



# NORTH BRANCH

## —Minnesota—

Steve Cich  
Chair

Nathan Ehalt  
Commissioner

Ross Otto  
Commissioner

Gary Shaefer  
Commissioner

Open  
Commissioner

**PLANNING COMMISSION  
REGULAR AGENDA  
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2025 @ 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, October 7, 2025**

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. ROLL CALL

**Present:** Commissioner Gary Schaefer, Commissioner Steve Cich, Commissioner Nate Ehalt

**Absent:** Commissioner Ross Otto

**Remote:**

**Others Present:** Commissioner Patrick Meacham

**Notes:**

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

**RESULT:** Passed

**MOVER:** Nate Ehalt

**ACTION**

**SECONDER:** Gary Schaefer  
**AYES:** Gary Schaefer, Steve Cich, Nate Ehalt  
**ABSENT:** Ross Otto  
**NOTES:**

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 September 2, 2025 Planning Commission Meeting Minutes ACTION

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

b. Approval of September 17, 2025 Planning Commission Public Hearing Meeting Minutes ACTION

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

7. PUBLIC HEARINGS

8. REPORTS

a. Comprehensive Plan Update INFO

Community Development Director Nate Sondrol gave a brief update regarding the Comprehensive Plan. The City is planning to have more updates in the next month or so, with a small committee reviewing each section of the Comprehensive Plan. We'll get more information out as soon as possible.

b. Website INFO

Community Development Director Nate Sondrol gave an update regarding the City of North Branch's new website. The website is expected to go live by the end of this year. We're currently looking for any ideas and thoughts regarding anything pertaining to the Planning Commission/Planning that you would like to see on our website.

c. Beach Transport Rezoning Discussion INFO

City Planner Ryan Saltis introduced the Beach Transport Rezoning Discussion to the Planning Commission. At the September 17th Special Planning Commission Meeting, Loren Beach (Applicant) requested approval for a Variance from Design Standards for building materials, Text Amendment to City Code to include outdoor storage, equipment & materials as a Conditional Use in the B-Business Zoning District, and Conditional Use Permit for outdoor storage, equipment & materials at 39777 Flink Ave. These requests are for a proposed building and garage for Beach Transport Inc. During the public hearing, there was opposition from the surrounding property owners and their representatives regarding

the use of the parcel as a heavy truck operation, the easement to access the property, and diminishing values of their property. The Planning Commission voted to deny the requests for the Variance, Text Amendment, and Conditional Use Permit. It was determined that each request failed to meet the established criteria. The applicant, Loren Beach, has asked the Planning Commission and City Staff for direction and insight as to how he can make this operation work at this location. Loren is seeking possible solutions following the denied requests and provided the following response to City Staff: "Here is my formal request for the consideration to rezone the B3 district located on Flink Ave, North of 392nd. This area is better suited for industrial zoning rather than "Business". The rezoning consideration for this area to "industrial" is far more suitable, and at the very least should be considered for a "flex zone". Prior to the updated 2018 comprehension plan Schwing Bioiset was zoned industrial all by itself. Moving further away from the apex of the city, design standards and zoning restrictions should decrease, thus promoting business growth and even "Small Business growth" within the city. Exceptions listed in Sec 66-943 in the city code allow building designs and materials that are in harmony with other current structures within this district. The Planning Commission has had zero consideration for this exception, which leads to the rezoning purpose. Starting at 392nd along the east side of Flink Avenue, there is first an outdoor storage company with containers and job trailers. Next, there is Schwing Bioiset, which is an industrial company making components for the industrial market. Next is Lambert's Lumber, this is a lumberyard completely exposed to Highway 35. Next is Gopher State Storage with mini storage and outdoor storage, including RVs, boats, and trailers. 100% of the businesses located on Flink Ave fall under the permitted use for I-industrial type zoning. To anticipate retail or other B3 type business in this area will stifle growth in this area for years to come." Based on this response, the applicant would be seeking an alternative approach in rezoning the area. This would require Planning Commission and City Council approval and would include a review of the corridor as a whole and existing surrounding uses. The rezoning request would have to follow the procedures, conditions on approval, and findings of fact found in Chapter 66, Article II, Division II of City Code.

