

PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES

March 24, 2025

The Fergus Falls Planning Commission held a regular meeting on March 24, 2025 in the Council Chambers of City Hall. The meeting was called to order at 5:15 PM. Present were Sarah Duffy, Nate Kunde, Mike Walls, Wayne Schuett, and Paul Vukonich. Ryan Fullerton and Ala Lysyk were absent. Staff present: Klara Beck and Jill Hanson.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES AND AGENDA

Motion to approve the minutes from January 27, 2025 and agenda was made by Commissioner Kunde and seconded by Commissioner Vukonich. Passed unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS

3a. Council-Directed Review of City Code Regarding Private Garages Accessory Buildings

Klara Beck explained the City Council has directed the PC to review zoning code language regarding stand-alone garages in residential districts. Currently, city code does not allow for stand-alone garages on residential lots without a primary structure. Garages are classified as accessory structures, requiring a principal use or structure on the lot.

A resident contacted a council member to request a change to the city code to allow a stand-alone garage, prompting this review. The Planning Commission is therefore asked to evaluate potential revisions to the zoning code to determine if or how stand-alone garages may be permitted in residential zones.

Klara mentioned possible next steps:

- Maintain the current zoning regulations, which prohibit stand-alone garages, OR
- Redefine garages as primary structures, OR
- Implement a Conditional Use Permit process for stand-alone garages, OR
- Change the code

Commissioner Kunde expressed support for allowing stand-alone garages in residential zones and suggested exploring the addition of a new zoning classification. Commissioner Vukonich proposed that such uses could potentially be reviewed through a conditional use permit process.

Klara Beck noted that Commissioner Kunde had provided an example from Watertown, South Dakota, which includes an R-G Residential Garage District. She shared that upon contacting Watertown, she learned that the R-G District is generally intended for more commercial-style garages and is designed for larger lot sizes. Chair Duffy raised concerns about limiting residential lots that could otherwise be used for housing. Commissioner Kunde pointed out there are undeveloped residential parcels that could benefit from new investment.

Klara Beck also mentioned Watertown's R-S Residential Storage District, which allows for smaller storage structures and may be a more appropriate model for Fergus Falls to consider. The Commission discussed the pros and cons of spot zoning and overlay districts. Commissioner Walls asked the broader question of what the community wants to see regarding stand-alone structures.

Chair Duffy mentioned we need to adapt our codes to make the most people in community happy, not just a few. Commissioner Walls noted that under the current ordinance, the request for a stand-alone garage is not allowed. He asked for clarity on whether the City Council wants the Planning Commission to consider a broader code amendment or to address only the current request.

Chair Duffy stated that further work on the ordinance would be needed before presenting any recommendations to the City Council. She also suggested gathering broader public input through a community survey. Commissioner

Kunde made a motion to adopt the ordinance language from Watertown, South Dakota's R-G Residential Garage District and R-S Residential Storage District. The motion failed for lack of a second.

Following this, the Commission discussed alternative approaches for evaluating potential updates to City Code regarding stand-alone garages on residential lots. Two primary options were considered:

- Creating a conditional use permit process for such garages
- Establishing an overlay district that would allow stand-alone garages in all residential zones

Commissioner Kunde then made a motion to form a subcommittee to draft options for potential City Code updates related to stand-alone garages in residential zones. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Vukonich and passed unanimously. Commissioners Kunde and Vukonich volunteered to form the subcommittee.

3b. Conditional Use Permit Process to Allow Pylon Signs in B-2 and B-3 Zoning Districts

Klara Beck noted that the City has received two requests for pylon signs in the B-3 zone, but current code does not reference the use of pylon signs in the in B-2 or B-3 zones. The Commission discussed adding language to permit pylon signs in these zones through a conditional use permit.

Commissioner Vukonich moved to recommend that pylon signs be allowed as a conditional use in B-2 and B-3 zones. Commissioner Walls seconded. Motion passed.

3c. Battery Storage Regulations

Klara Beck explained as due diligence for a possible sale or lease of Port Authority property for a battery storage project on Port property, staff have had discussions with Otter Tail Power Company regarding battery energy storage projects and their role in future energy solutions. Otter Tail Power's resource plan does include battery storage as a future component, though it is currently prioritized behind solar and wind.

Given the emerging nature of battery storage, Otter Tail recommended the City begin developing zoning ordinance language for such projects, similar to the proactive approach taken with solar energy ahead of the Hoot Lake Solar project.

Staff recommend covering most or all these components in discussion for an ordinance update:

- Definitions
- Use permissions
- Dimensional standards
- Performance & design standards
- Safety and first responder standards
- Decommissioning standards

The Commission discussed battery storage basics and the importance of decommissioning and fire code considerations. Klara noted that model ordinances exist and could be tailored for Fergus Falls. Chair Duffy suggested staff prepare a draft ordinance for review by a subcommittee.

Next meeting is a special meeting on April 8 at 5:15 PM.

The meeting adjourned at **6:18 PM**.

Jill M. Hanson