, particularly regarding whether parking areas and driveways in commercial and industrial developments should be paved.

As currently written, the surfacing section only specifies paving requirements for residential properties that are two (2.0) acres or smaller and does not clearly address surfacing standards for commercial and industrial zoned properties. Additionally, Section 66-856 (Drainage) requires poured-in-place concrete curbing for parking lots and access drives in commercial and industrial developments. The intent of this section assumes hard-surfaced parking areas; however, this relationship is not clearly reflected in the surfacing section and should be addressed to avoid conflicting interpretations and enforcement.

At the January 6th, 2026, Planning Commission Meeting, additional discussion occurred regarding whether the two-acre threshold for residential properties requiring hard surfacing remains appropriate. Planning Commissioners expressed interest in reducing the two-acre hard surface requirement down to one acre and directed staff to research the impacts of this possible text amendment.

Public Hearing opened up at 7:23 PM. There was no public input.  
Public Hearing closed at 7:24 PM.

After a brief discussion among the Planning Commission, they agreed that option 4, needs to have updated language added from staff and postponed until next month.

Hard Surfacing in Front Yards Only



The City Council has a purchase agreement in place for the sale of the property, which is comprised of two (2) parcels totaling approximately 0.41 acres to MN Bolt & Screw, LLC. The parcels are legally described as Lot 1, Block 1, North Branch Downtown Addition, and Lot 4, Block 1, North Branch Downtown Addition. The company is proposing to use the property for the sale of industrial products supplies (nuts, bolts, threaded rod, unistrut, and pipe supports).

Per state statute, the Planning Commission must analyze proposed sales of city-owned land to determine (and make the appropriate finding) that the intended purpose of the buyer is consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Chair Nate Ehalt asked if there was a plan to improve the gravel parking lot. The proposed buyer was in attendance and answered that at some point they would want to tar it. Commissioner Steve Cich asked if there were any thoughts about expanding the existing building. The proposed buyer answered that hopefully there would be a time for expansion, but not in the immediate future. Councilmember Patrick Meacham asked if there would be a retail component at this location, and the buyer responded that, in fact, there will be a retail component at this location and that he is aware of ADA-compliant graphics.

Chair Nate Ehalt brought up his concern with the gravel surface with vehicle traffic that's coming and going, and delivery vehicles, there will be a lot of tracking of gravel.

The Motion for the proposed use is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

**RESULT:** Passed  
**MOVER:** Steve Cich  
**SECONDER:** Kelly Maurer  
**AYES:** Steve Cich, Ross Otto, Nate Ehalt, Kelly Maurer  
**ABSENT:**  
**NOTES:**

b. Comprehensive Plan Update

INFO

Community Development Director Nate Sondrol gave the Comprehensive Plan Update. Currently, the comprehensive plan is specifically focusing on the vision. Nate asked the Planning Commission if the commission still feels like the same vision that we have today.

There will be a Comprehensive Plan work session meeting on Wednesday, February 18th, 2026, at 6 PM at the City Hall.

11. NEXT MEETING - March 3, 2026, 6:30PM

12. ADJOURNMENT

The Planning Commission meeting was adjourned at 8:14 PM.



**Prepared By: Ryan Saltis, City Planner**

**Presenter: Ryan Saltis, City Planner**

**Date: 02/26/2026**

**Board & Commission: Planning Commission**

**Subject: Text Amendment to City Code Sec. 66-855 Surfacing**

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**Background Info**

The Planning Commission held a public hearing at the February 2, 2026, Planning Commission meeting to obtain public input on potential Text Amendments to clarify City Code Sec 66-855 Surfacing to include commercial and industrial zoned properties requiring hard surfaces for driveways and parking areas. There was no public comment received at the meeting. The Planning Commission further discussed and provided input to staff for potential modifications to the code and to bring back to the March 3, 2026 meeting for discussion.

**Voting Requirements:**

**Voting Options          Simple Majority**

## Planning Commission Action

Motion to recommend/deny approval to the City Council:

- Text Amendment to City Code Sec 66-855 Surfacing establishing updated surfacing requirements for residential, commercial, and industrial properties.

## Overview / Background

City staff has been reviewing provisions of the City Code to clarify sections that may be confusing or subject to varying interpretation. One section that has repeatedly arisen during discussions with developers and property owners is Section 66-855 (Surfacing), particularly regarding whether parking areas and driveways in commercial and industrial districts are required to be paved.

As currently written, Section 66-855 only establishes surfacing requirements for residential properties two (2.0) acres or smaller and does not clearly address surfacing standards for commercial or industrial zoned properties. This omission has resulted in uncertainty during project review and inconsistent expectations between applicants and the city.

Additionally, Section 66-856 (Drainage) requires poured-in-place concrete curbing for parking lots and access drives within commercial and industrial developments. The intent of this requirement assumes hard-surfaced parking areas; however, this relationship is not explicitly reflected in the surfacing section, creating potential conflicts in interpretation and enforcement.

During prior Planning Commission discussions, Commissioners expressed interest in maintaining neighborhood appearance and protecting public infrastructure while also allowing reasonable flexibility for residential properties, particularly for side or rear parking areas. At the February 3<sup>rd</sup> Planning Commission Meeting, surfacing locations for residential properties 2 acres and under were debated and it was determined that it is appropriate to require hard surfaced driveways and parking areas in the front yard, while allowing flexibility for gravel surfaces on the side yard. Rear yard driveway/parking surfaces should be analyzed and discussed further to review whether the city should allow designated vehicle routes and parking behind the principal structure.

To address these concerns, City staff has prepared two text amendment options that clarify surfacing expectations while balancing maintenance, aesthetics, stormwater considerations and homeowner flexibility.

## Issue(s) to Consider

1. Text Amendment to City Code Sec 66-855 - Surfacing

## Analysis of Issue(s)

### 1. Text Amendment to City Code Sec 66-855 Surfacing

Sec 66-855 Surfacing currently reads as follows:

*“All areas used for parking and driveways on residential lots 2.0 acres or smaller shall be hard surfaced with bituminous or concrete pavement or equivalent pavement as approved by the City’s Public Works Director”*

This existing language:

- Applies only to residential properties;
- Does not address commercial or industrial uses; and
- Does not distinguish between primary driveways and accessory parking areas.

