



MEETING MINUTES

LAND USE COMMISSION

Wednesday, May 14th, 2025

6:00 PM

James C. Lytle City Council Chamber, Second Floor
Lorraine H. Morton City Hall, 909 Davis Street

Members Present: Loren Berlin, Darush Mabadi, Jameika Mangum, Max Puchtel, Luke Harris-Ferree, Myrna Arevalo

Members Absent: Brian Johnson, Kiril Mirintchev, Chair Jeanne Lindwall

Staff Present: Neighborhood Land Use Planner Meagan Jones, Planning Manager Elizabeth Willias, Planning and policy Supervisor Erin Baynes, Community Development Director Sarah Flax

Presiding Member: Vice-Chair Max Puchtel

I. CALL TO ORDER/DECLARATION OF A QUORUM

Chair Puchtel called the meeting to order. Neighborhood and Land Use Planner Meagan Jones performed the roll call and a quorum was established.

II. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES: January 15, 2025

Commissioner Puchtel made a motion to approve the January 15th 2025 meeting minutes

Motion: Arevalo

Second: Berlin

Motion Passed

Ayes: Loren Berlin, Darush Mabadi, Jameika Mangum, Max Puchtel, Luke Harris-Ferree, Myrna Arevalo

Nayes:

Abstain:

Absent: Brian Johnson, Kiril Mirintchev, Chair Jeanne Lindwall

III. DISCUSSION

A. Land Use Commissioner Training

Commissioners will be trained on standards and best practices for Land Use Commission activities.

Michael Blue (Teska Associates) and David Silverman (Ancel Glink) led a training for commissioners on behalf of the Illinois Chapter of the American Planning Association. They reviewed the roles and responsibilities of commissioners, elected officials, and staff in the land use decision-making process. They emphasized that commissioners' decisions must be based on findings of fact and the standards outlined in the zoning code, while elected officials whose roles are broader may consider other policy and political factors. Staff's role is to manage and support the process, not to advocate for a particular outcome. Commissioners also introduced themselves and reflected on why they chose to serve.

The presenters emphasized that staff reports are a condensed and essential summary of relevant information for commissioners, including code references, project history, and context. Commissioners are encouraged to reach out to staff with questions before meetings open communication improves staff reports over time. The role of staff is as informed guides, not advocates, helping developers understand code requirements and process expectations while remaining neutral. Developers often work with staff for months before a proposal reaches the commission, but they always retain the right to a hearing, even if staff has advised caution. Staff should not promise approvals or rejections, nor should they advocate for projects, as that could compromise legal objectivity. Additionally, other commissions (like Preservation or Design Review) may contribute feedback that informs the process. Public input and legal guidance from the city attorney are also important components of the review. Overall, staff act as knowledgeable sherpas informing, not steering, the process.

Commissioners and the training team discussed how developers often begin with a maximal proposal and adjust through early conversations with staff. A commissioner asked whether zoning code reform efforts in other cities have effectively streamlined development review without harming community input. One trainer responded that zoning remains inherently contextual and that no zoning code can eliminate negotiation because economics and site conditions vary; another simply stated, "no," noting that developer-driven discussions are inevitable. They stressed the importance of thoughtful, flexible code drafting tailored to local context. The conversation also touched on coordination with other taxing jurisdictions, regional planning efforts, and the challenges of overly prescriptive codes. Mr. Blue and Mr. Silverman emphasized the importance of commissioners being prepared, reading materials in advance, and visiting project sites—while also understanding their role as representatives of local government, even if appointed rather than elected. A commissioner raised a question about how to handle disruptive public comments, prompting clarification that commissioners are indeed officers of the government and must remain professional and clear in their conduct.

The presenters explained that commission decisions must be based on specific standards outlined in the zoning ordinance, not on personal opinions or unrelated issues like stormwater, financing, or interior design. They emphasized the importance of staying within the commission's purview and relying on staff or the ordinance itself for clarity. Commissioners were encouraged to weigh public testimony appropriately and to tie their reasoning back to the standards.

The discussion also touched on tools to help commissioners stay focused, like standardized worksheets used in other communities to review findings of fact. A commissioner asked whether standards were available in a more accessible form than just staff reports or the zoning ordinance. Staff clarified that while the standards are embedded in the ordinance, they had pulled them out separately for training and reference.

Mr. Blue and Mr. Silverman then introduced the LaSalle Factors, a legal framework originating from Illinois case law that influences how zoning standards are interpreted and consistently applied across municipalities. While these are not strict rules, they shape the structure of many zoning codes. The key takeaway: each case is unique, and the commission does not set precedent; their decisions are tied to the specific facts and standards of each proposal.

Commissioners are reminded to differentiate between credible testimony (e.g., consistent stories from multiple neighbors with specific details) and generalized emotional objections. The speaker also notes that staff often anticipates areas of concern and prompts applicants to address them, including recommending studies like traffic analyses when warranted.

Regarding standards and findings of fact, the group is advised that some standards may not apply, but failure to meet a particularly relevant one could be reason enough to recommend denial even if others are met. Commissioners can also apply conditions of approval to help a project meet standards by mitigating potential impacts on neighboring properties.

Commissioners and presenters engaged in a nuanced discussion about how to interpret and weigh standards for approval when reviewing cases. The conversation emphasized that not every standard must be met for a project to be recommended or approved, particularly if certain standards carry more weight in the context of a specific proposal. This contrasted with some commissioners' past understanding, and existing commission rules and procedures, that all standards must be met to vote in favor. The presenters recommended the group consult with the City Attorney for clarity, as interpretations can vary by community. There was also discussion around the limits of financial considerations in deliberations, appropriate handling of public comment, and the differences between making recommendations versus final decisions. The session ended with a brief transition into ex parte communications and conflict of interest, with appreciation expressed for the commission's deep engagement.

IV. COMMUNICATIONS

None

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

Linda Damashek urged the Commission to provide the public with more time to review the upcoming edits to the draft comprehensive plan and to reopen the public hearing to allow testimony on that draft. She emphasized that the plan effectively sets policy for the city and that a fair, democratic process requires meaningful public input on such an important document.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Arevalo moved to adjourn the meeting.
Seconded by Berlin

Motion:
Second:
Motion Passed

Ayes: Loren Berlin, Darush Mabadi, Jameika Mangum, Max Puchtel, Luke Harris-Ferree, Myrna Arevalo

Nayes:

Abstain:

Absent: Brian Johnson, Kiril Mirintchev, Chair Jeanne Lindwall

The next Evanston Land Use Commission meeting is scheduled to be held **on Wednesday, May 21st, 2025, at 6:00 pm**, in the James C. Lytle Council Chambers in the Lorraine H. Morton City Hall.

Respectfully submitted,
Justin Bock, Administrative lead

Reviewed by
Meagan Jones, Neighborhood and Land Use Planner