

Memorandum

May 12, 2021

**To: Ordinance Committee
Common Council
Louis Schulman, Chairman, Zoning Commission
Francis Dimeglio, Chairman, Planning Commission
Laoise King, Chief of Staff
Jessica Vonashek, Chief of Community & Economic Development
Steve Kleppin, Planning & Zoning Director**

From: Harry Rilling, Mayor

Re: Combining Planning & Zoning Commissions

In meeting with my Economic and Community development team, we have identified an opportunity to further streamline the land-use process and improve efficiencies by adopting the Citywide Plan recommendation to evaluate the benefits of recombining the Planning and Zoning commissions.

Below there is information and recommendations provided by Steve Kleppin, Planning & Zoning Director.

Based on the information provided below, we strongly recommend merging the Planning and Zoning commissions in the City of Norwalk.

Citywide Plan Reference

Chapter 12, Future Land Use, Zoning & Urban Design, p. 230:

Norwalk has separate Planning and Zoning Commissions which contributes to a disconnect between planning, land use policy, and zoning. Some cities and towns in Connecticut have a combined Planning and Zoning Commission to support more efficient and collaborative relationships between planning and zoning. Among peer cities, New Haven has a City Planning Commission with combined duties and responsibilities while Danbury and Stamford have separate bodies like Norwalk

Part V, Chapter 13, Stewardship & Implementation:

vi. Explore the capacity and merits of combining the Planning and Zoning Commissions into a single body.	2020	Mayor; Common Council; Planning Commission; Zoning Commission; Planning and Zoning staff	Staff time
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Planning Commission Workload

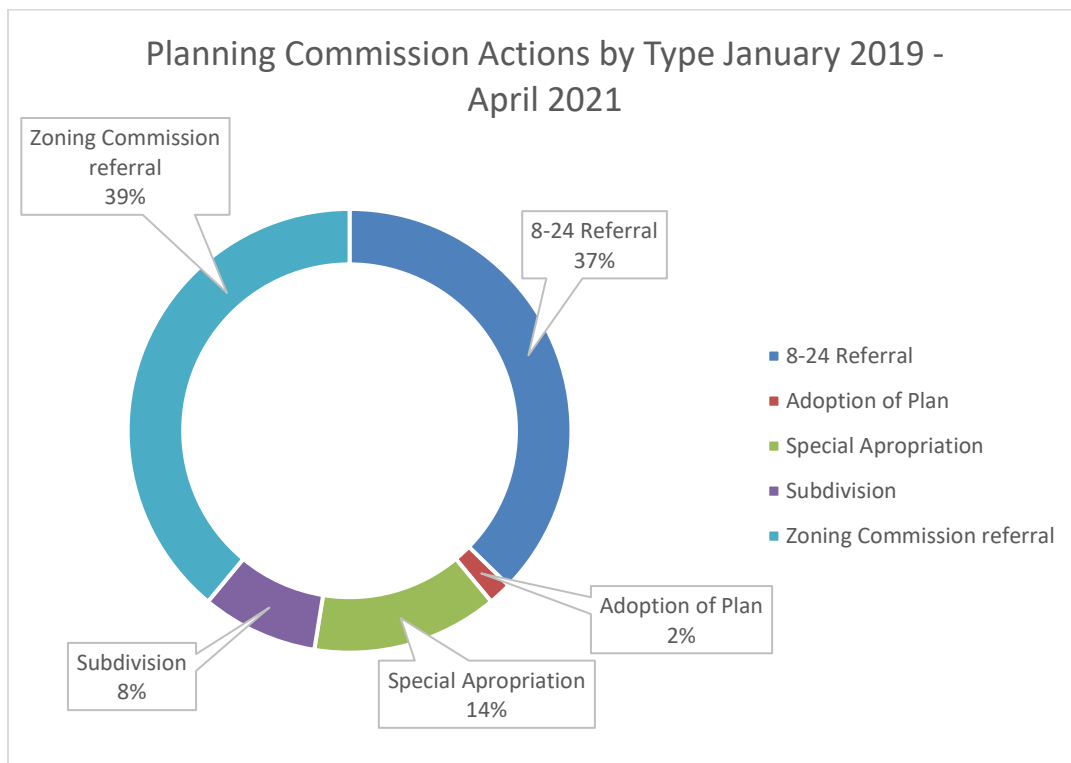
Before the merits are considered, it is important to understand the Planning Commission's workload. The CT General Statutes provide an overview of the responsibilities of a Planning Commission. The main functions include the development and adoption of the Plan of Conservation and Development (Citywide Plan). This plan is a 10-year planning document that guides the city's growth and development. Norwalk's plan was adopted in December of 2019 and amended in October, 2020. The update process is approximately 24 months from start to finish. The second major function is the review and approval of subdivisions. The Planning Commission has had a total of five subdivision applications from 2019 through April of 2021, the majority being 2-lot subdivisions. Subdivision applications are fairly straightforward and should be considered as-of-right if the lot(s) conform to the minimum dimensional standards. The small number of subdivision applications is largely due to the built nature of the City.