### **Text Amendment Proposals:**

Regulating surfacing requirements across all development types supports orderly site design and overall community quality. Hard-surfaced parking and driveway areas improve safety, accessibility, and appearance while reducing long-term maintenance concerns. Establishing clear standards also promotes predictable development expectations and consistent code administration citywide.

#### Example Code Language Option 1:

***“All driveways and parking areas serving commercial and industrial uses shall be hard surfaced with bituminous, concrete, or equivalent pavement as approved by the City’s Public Works Director.***

***On residential lots two (2) acres or less, the driveway from the public street to the front façade of the principal dwelling shall be hard surfaced. Parking areas and driveways located within the side or rear yard may be surfaced with gravel or other approved aggregate material.”***

This language accomplishes the following:

- Includes front and rear yard gravel surfacing flexibility
- Protects streets from gravel tracking near public right-of-way
- Maintains consistent neighborhood streetscape appearance
- Provides homeowner flexibility for recreational vehicles and accessory parking
- Reduces paving costs for homeowners
- Targets hard surfacing where usage intensity is highest

#### Example Code Language Option 2:

***“All driveways and parking areas serving commercial and industrial uses shall be hard surfaced with bituminous, concrete, or equivalent pavement as approved by the City’s Public Works Director.***

***On residential lots two (2) acres or less, the driveway from the public street to the front façade of the principal dwelling shall be hard surfaced. Parking areas or accessory driveways located within a side yard may be surfaced with gravel or other approved aggregate material. Gravel or aggregate driveways and parking areas shall not be permitted within the rear yard.”***

This language accomplishes the following:

- Maintain hard-surfaced access from the street to the home
- Allow limited homeowner flexibility for side-yard parking (trailers, boats, RV’s)
- Prevent expansion of informal parking areas behind homes
- Reduce visual and drainage impacts associated with rear-yard vehicle circulation
- Maintain clearer enforcement standards by limiting aggregate areas to one defined yard location

By allowing aggregate surfacing only in side yards, the City preserves opportunities for accessory parking while discouraging large rear-yard parking areas that may create drainage concerns, screening issues, or impacts to adjacent residential properties. This approach also simplifies administration by establishing clear locational limits for non-paved surfaces.

### **Planning Commission Action**

1. Motion to recommend Option 1 of the proposed text amendment (Side & Rear Yard Aggregate Allowed)
2. Motion to recommend Option 2 of the proposed text amendment (Side Yard Only – No Rear Yard Aggregate)
3. Motion to recommend approval of Options 1 or 2, with modifications as discussed by the Planning Commission



**Prepared By: Nathan Sondrol, Community Development Director**

**Presenter: Nathan Sondrol, Community Development Director, Matthew Hill, City Administrator**

**Date: 02/26/2026**

**Board & Commission: Planning Commission**

**Subject: Comprehensive Plan Update**

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The Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee requests that the Planning Commission review two specific sections of the 2018 Comprehensive Plan:

- **Section 2: Values and Vision (all groups will review this section)**
- **Section 3: Land Use and Growth**

Your focused review is vital as we move toward the final revision of the plan. This should include a thorough overview of the current language, and listing any changes that the group feel necessary due to the changes and growth of the City.

We are establishing the following timeline for the process:

The committee met on February 18 and discussed the following items:

- *Urban Service Area Boundary*
- *Types of Housing/Demand*
- *ADU's: Where are they acceptable and identified a Goal for placing regulations*
- *Short Term Housing*
- *Ecological Preservation*
- *Goal: Design Standards*

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday March 18 at 6pm at City Hall.

- **March 2026:** The Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee will convene to review the individual group findings.
- **April or May 2026:** Presentation of the Comprehensive Plan review results to the Planning Commission for public hearing and consideration, and Council approval in June.

Supporting documents are attached, including:

- Sections 2 and 3 of the Comprehensive Plan, and a link to the entire document  
- <https://www.northbranchmn.gov/DocumentCenter/View/216/2018-Comprehensive-Plan-PDF>
- Summary of the feedback forms from the community questionnaires

**Requested Action**

To provide input on Sections 2 and 3 of the comprehensive plan

**Voting Requirements:**

**Voting Options**      **Simple Majority**

# 3

## LAND USE & GROWTH

### Introduction

The Land Use & Growth Management Chapter is a roadmap that helps guide City officials and staff on how to make policy decisions related to land use and future growth. These policies may influence the type, location and density of future development within the community. This chapter is intended to result in orderly and efficient development that utilizes land efficiently and makes the most of the community's resources. It offers guidance on key initiatives for the community which is consistent with the City's vision and goals.

In this chapter is a description of existing land use patterns, as well as an overview of how the City anticipates land will be used and developed in the future. It accommodates growth and applies the desired qualities of the community.

Another important aspect of this chapter is that it also serves as the foundation for reviewing the City's Zoning Ordinances, Zoning Map, Subdivision Regulations and other implementation tools. Implementation of the Land Use Plan produces several important implications:

#### USES

Every parcel is placed into a specific land use category. Each category includes a description of the type of land use or uses intended for that category. This description should match with the types and forms of development currently found in North Branch and desired for the future.

#### RELATIONSHIPS

Much like a jigsaw puzzle, the true picture comes from how each piece fits together into a whole. The Land Use Plan guides how elements of the built and natural environment come together in North Branch. These relationships will determine how North Branch will look, function and feel.

#### ACTIONS

The Land Use Plan sets the framework for public actions and investments. Utilities, streets, parks, and facilities are all influenced by the form and pace of development.

### Figure 3-1: Existing Land Use

Identifies the location, amount, and types of existing land uses in the City of North Branch in 2018. The inventory as conducted as part of this planning process reflects general development patterns and is intended for general planning purposes only.