Community Director Nate Sondrol reminded the Planning Commission that the items from the September 17th meeting will be going to the City Council at the next meeting on Tuesday, October 14th.

Chair Steve Cich said that after the last meeting, he had some thoughts about rezoning and that it might not be a bad idea. He said that he's assuming that North Branch Chevrolet must have to have a continuous CUP for having cars outside, as well as Anderson and Koch Ford and Cartful. Those are very highly visible areas that have outdoor parking, and they're right along 95. Steve said that he is also hearing flex business when the Council was discussing this last time. I think that's not a bad idea for up there, because we could have a mix of office buildings, auto shops, like he has in that area. Steve mentioned that he was thinking maybe we could call it an area where you could have a variety of businesses there. Steve asked Loren Beach if he was going to use dust-free material for the driveway.

Loren Beach responded that it would be bituminous milling, which is recycled asphalt, dust-free, and it would be a temporary driveway. He said that he talked to his neighbor yesterday, and she has concerns of her own. She can discuss those, but one of the ways I want to work together is not to create a permanent driveway that's completely dividing her land in half. So one of these ways is recycled asphalt, so it's easily removable. It's not creating a permanent driveway and putting her land in a box; this is how you have to develop it. That's not what my intentions were from the start. Loren mentioned that they have lots of trailers, but everyone keeps the trailers at their own house. We have owner operators who own their own dump trucks, so they take them home.

Chair Steve Cich asked Loren how many trailers are on any given day, possibly two a day. Loren responded that yes, and they would actually be traveling less because currently he lives off of 400 to the West, so they would be driving less towards the City. There's no increased truck traffic.

Commissioner Gary Shaefer asked Loren if, in his original request, he had mentioned storage of materials. Loren responded that that was an assumption; there would be no storage. Gary said that he felt this discussion was a bit unusual because he doesn't recall ever revisiting something that has already been decided on, and that should be moving to the City Council with the Planning Commission's recommendation.

Commissioner Nate Ehalt responded to Gary that he believes it's to have a conversation regarding the uses within that particular area. So, looking at the overall zoning as a discussion with Mr. Beach, not necessarily a decision on what has already been done. I think you know Loren, having some conversation about what that looks like? You had proposed, at least in your narrative here, that it should be industrial zoning. What does that mean to you? And is that what you would be seeking from the city, an absolute rezone? And are you looking at it specifically to your parcel, or what would be your request to the city so that we can have a little bit more of a thoughtful conversation here regarding your rezone?

Loren Beach responded, saying that, to be completely honest, it is to fit my design standards. I did that by finding the exclusion to the code for the design standards. Hopefully, it's in there regarding the exception. If your building is in harmony with other buildings within your district, that is a rightful exception. I'm pushing for an industrial that would ease the design standards to allow the building that I have. Does it need to be industrial? Can it be flex? Yes. Can there be businesses on the front that are more appealing to traffic on Flink? Absolutely. I'm not putting that area in a box. I don't want to do that. I don't want to put the neighboring land owners in a box, but I'm driving past every single business here, and they're all industrial.

Commissioner Ehalt responded, saying, I hear what you're saying, and I think from the perspective of coming into a community, when you drive along a particular roadway, if you see uses, you assume that that is what could be expanded along the entire way. The city went through a very thoughtful process of identifying specific zoned areas for development, which provides consistency and knowledge for all businesses that are interested in moving into a location. And so, while there may be existing businesses that are in place that are no longer conforming to the new zoning standards. They did conform at one point in time, and so by directly using those as a decision to rezone another area, in my mind, doesn't necessarily work because the city went through a comprehensive zoning process, as well as other businesses that might be looking to come into an area, and not even specific to this, but if you look at the entire zoning of the city, they're dependent upon that for making good, long range decisions, whether it's developers who want to know how the area might look 20 years around that development, or other businesses and are curious what might be located there, next to their business in 15 or 20 or 30 years down the road. And so if we're looking specifically at your parcel, it's going to be even harder, I would say, from a rezone perspective. And that's why I was thinking, you know, what area are you suggesting or asking the city to entirely consider? You know, while spot zoning isn't necessarily completely illegal in Minnesota, the Supreme Court in 1969 and Zylka versus City of crystal made it very clear what some of those standards should be in terms of how you look at zoning on a very localized area and determine multiple factors that we as a commission need to look through as a lens to make sure that we are holding the liability away from the county or away from the city, to be able to protect the city and the taxpayers as much as possible. So I guess I'm really kind of curious. They don't just simply look at your parcel, that five acres, I don't think passes legal muster. We would need to be looking at a much larger area from the standpoint of zoning to be able to even start to get into more of those comprehensive conversations of what would then be appropriate. And I think it is appropriate to have conversations at points in time of rezoning, but it shouldn't be specific to one parcel. It needs to look at the remainder of the land within that entire area. I'm not I always want to make it clear, like none of us are anti-business or opposed to business, it's that. It's when zoning is in place; it's in place for all businesses. So the rules are known, right? So if we change the rules every five years, we end up picking winners and losers, and that's not