The other statutory requirement (CGS 8-24) is that the Planning Commission must confirm that all municipal improvements are consistent with the Citywide Plan. The Commission reviews approximately one 8-24 request per month. Similarly, any proposed amendment to the zoning regulations or zoning map must be referred from the Zoning Commission to the Planning Commission. These are often brought by applicants in connection with development proposals.

In addition to the statutory requirements, the City Charter charges the Planning Commission with developing an annual capital budget based on City departmental requests and also receives special appropriations. The review and preparation of the capital budget is the one area that will add a considerable workload to a combined commission. I would recommend that this be handled by a subcommittee of the Commission.

The following table and chart indicate the number of actions by type that the Planning Commission resolved from 2019 through April 2021:

Row Labels	Count of Item Name/Identifier
8-24 Referral (<i>finding of consistency with the Citywide Plan</i>)	23
Adoption of Plan (<i>every 10 years</i>)	1
Special Appropriation	8
Subdivision (<i>one of main functions of the PC</i>)	5
Zoning Commission Referral (<i>duplicative effort</i>)	23



Based on historical workload and type, as shown in the chart above, it can be deemed that the majority of the Planning Commission's work can easily be absorbed by the Zoning Commission, adding less than one additional item per meeting.

The Zoning Commission has 22 scheduled meetings a year, but probably has an extra half dozen per year based on demand, while the Planning Commission has 13 scheduled meetings per year.

Advantages

Considering that over one-third of their workload consists of matters referred to them from the Zoning Commission, there is a significant time and cost benefit to applicants from not having to present requests to both commissions. When matters are referred from Zoning to Planning that adds one to two months to the approval process and adds costs in terms of meeting attendance and preparation. In addition, many of the 8-24 approvals involve projects that require Zoning Commission approval as well (new school, turf field, etc.). These extra meetings cost the City money since consultants are often involved and can require staff overtime and unnecessarily prolong the approval process. Fewer meetings will also reduce City costs in terms of hours billed toward meetings from staff as well as outside contractors who prepare the official minutes.

In addition to the cost benefits for the City and applicants, it will also ensure a more consistent decision making nexus between the planning policies and the resulting end rules and projects. Often, the Planning Commission expresses a desire for a broader role and more say in items not under their jurisdiction, which they are asked to review for consistency with the Citywide Plan.

Makeup of Combined Commission

For informational purposes the following table outlines how other communities are structured.

Combined/ Size	Separate
Fairfield: 10 members/ 4 year term limit	Danbury: Planning: 8 members; Zoning: 9 members (+3 alternates)/ 2 year term limit
Hartford: 7 members (+3 alternates)	Stamford: Planning: 5 members (+2 alternates)/ 4 year term limit; Zoning: 5 members (+1 alternate)
Bridgeport: 9 members/ 3 year term limit	Stratford: Planning: 5 members (+3 alternates), 4 year term limit; Zoning: 5 members (+3 alternates), 4 year term limit
New Haven: 7 members, 5 active, 1 alternate, 1 non-voting	

Currently the Zoning Commission has seven seated members and three alternates, while the Planning Commission has eight members.

If voted in support, future discussions and decisions will need to focus on the number of members to be appointed in a merged Commission and member term limits.

Feel free to reach out to me or Steve Kleppin, Planning & Zoning Director with any questions.

END