*The City of North Branch is a complete community that provides a well-balanced and wide range of places to live, work, shop and play.*

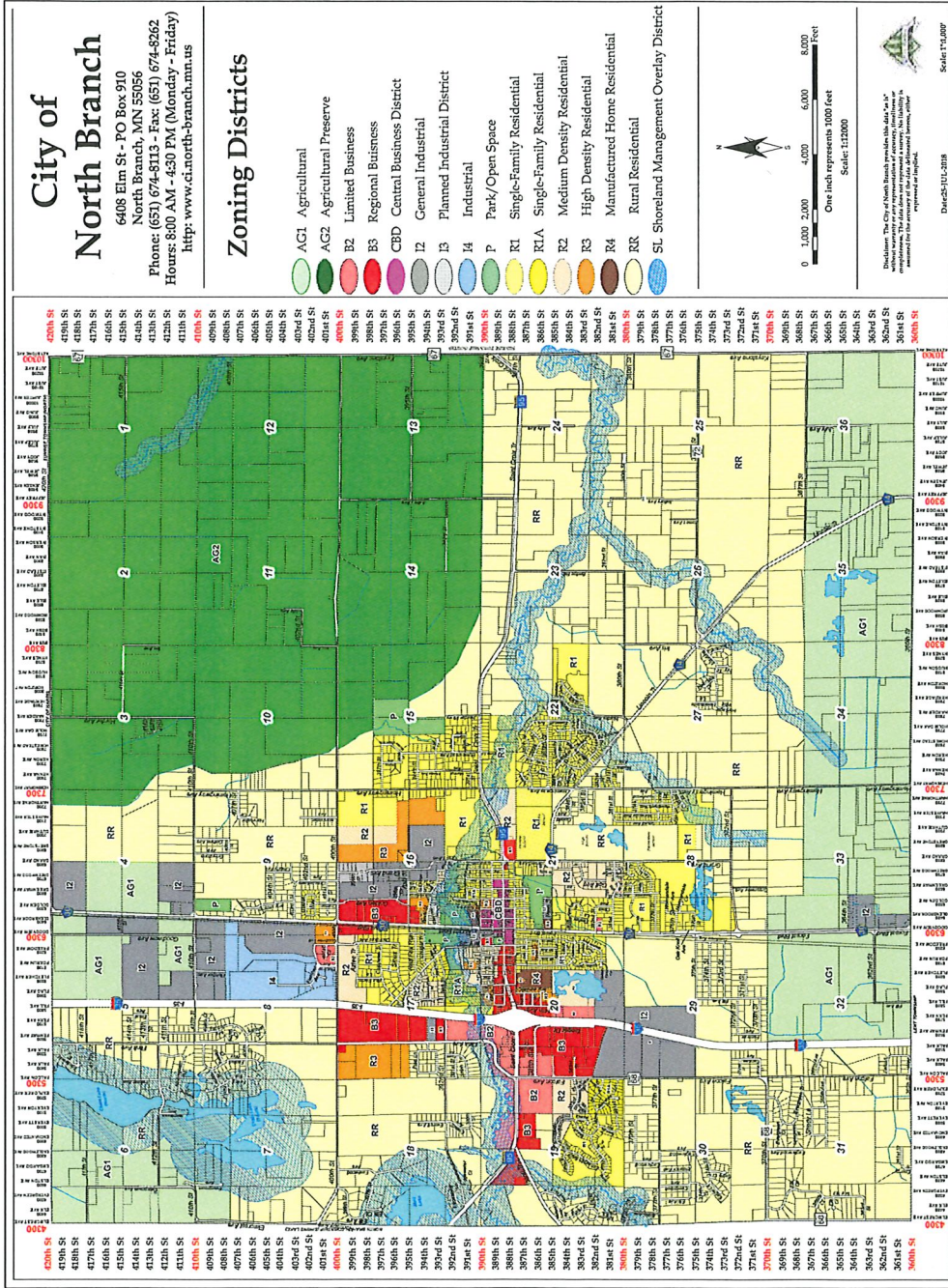


Table 3-A: Summary of Existing Land Use - 2018 summarizes the amount and type of existing land uses designated (whether or not fully developed) in North Branch.

<b>Table 3 - A: Summary of Existing Zoning 2018</b>		
<i>Existing Land Use Designation</i>	<i>Gross Acres*</i>	<i>Net Percent of City</i>
<i>Agriculture (AG1 and AG2)</i>	<i>8,680.2</i>	<i>37.6%</i>
<i>Rural Residential (RR)</i>	<i>9,961</i>	<i>43%</i>
<i>Low Density Residential (R1 and R1A)</i>	<i>1,869.7</i>	<i>8.1%</i>
<i>Medium Density Residential (R2)</i>	<i>403.4</i>	<i>1.7%</i>
<i>High Density Residential (R3)</i>	<i>216.6</i>	<i>.9%</i>
<i>Manufactured Home Residential (R4)</i>	<i>27.2</i>	<i>.11%</i>
<i>Central Business District (CBD)</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>.18%</i>
<i>Limited Business District (B2)</i>	<i>214.8</i>	<i>.9%</i>
<i>Regional Business District (B3)</i>	<i>437.3</i>	<i>1.9%</i>
<i>General Industrial District (I2)</i>	<i>858.1</i>	<i>3.7%</i>
<i>Planned Industrial District (I3)</i>	<i>21.6</i>	<i>.09%</i>
<i>Industrial District (I4)</i>	<i>158.6</i>	<i>.7%</i>

\*Gross acres of use determined by GIS mapping data.

Figure 3-1:  
Existing Zoning



## *Existing Zoning*

### **Agriculture (AG1 and AG2)**

Over one-third of the city's land area (37.6%) is currently used for agricultural purposes. Housing densities are low, and this zoning is characterized by active farms, hobby farms and homes on large lots. The northeast corner of the city is the historic river bottom of the St. Croix River and is framed by the historic river bluff line. Soils are well suited for sod farming and the production of produce. By maintaining a low density of development, it is the City's intent to preserve and protect the many natural resources found in this part of North Branch, including lakes, streams, wetlands and woodlands.

### **Rural Residential (RR)**

Rural Residential makes up 9,961 acres or 43% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is largely characterized by single family residences set on larger lot sizes to accommodate on-site sewage treatment systems. Some of these areas are located within the city's designated Urban Service Area and no new development is allowed within this zoning district without connecting to municipal services. Areas located outside of the Urban Service Area must meet a minimum buildable acre standard so as to ensure that there is sufficient land area with the appropriate soil separation to support both a primary and a future secondary on-site sewage treatment system.