what cities do. We try to put zoning in place so that businesses can decide, is this appropriate for me to develop if you've got a housing development just to the west that came in and spent millions of dollars putting in infrastructure, building homes, and that's a business. Developing land as a business, and all of a sudden, you rezone that area to the east of Flink as industrial uses. Industrial is pretty high intense in terms of what could be used there, and I don't see that as being very compatible, and that's very right next door to housing development, right? So the developer knew at that point in time that this was zoned business, and they could easily look at the documents that are here before, and they could say, okay, generally, these are the businesses that would be categorized as permitted uses. And here's what could be conditional uses within that. This makes sense for us to put money into that area and develop that, and having that known consistency, I think, is really important for all businesses. So, again, we're not the ones deciding who should go in what particular area. Cities try to be more comprehensive in terms of their approach. Again, I'm really trying to seek for you as we're not just looking at your parcel. What are you thinking? Are you looking at everything north of 95? Cities are very long-range forever entities, right? And so we need to think in terms of decades, not in terms of years, and we need to be considered thoughtful of that, just like a lot of businesses that go out and seek particular areas before they develop. They do a lot of homework. They look at the decisions and when they were made. Are they decisions that they can rely upon, or are they things that are going to happen every three or four or five years? Because that provides a lot of inconsistency, right? And a lot of unknowns for businesses as they're seeking areas and looking at where they should invest millions of dollars, depending on what that business is, and so going through a comprehensive rezoning process like the city did is not something that should be undone quickly or lightly. I'm not saying it should never be looked at at all. I'm saying that they're in place so that it's consistent.

Commissioner Patrick Meacham mentioned that since we're having an informal discussion, it's going to be on the docket next week. I want to be careful about making any statements, but correct, I just want to go back to what Mr. Beach said for part of the zoning change, or wanting to have that conversation is about design standards, is what you said, if I heard correctly, but changing the zoning or the land use does not change the need for still variance to the design standards correct, because we have the design standards now, even if it's rezoned, that changes more the CP and the text amendment language, as opposed to the need for a variance of design standards. Community Development Director Nate Sondrol responded that this was correct.

Commissioner asked Loren Beach if you would bring the standards to a point where it would be aesthetically pleasing, but allow a little broader range of material. So like making the wainscoting be rock or stone or brick, right, but the mass covering would be steel. Is that kind of what your plan was? Loren responded that if that's what it takes, he'll put wainscoting on. Commissioner Cich questioned the Council if this would be something we possibly consider, not necessarily as a variance, but possibly for that area, could we do that? I mean, because the one thing that I've also read on comp plans is that they're supposed to be somewhat rubbery or flexible, and you can tweak them as you would like, is what I've read up on, and do that as a flowing plan. And in our case, granted, we have an industrial park. So I would not want industrial there, okay, I want businesses there, offices, maybe an office park type of thing, right, something like that. So your business kind of fits that. It's just yeah, it kind of does. Because if you think, if you think about being in the CBD area, okay, you have TAC auto. You have the auto dealerships. You have the one on the one on Grand and 95 they all have some sort of outdoor storage. They also have vehicles outside because the customer hasn't picked them up. That's an allowable business in that area, and that's basically similar to what he would want to do. So he's just a repair facility. That's all he's doing. That's my take on it, and you don't look to expand your business further than the five acres. You don't want to store anything on there