### **Low Density Residential (R1 and R1A)**

Low Density Residential makes up 1,869.7 acres or 8.1% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is largely characterized by single-family homes with densities of 1 to 4 dwelling units per acre in those areas served by municipal utilities. Older areas of the city were platted before municipal utilities were established, resulting in larger lot sizes to accommodate on-site sewage treatment systems. The city has a limited inventory of older, historic homes that are located primarily in the one square mile area that had been the original city of North Branch. The areas around the historic center feature homes built approximately 50 years ago, with new development happening neighborhood by neighborhood since that time. 2017 marked the start of a new housing boom with new single family homes being constructed on existing lot inventory and multiple developments platted for the purpose of constructing even more single family homes. The new development that is planned or in process as of the writing of this plan is intended to provide the city with a more diverse mix of housing styles and at a wider range of price points.

### **Medium Density Residential (R2)**

Medium Density Residential makes up 403.4 acres or 1.7% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. Medium Density Residential is characterized by single family homes on smaller lots that required for R1, townhome style development, and two-family attached homes densities of 1 to 6 dwelling units per acre.

### **High Density Residential (R3)**

High Density Residential makes up 216.6 acres or .9% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. High Density Residential is characterized by land use that consists of all forms of multi-family attached housing units such as two-family attached homes, townhomes and apartment buildings.

High density residential has densities of up to 18 dwelling units per acre.

#### **Manufactured Home Residential (R4)**

The Manufactured Home Residential zoning classification only exists for the benefit of the four established manufactured home parks. It currently makes up 27.2 acres or .1% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. Changes in Minnesota laws now allow manufactured homes in any zoning district that allows twin homes, subject to all applicable lot standards, such as lot size, frontage, road widths, etc. The new land use map and updates to the zoning map will include areas previously zoned at R4 within either an R2 or R3 zoning class.

#### **Central Business District (CBD)**

The Central Business District is a unique classification intended to provide for a planned, unified development of the City's historical downtown area. This zoning classification makes up 43 acres or .18% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. Permitted uses include service based businesses, office uses, retail uses, apartments and hotel uses, among other things, in close proximity to one another to promote pedestrian movement between businesses. The area offers a mix of street and lot parking, with the parking lots being located behind buildings at various locations throughout the district. The existing land use is primarily commercial buildings, many of which are vacant and in need of rehabilitation. The area is dotted with existing single family homes which were intended to be phased out of use and converted to commercial uses over time. The area is adjacent to TH95, with sidewalks that provide pedestrian passage, but pedestrian movement across TH95 is difficult and poses a significant challenge to the goal of this area being an inviting public space offering a "range of retail and civic experiences" as hoped by the authors of the 2009 Comprehensive Plan.

#### **Limited Business District (B2)**

The Limited Business District makes up 214.8 acres or .9% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is characterized by business uses and services, lodging, and retail that are also permitted in the CBD, but that are dependent on automobile traffic. Additionally, the area is intended to serve as a transition zone between the CBD and the Regional Business District (B3).

#### **Regional Business District (B3)**

The Regional Business District makes up 437.3 acres or 1.9% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is characterized by business uses and services, lodging, and retail that are also permitted in the CBD and B2, but also provide for the location of commercial activities that serve primarily regional or nonlocal market. The lot sizes are larger so as to provide the area needed for retail and commercial activities that require very large buildings.

#### **Light Industrial/Office District (I1)**

The Light Industrial/Office District is defined as a region characterized by office, manufacturing and warehousing uses, but currently no part of the city is zoned for this use.

### **General Industrial District (I2)**

The General Industrial District makes up 858.1 acres or 3.7% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is characterized by manufacturing, assembly, warehousing, storage, showrooms and contractor shops.

### **Planned Industrial District (I3)**

The Planned Industrial District is similar to I1, and makes up 21.6 acres or .09% of the total acreage in the city.

### **Industrial District (I4)**

The Industrial District makes up 158.6 acres or .7% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch. This land use is characterized by manufacturing, assembly, warehousing, storage, showrooms and contractor shops as can be found in I2, but its location adjacent to I35 makes this area highly visible and is subject to stricter design standards. Currently, over 200 acres in the I2 and I4 zoning classifications are vacant but ready for development in the industrial park owned by the City through its Economic Development Authority.

### **Overlay Districts**

Sensitive areas, such as those adjacent to bodies of water or within a designated flood plain or flood fringe are managed by the City in accordance with applicable Minnesota Statutes. Setbacks, design standards and other restrictions on use within the overlay district are imposed so as to limit ecological impact and loss.

### ***Analysis of Existing Land Use***

With over 36 square miles of land, an analysis of the existing land use illustrates several important issues about current and future development:

**The largest land use category in terms of area in the City is agriculture.** Followed by the rural residential land use category. It is anticipated that the agricultural areas will continue to be used for agricultural production due to its geologic characteristics and the community's desire to support its rich agricultural heritage and industry. The rural residential areas, which are served by private wells and septic systems, will also have agricultural or hobby farm uses. The total land areas for these two uses will not likely change, but development within these areas will occur at a much slower pace than the low density residential uses served by municipal utilities.

**The second largest residential land use category is low density residential.** It is anticipated that expanded development within this zoning classification will continue to grow throughout the life of this plan, resulting in greater intensity of the use without increasing the overall land area designated for this use. The three primary residential categories (R1 and R2) account for 9.8% of the total land use in the City.

**The Central Business District is characterized by a development style common among other older downtowns.** It is pedestrian oriented in nature with buildings built to the sidewalk. Parking for these uses is typically on street, in the rear of buildings, or shared among several users. The transition from residential uses to commercial uses did not occur as anticipated when the zoning district was created. There are numerous vacant buildings and the area is ripe for redevelopment.

**The City, through its Economic Development Authority, owns over 200 acres of land zoned for industrial uses.** Until this land is sold and developed, no additional industrial zoned land is needed within the Urban Service Area. If the city were to allow for heavy industrial uses, consideration should be given for compatibility with adjacent land uses. Controls should be in place that protect against negative impacts to neighboring property.

**The nation's third largest solar farm is partially located within the City's limits.** Other smaller solar installations are located entirely within the City. The solar installations feature native plantings intended to re-establish prairie habitat and support pollinator species, such as the Monarch butterfly.

**The City benefits from existing park facilities, trails and open spaces.** Approximately .6% of the total acreage in the City of North Branch is utilized as city owned park and open space uses. The City is also home to the Janet Johnson WMA, owned and managed by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The Sunrise Prairie Regional Trail and other city sidewalks and trails serve the city's goal of being walkable and bikeable, but it is the goal of the city to expand those opportunities and consideration should be given to identify areas for preservation for these purposes.

**There are significant residential development opportunities in the northwest portion of the city.** Large tracts of land are currently undeveloped and the opportunity exists to establish traffic corridors without the need for redevelopment.

## *Vision for Land Use*

The City of North Branch is a complete community that provides a well-balanced and wide range of places to live, work, shop and play. Land uses make efficient use of existing infrastructure, contribute to a strong local economy, preserve natural resources and contribute to a high quality of life.

### **RESIDENTIAL USES**

A diverse housing stock allows people at any stage in their life to be able to find a home in North Branch, which may include housing options suitable to multigenerational households. Older housing is well maintained while new development expands housing options to complement existing neighborhoods.

### **COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL USES**

A significant amount of commercial and industrial uses can be found within the City that allow residents to work in North Branch, while also being able to meet all of their day-to-day needs. Commercial and industrial uses are compatible with their surrounding land uses.

### **PUBLIC/INSTITUTIONAL**

Public and institutional uses are viewed as valued resources to the community and contribute to making North Branch a better place to live and do business.

### **PARKS, OPEN SPACES AND TRAILS**

Quality parks and open space are within close proximity to all residents, providing recreational opportunities to encourage an active lifestyle. A wide variety of community facilities are provided to serve a range of interests. The City of North Branch has a proposed trail system that will allow bicycle and pedestrian access to most of the major pedestrian generators within the city, including schools, shopping areas, and parks. Many of the proposed trails are destinations in themselves, offering scenic walks or rides around many of the city's scenic views. With recreational activities such as running, bicycling, and walking increasing in popularity, the city's trail system will not only offer a recreational opportunity in itself, but will also help to connect the community's parks with the neighborhoods.

# GOAL 1

*Maximize the use of land within the City of North Branch in a way that strengthens the local economy, preserves natural resources, and ensures a high-quality of life for all residents.*

## **Goals, Objectives, and Policies**

The following is the primary goal for land use followed by a series of objectives and policies intended to influence future land use decisions in a direction that is aligned with the Vision Statement.

### **OBJECTIVE 1.1**

**PRESERVE AND ENHANCE THE SMALL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT OF THE DOWNTOWN.**

#### *Policy 1.1.1*

*Encourage and promote the renovation and rehabilitation of existing buildings within the downtown.*

#### *Policy 1.1.2*

*Connect businesses with façade improvement grants and loans.*

#### *Policy 1.1.3*

*Make infrastructure improvements that enhance the pedestrian realm such as lighting and seating and gathering places for community activities.*

### **OBJECTIVE 1.2**

**USE LAND IN A MANNER THAT STRENGTHENS THE ECONOMY OF NORTH BRANCH.**

#### *Policy 1.2.1*

*Strive for a balance of areas guided for industrial uses and areas guided for commercial uses.*

#### *Policy 1.2.2*

*Continue to identify all areas prime for redevelopment and analyze the best use for each property. Work to re-zone these properties and amend this plan as appropriate.*

#### *Policy 1.2.3*

*Increase the number of residential housing units in the City to attract new residents to increase the workforce and thereby improve the local market for commercial and industrial opportunities.*

#### *Policy 1.2.4*

*Actively work to infill vacant land within the Urban Service Area that will be connected to municipal services, while preserving a network of functional ecologic areas.*



*Policy 1.2.5*

*Allow for mixed uses within some zoning districts to accommodate commercial, retail and residential uses.*

*Policy 1.2.6*

*Discourage “leapfrog” patterns of development on municipal utilities.*

**OBJECTIVE 1.3**

**PROTECT AND PRESERVE NATURAL RESOURCES FOR LONG TERM ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENJOYMENT OF RESIDENTS.**

*Policy 1.3.1*

*Work with landowners and other governmental entities to either obtain property or ensure protection of natural areas with high ecological value.*

*Policy 1.3.2*

*Discourage patterns of development that would stress existing infrastructure and ecosystems.*

**OBJECTIVE 1.4: USE LAND IN A MANNER THAT ENSURES A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE FOR RESIDENTS.**

*Policy 1.4.1*

*Expand parks, trails, sidewalks and other amenities as the City’s population continues to grow.*

*Policy 1.4.2*

*Review and encourage methods of development which promote linkages among residential, civic, commercial, industrial and recreational facilities using trails and sidewalks for safe and enjoyable pedestrian uses and provides pedestrian connections between complementary land uses.*

*Policy 1.4.3*

*Review and encourage street and sidewalk designs to provide for easy access by police, fire and ambulance services, school buses, and plowing.*

## Land Use Plan

The land use plan provides the framework for the growth and development of the City. The land use plan serves as a guide for the character and intensity of development and will be supported by other land use controls and public actions taken pursuant to the Comprehensive Plan.

The land use map appears in Figure 3-2: Future Land Use. The plan illustrated by this map evolved from inputs and evaluations received through the planning process. The Plan builds on the existing community pattern to achieve the desired vision for the future of North Branch. Where the Future Land Use map guides property for something different than the existing zoning, zoning approvals such as variances and conditional use permits should not be considered inconsistent with the comprehensive plan if otherwise deemed appropriate.