Lori Pulkrabek, a trustee for the Karen R Swanson revocable trust, which owns the property on the three sides of the applicant's parcel, read a statement to the Planning Commission. Imagine my surprise and

learning last night about this meeting tonight, which discusses rezoning not only Mr. Beach's parcel, but also the surrounding area. Mr. Beach recently bought a 4.98-acre parcel and wants to use it in a way that is incompatible with its being business zoning. There are many sites within the city zoned for industrial that will be compatible because the planning commission recommended denial of all three of his requests last month; he's now back to ask to rezone the entire area, including the 52 acres owned by my mother's trust. For the record, we oppose rezoning this area. Last month, planning commissioners talked about all of the work that went into the comprehensive plan to guide our city into the future. To change the zoning to appease one small property owner at the expense of neighboring properties would be illogical. I appreciate your previously expressed commitment to doing what's best for the city by maintaining the current zoning. And as a second, I met with Lauren yesterday afternoon at his request in an attempt to be a good neighbor, as we've had some challenges in the last few months that he's owned his five-acre or 4.98-acre parcel, and I specifically asked during that meeting whether he was aware of any news or updates regarding his property at the city. He said no. Four hours later, I learned this topic was on the agenda for tonight, so I took time out of work to meet with someone who had no intention of being honest or a good neighbor. I've learned my lesson and realized that this is all a waste of time and city resources. Again, I want to be crystal clear, we oppose this rezoning. Thank you.

Commissioner Nate Ehalt responded, I'm not sure what the point of zoning would be, or our ordinances or design standards, if every business that approaches. Is it going to want multiple variances or changes from what exists today to make it work? That's where I get stuck. If we're going to start to do this for one, we'd better be prepared as a commission to do it for every single business. And I mean that wholeheartedly. And so if we get a formal request to redo the zoning, and we move in the direction of breaking from case law and what and why and how cities plan for then I'm not quite sure why zoning would even be important for the city of North Branch, to be honest with you, when you look at the criteria that the Minnesota Supreme Court has used in terms of some of their cases that they've looked at, it's laid out there consistency with comprehensive plan if you're going to change public purpose or benefit. Is it benefiting the public to be able to do a rezone here, or are we having this conversation to look at it for the benefit of one that is not and does not pass muster, compatibility with surrounding land uses? Some of that perhaps there could be an argument that there is because of the businesses to the south, but they're also legally non conforming businesses, meaning they were put in place legally at one point in time, met those standards, the standards then have changed for the future, and of course, reasonable and due process, and that's an important one for an applicant as well as a city to consider. And so I think it's really incumbent upon us to figure out a way to better communicate, perhaps the city to all businesses, so we don't get into situations with businesses or entrepreneurs or people that want to develop here and be here, because I don't want to see Mr. Beach not be here. I don't I think his business should be in the city of North Branch. It's been in the city of North Branch. You currently operate here, and we don't want to see people go elsewhere, but we also shouldn't be put in, boxed into a corner just because of where that business now might want to be located when these things have been known and they're planned for I really would suggest that the EDA work with Mr. Beach and find an appropriate area for his business that is the business of Economic Development. Association is working with businesses to retain them. Ours is to look at in a quasi-judicial way what exists for ordinances and how it impacts the overall city, the plans that have been put in place, and the risk if we make significant variations from it. And so that's, that's where I'm at. And I really would encourage, you know, staff to reach out to the ADA and figure out how to work with Lauren. I We don't want to see you go, that's not that's not it all. We don't want to see you be in the city. And I don't know how to make that more clear, but I also need to look at it from the standpoint of as a planning commissioner, we've got certain responsibility, legal responsibilities, to be able to protect the city.

Commissioner Steve Cich pointed out to Loren that before I would have bought the 5 acres of land, I would have done a little more research. Commissioner Gary Shaefer said that he really likes what Mr. Beach is trying to do here, trying to establish a business in this City, but the business you want to

establish looks like it should go in the industrial zone area. Commissioner Cich mentioned that he thought the EDA would be more than supportive to work with Mr. Beach, they want to absolutely have business within our industrial park, and maybe would be interested in doing a land swap.

9. NEXT MEETING - NOVEMBER 4, 2025 6:30 P.M

The next Planning Commission meeting is supposed to be held on November 4th, 2025. Due to that being election day, the meeting will be moved to a different date.

10. ADJOURNMENT

The Planning Commission meeting was adjourned at 7:45 PM.

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