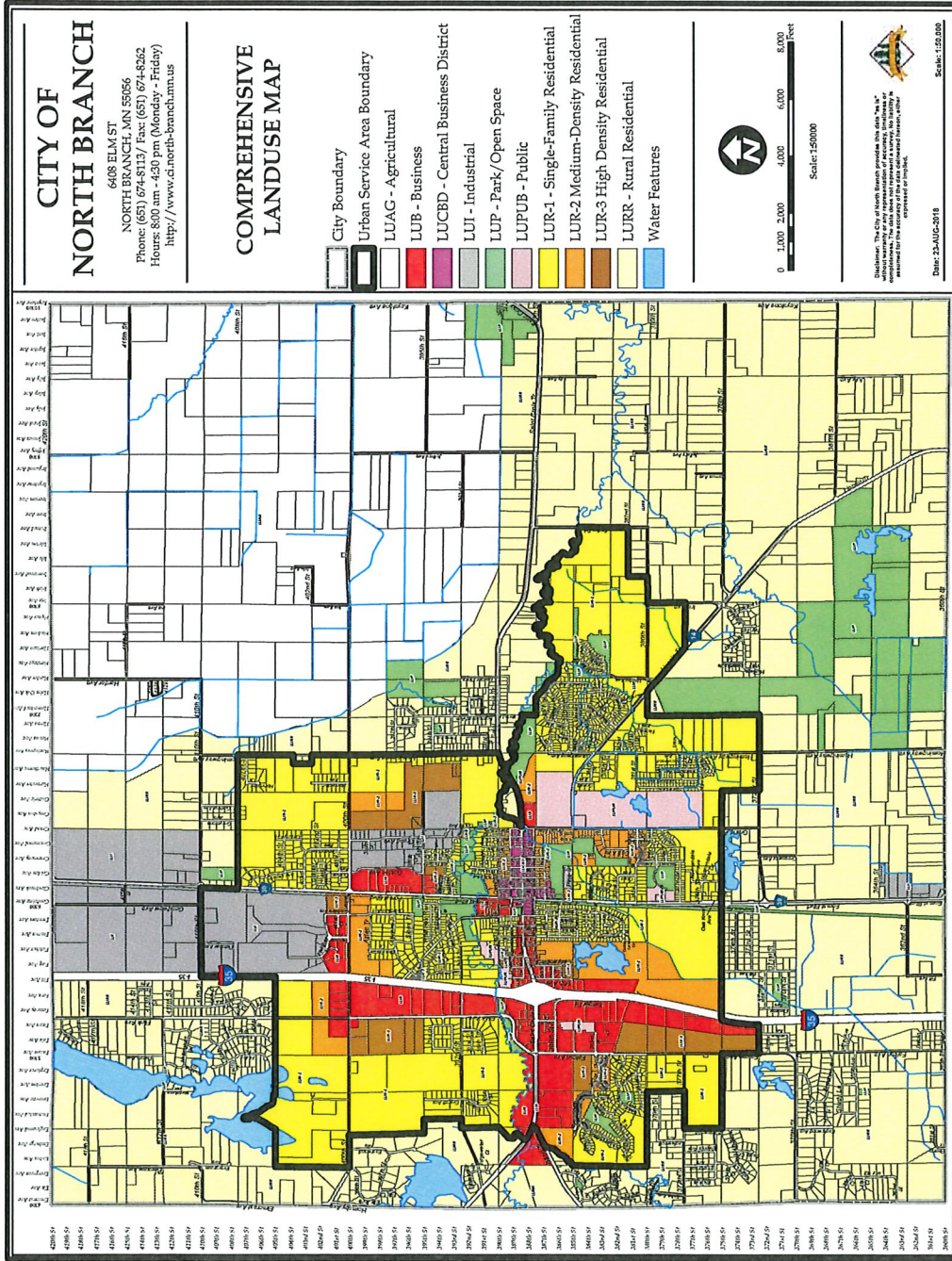
**Table 3 - B: Summary of Future Land Use**

Future Land Use by Designation	Gross Acres*	Net Percent of City
Agriculture (AG)	5,271.4	22.9%
Rural Residential (RR)	9,992.6	43.3%
Low Density Residential (R1)	3,492.5	15.1%
Medium Density Residential (R3)	577.2	2.5%
High Density Residential (R3)	330.8	1.4%
Central Business District (CBD)	71.4	.3%
General Business District (B)	802.2	3.5%
Industrial District (I)	1,123.7	4.9%

\*Gross acres of use determined by GIS mapping data and does not include public and institutional areas which are separately defined under the proposed land use map.



Figure 3-2:  
Future Land Use



## *Residential*

### **Rural Residential**

The land use in this category is hobby farms and homes on large lots. The area is outside of the designated Urban Service Area and will be served by wells and individual septic systems. Individual lots must be a minimum size of one acre buildable, and the presence of wetlands and other natural features may result in actual lot sizes much larger than one acre in order to achieve the required one acre buildable standard. This lowest density of residential development is intended to reduce demands on the rural roads and protect the natural resources found in North Branch. The primary zoning district that would generally correspond to this land use designation would be the LURR Rural Residential District.

### **Low Density Residential**

The land use in this category is single-family detached homes served by municipal utilities. This plan anticipates that this is where the majority of new housing units will be added over the next 20 years. One of the biggest strengths of the City of North Branch is its attractiveness to young families. Part of this attraction is due to the anticipated development of quality affordable single-family homes, and the existing parks and trails system, school district and proximity to the metropolitan areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Continuing to add new housing units will provide more opportunities for all families to locate in North Branch, while making older housing more affordable. Densities targeted in this category are limited to no more than 4 dwelling units per acre. The primary zoning district that would generally correspond to this land use designation would be the LUR-1 Single Family District.

### **Medium Density Residential**

Medium density residential uses are typically in the form of single family homes on smaller lot sizes, townhomes, duplexes, and small scale apartment and condo buildings and served by municipal utilities. Advantages of these types of housing are that less property maintenance may be required since yards are smaller and some medium density developments may have associations that handle lawn care and snow removal. As a result, these types of housing tend to be very attractive to seniors and professionals. Densities targeted in this category are up to 6 dwelling units per acre. The primary zoning district that would generally correspond to this land use designation would be the LUR-2 Medium Density District.

### **High Density Residential**

The High Density Residential land use category consists of multiple family attached housing oriented in a vertical fashion, more commonly referred to as apartments and condominiums and served by municipal utilities. Housing units may be owner or renter occupied. High density housing is an efficient land use because it contains more dwelling units per acre than other residential uses.

High density residential uses are located in places with compatible adjacent land uses and where the local street system will accommodate the traffic. Ideally, they are located near commercial uses or employment centers to maximize the number of people who can walk or use alternative modes of transportation.

The densities targeted in this category are over 6 dwelling units per acre. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUR-3 High Density Residential.

### *Agriculture*

#### **Agriculture**

The city’s strong agricultural heritage is clearly visible in the farm fields located in the northeast corner of the city. The fields, bordered by the historic St. Croix River bluff line, are dotted with artesian wells, have deep pockets of organic soils generally not conducive to development, and are linked by a series of more traditional farm style roads. Single family homes are present and seem accessory to the commercial operations of the farms. Non-agricultural uses will be limited and densities targeted in this category are no more than one dwelling unit per 10 acres. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUAG Agriculture.

### *Commercial*

#### **Downtown Business**

Although a number of single family homes currently exist in the Central Business District, new residential development should be part of a mixed use plan with a balance of housing and commercial uses within a single building or complex. Replacing single family homes with mixed use structures and redeveloping existing commercial buildings will help support a healthy business environment and allow more people to be able to walk to their destinations.

Buildings should be located close to the street but with ample space for sidewalks. Parking should generally remain in the rear of the property when on-premise parking is offered. Streetscape improvements that enhance the pedestrian realm, such as planters, hanging baskets, street trees, outdoor seating, public art, street lighting, should be prioritized here. The City should continue to work with business owners and encourage façade improvements by connecting them to grant and funding opportunities. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUCBD Central Business District.

#### **General Business**

The General Business guiding designation allows a wide variety of uses including those for convenience oriented, neighborhood-oriented, community-oriented and bulk retail-oriented markets and consumers. These areas provide a wide range of goods and services to serve many of the shopping and dining needs of people who live, work in or visit the City. Certain commercial uses, such as those devoted to motor vehicle-oriented retail or service activities (e.g., vehicle service and fuel sales, drive-through businesses and sales of motor vehicles) depend on access to major transportation routes and often have characteristics that are incompatible with residential areas. Other commercial uses, such as those involving wholesale and retail trade of large volume or bulk commercial items with on-site storage and warehousing, may have both commercial and industrial characteristics.

This guiding designation also allows a variety of uses including professional offices, administrative offices, research and laboratory facilities, wholesale showrooms, service facilities (e.g., conference

centers, lodging and reception halls), and business uses having limited contact with the general public. These areas may provide for limited retail sale of convenience-type products and services for the immediate surrounding area.

Commercial uses in this classification are expected to develop with the highest standards of design and performance, with a higher level of amenities such as landscaping, preservation of natural features, architectural controls, pedestrian trails and other features. Office parks and campus-style developments are encouraged in these areas. Commercial office uses can also serve as, and provide for, an orderly and progressive transition between higher and lower intensity land uses. Locations adjacent to the Central Business District, TH95 and I35 may be subject to stricter design standards so as to achieve an attractive, inviting and high quality retail shopping and commercial services in areas of high visibility and sensitivity to surrounding uses. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUB General Business District.

### **Industrial**

Industrial uses include all forms of businesses with manufacturing, distribution, warehousing or other industrial uses that may have consequences typically associated an industrial activity such as noise, odor, dust or low quality aesthetics. As a result, when these uses are in close proximity to residential, park and open space uses, additional restrictions may be appropriate. These uses may generate truck traffic and may involve outdoor storage. Locations adjacent to residential uses, I35, TH95 or other high visibility areas may be subject to additional design standards. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUI Industrial District.

### **Public/Institutional**

Public, semi-public or institutional uses are comprised of churches, schools, city offices, public works facilities, fire stations, public utilities, and other governmental or non-profit entities. This use may also include parks, designated open spaces and regional storm water management, such as publicly maintained storm water management ponds. This land use classification is intended to differentiate these sites as providing a common amenity or service and not land that is intended to be developed. The primary zoning district that would correspond to this land use designation would be the LUPUB Public/Institutional District.

### ***Required Zoning Changes***

The City has adopted zoning regulations for the purpose of carrying out the policies and goals of the land use plan element of the Comprehensive Plan. The application of zoning districts and the specific regulations should support the objectives of the Plan. As a result, an outcome of adopting the plan will be the review and modification of the Zoning Ordinance and Zoning Map as necessary.

The land use plan provides the basis for guiding zoning decisions that will be made by the City and private property owners. Minnesota Statutes Section 462.357 states that “.....the planning agency shall study and propose to the governing body reasonable and practical means for putting the plan into effect. Subject to the limitations of the following sections, such means include, but not limited to, zoning regulations, for the subdivision of land, an official map.....” This statute anticipates that the

zoning regulations will be reviewed and updated to ensure implementation of the land use plan. In a broad sense, this review of the zoning ordinance should examine the following:

- The regulations for each zoning district should be reviewed to determine if they fit with the intent of the Comprehensive Plan.
- Zoning districts should be examined in relationship to the land use designation. Changes in zoning districts may be needed to match zoning with land use.
- The City will need to thoroughly review and update its Ordinances to address inconsistencies and conflicts to integrate the concepts described in this Comprehensive Plan. Updating the Zoning Ordinance will be a large undertaking that will require significant input, time and energy.

One of the policy decisions the City will need to make is how to implement the land use plan through the zoning map. Unlike the Metropolitan Land Planning Act (Minnesota Statutes Section 473), which requires consistency between the land use plan and zoning in cities within the Twin Cities metropolitan area, North Branch may choose to take a number of implementation strategies. Each has varying implications for existing property uses and current zoning. The strategies include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Keep current zoning in place until such time as the use terminates or redevelopment is initiated.
- Rezone property to a zoning district compatible with a land use plan category.
- Develop an interim strategy to address current use situations as they relate to long term objectives.



# 2

## VALUES AND VISION

### Values

Residents and other stakeholders were asked what they loved about North Branch at the Community Expo, at a chamber meeting, and at the first community café. The values expressed most often were:

**THE STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

**A HOME TOWN FEEL**

**THE CITY'S COMMITMENT TO ITS PARKS AND TRAILS**

**A COMMUNITY THAT ENCOURAGES BIKING AND WALKING**

**QUALITY SCHOOLS**

These values were reiterated at each of the other three community cafes and served as the foundation for the vision statements expressed below.

### *Vision for North Branch in 10 years .....*

North Branch is a growing and safe community with outstanding natural and recreational amenities and opportunities for all, and well maintained infrastructure, vibrant business districts and neighborhoods, and provides residents with an excellent quality of life.

### *Vision for Land Use*

The City of North Branch is a complete community that provides a well-balanced and wide range of places to live, work, shop and play. Land uses make efficient use of existing infrastructure, contribute to a strong local economy, preserve natural resources and contribute to a high quality of life.

#### Residential Uses

A diverse housing stock allows people at any stage in their life to be able to find a home in North Branch. Older housing is well maintained while new development expands housing options to complement existing neighborhoods.

#### Commercial and Industrial Uses

A significant amount of commercial and industrial uses can be found within the City that allow residents to work in North Branch, while also being able to meet all of their day-to-day needs. Commercial and industrial uses are compatible with their surrounding land uses.

#### Public/Institutional

Public and institutional uses are viewed as valued resources to the community and contribute to making North Branch a better place to live and do business.



*North Branch is a growing and safe community with outstanding natural and recreational amenities and opportunities for all, and well maintained infrastructure, vibrant business districts and neighborhoods, and provides residents with an excellent quality of life.*

### Parks, Open Spaces and Trails

Quality parks and open space are within close proximity to all residents, providing recreational opportunities to encourage an active lifestyle. A wide variety of community facilities are provided to serve a range of interests. The City of North Branch has a proposed trail system that will allow bicycle and pedestrian access to most of the major pedestrian generators within the city, including schools, shopping areas, and parks. Many of the proposed trails are destinations in themselves, offering scenic walks or rides around many of the city's scenic views. With recreational activities such as running, bicycling, and walking increasing in popularity, the city's trail system will not only offer a recreational opportunity in itself, but will also help to connect the community's parks with the neighborhoods.

### *Vision for Economic Development*

A strong business community is the cornerstone of a vibrant city. Economic development encompasses the policies and activities that improve the long term economic and social wellbeing of the community. Communities with strong economies have financial resources to support the levels of service that their residents need and desire. Successful communities realize that economic development is about bringing together social, natural, infrastructure, and economic assets in the community to sustain the "whole" community.

### *Vision for Municipal Utilities*

The City of North Branch, individually and in collaboration with the North Branch Water & Light Utility, has a significant investment in its existing public utilities systems (water, wastewater and stormwater). The continued expansion and development within the Urban Service Area will require the extension of public utilities. In general, the existing infrastructure system is well-positioned and of adequate size to support expansion. However, coordination will be required between community development and the required expansion of the utility system. In some cases, the cost of providing utility service may dictate where and when future growth will occur.

### *Vision for Transportation*

North Branch is located at the cross roads of I35 and TH95, providing for ease in and out of the city. Within the city limits, however, these features will require a coordinated approach to providing movement of traffic through the city to local destinations, safe pedestrian and bike corridors, and improved intersections to safely serve the increasing number of commercial vehicles passing through North Branch.

### *Vision for the Environment and Sustainability*

Natural infrastructure includes all systems that relate to natural resources and contribute to an improved public life. Natural infrastructure considers the full range of natural resource uses including economic, environmental, health, cultural, and aesthetic. This broad view leads us to include surface water, groundwater, stormwater, wastewater, drinking water, geology, topography, soils, natural areas, open space, green spaces, urban forest, habitat, vegetation, scenic views, and parks and trails in natural infrastructure.

Natural infrastructure is a key element in planning where development should or should not take place within a city. This element is important to communities and development as it avoids certain development hazards, provides health benefits to citizens, protects ecological systems and enhances biological diversity, and offers communities unique quality of life components. Consideration of natural infrastructure ensures that homes are built upon stable dry soils, provides clean drinking water, accounts for resource based economic activities, provides scenic views and open spaces, and plans development that respect the integrity of natural systems and incorporate natural features into development.

### *Minnesota GreenStep City*

In 2018, the Mayor and City Council approved a resolution to make North Branch a GreenStep City through the MPCA and League of Minnesota Cities' program. Minnesota GreenStep Cities is a voluntary challenge, assistance and recognition program to help cities achieve their sustainability and quality-of-life goals. This free continuous improvement program, managed by a public-private partnership, is based upon 29 best practices. Each best practice can be implemented by completing one or more actions at a 1, 2 or 3-star level, from a list of four to eight actions. These actions are tailored to all Minnesota cities, focus on cost savings and energy use reduction, and encourage civic innovation. North Branch is currently a Step 1 City. As North Branch plans for the future, it will continue to consider GreenStep City Best Management Practices as they relate to the goals and objectives of this comprehensive plan.



# Comprehensive Plan Questionnaire: Key Patterns and Trends

## 1. Community Strengths and Identity

Across the early sections of the questionnaire (pages 2–3), respondents consistently highlight:

- A strong sense of community pride and belonging.
- The small-town feel and safety that make the area family-friendly.
- Deep appreciation for natural spaces, recreation, and access to the outdoors.
- Recognition that schools and local events form the heart of community identity.

**Trend:** The community’s greatest strength lies in its cohesion and shared values. Schools, local partnerships, and volunteerism serve as anchors of civic pride and engagement.

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## 2. Transportation and Accessibility

From the middle portion of the survey (around page 6), respondents discuss:

- A strong desire for safe biking and walking routes, particularly for students and families.
- Concerns about traffic flow near schools and main corridors.

**Trend:** Participants want more walkable, connected routes—aligning with health, safety, and sustainability goals. There is clear community interest in making it easier to move around town without a car.

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## 3. Education and Workforce Alignment

Later responses (pages 7–8) show widespread recognition of:

- Education quality as a defining strength of the community.

- Calls for more career-connected learning, technical training, and real-world skills.
- Alignment with the district's goal of ensuring students graduate with a plan, not by chance.

**Trend:** The community supports educational innovation—especially programs that bridge academics with career readiness and local workforce opportunities.

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#### **4. Economic and Environmental Balance**

Responses from pages 9–10 highlight the desire to:

- Support small businesses and encourage local job creation.
- Promote sustainable growth that balances targeted industry development with environmental preservation.
- Explore renewable energy and responsible land use; Maintain and protect natural resources and open spaces.

**Trend:** Residents value a balanced approach—advancing economic opportunity while safeguarding the environment and rural character that define the community.

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#### **5. Community Engagement and Governance**

The final sections (page 11 and beyond) emphasize:

- Appreciation for transparent communication from local leaders.
- Calls for inclusive planning that welcomes voices from all age groups, especially youth and families.
- Recognition that civic collaboration is essential for moving forward.

**Trend:** There is strong appetite for collaboration and communication—people want to be informed, involved, and part of shaping the community's future.