

CITY OF WALLA WALLA PLANNING COMMISSION
DRAFT MEETING MINUTES
Monday, September 14, 2026 – 6:30 P.M.
Hybrid Meeting – In Person and via Zoom
Council Chambers, 15 N 3rd Avenue, Walla Walla

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Williams called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Jim Williams, Chair
 Arlene Alen, Member
 John Gahbauer, Member
 Kristin Jensen, Member
 Liz Jessee, Member
 Jeff Strickler, Member
 Jennifer Walden, Vice-Chair

Staff Present: Emily Arteche, Deputy Director
 Lisa Wasson-Seilo, Sr. Planner
 Jon Maland, Sr. Planner (via Zoom)
 Pam Ransier, Administrative Permit Coordinator

Quorum was established.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Jeffrey Robinson – Speaking in his capacity as a private citizen, thanked the Planning Commission and staff for the work and thought put into items brought before them and expressed appreciation to each member.

RL McFarland – Although a member of the Walla Walla County Planning Commission, Mr. McFarland stated he was speaking on his own behalf. He noted that Mr. Robinson had spoken as a private citizen, but he then created a conflict when he spoke to the commissioners as a council member, thus cancelling his claim to be speaking as a private citizen.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. Regular Meeting – August 3, 2026

Chair Williams noted a minor scrivener's error in the minutes.

MOTION: **Commissioner Jensen** moved, and **Commissioner Alen** seconded to approve the regular meeting minutes for July 6, 2026 as amended.

Motion carried 7- 0

5. OLD BUSINESS

A. Annual Code Amendments & Critical Areas Ordinance Update

Public Hearing & Commission Action

Using a PowerPoint presentation, **Lisa Wasson-Seilo, Sr. Planner**, provided an overview of the proposed annual code amendments and updates to the Critical Areas Ordinance. She noted that comment letters had been received on the amendments and these comments had been provided to the commissioners by email and distributed at the meeting.

Chair Williams opened the public hearing at 6:39 p.m. and invited members attending in person to provide their comments on the record. Using the attendance sign-in sheet, he called each person in turn.

Judith Johnson, 209 N Clinton Street, Walla Walla – Ms. Johnson spoke in largely in favor of the proposed changes [to the Critical Areas Ordinance update] but had some concerns on the implementation and maintenance of riparian areas on private property.

Casey McClellan, [no address given] – Mr. McClellan lives on Stone Creek. He asked procedural and vesting questions of staff. Mr. McClellan feels the increased buffer zones would impact their ability to build a new home on the property. He questioned development in the Urban Growth Area. [Staff noted that the hearing was on the annual code amendments, not the Comprehensive Plan and offered to speak with him on this subject at a later date].

Vicky McClellan, 1212, 1202 Pleasant Street, Walla Walla – Ms. McClellan expressed concern regarding the speed of the code amendments. She asked for greater detail of buffers as determined by best available science. Ms. McClellan noted the online map appeared blurry when increasing its size.

Christy Schoessler, 849 & 839 Abbott Rd, Walla Walla County – Ms. Schoessler noted a lack of direct notification of tonight's meeting. She spoke about her property in the county and the restrictions that will be applied once the new buffers are implemented. Ms. Schoessler expressed her dislike of the term "best available science" and the diversion of Yellowhawk Creek to Mill Creek during summer 2025. She commented on the lack of time to prepare for the changes.

Michael Murr, Miami Beach, Florida – Mr. Murr noted he did not receive direct communication from the city regarding the CAO amendments. He commented on his estimated number of properties that will have their values impacted by the change in buffer distances. Mr. Murr expressed support for slowing down the code implementation process and to look at how other cities chose to adopt a modified version, acknowledging this will cost the city more money to commission a new study specific to Walla Walla. Mr. Murr offered suggestions for how to ease the impact on residents affected by the change.

Jim Hayner, 1504 Ironwood Drive – Mr. Hayner provided a copy of a GIS map showing the areas he identified as a critical area and offered his analysis of how many homes and acres will be impacted by the CAO update. He noted a current lack of housing in the city and commented that the update will remove more housing opportunities in the city. Mr. Hayner provided a brief history of the Critical Areas Ordinance and questioned the change in current science. He provided a summary of his own research and analysis of wildlife found in and around streams in Walla Walla. Mr. Hayner concluded that wildlife in riparian areas will be safe with a 35-foot buffer.

RL McFarland, 3731 Middle Waitsburg Road, Walla Walla County – Mr. McFarland is a Walla Walla County Planning Commission member but was speaking as a private citizen. He questioned the decision to change the name of the Development Services department to

Community Development, noting it's the same department name as the county's counterpart and will confuse members of the public.

Travis Watts, 3437 Powerline Road, Walla Walla County – Mr. Watts commented on the lack of notification of the proposed change. He owns investment property at Pleasant Street/Berney Drive situated along Yellowhawk Creek. Mr. Watts explained how the proposed Critical Areas Ordinance changes would affect the number of lots in his planned subdivision, increase the costs of development, and speed up his development timeline. He would like the city to slow down the process and find exceptions to adopting the updates as presented. Mr. Watts expressed concern for homes [within the new buffer distances] that may be damaged and could not be replaced.

Jean Dolling, 708 Detour Road, Walla Walla County – Ms. Dolling gave an overview of water conservation, water use practices, annual flooding, and noxious vegetation. She encouraged people to make decisions regarding environmental practices. Ms. Dolling commented on the lack of notification about tonight's meeting. She noted that unfunded mandates often end up in litigation as the losing party.

Kip Kelly, County Commissioner, 1214 Yellowhawk Way, Walla Walla – Mr. Kelly recounted a small subdivision he platted along Yellowhawk Creek in 2022 and the money he spent on environmental and cultural resource studies required as part of his short plat process. He stated that, if his lots were not grandfathered [to the old standards] and were included in the 100-foot buffer, he would expect compensation for the monies invested for requirements at the time of his short plat application. Mr. Kelly expressed dislike for the term "best available science" and considers it insulting and overused and used as an explanation for a pre-determined outcome. He commented that all variables should be taken into consideration when determining regulations. Mr. Kelly requested grandfathering language to be included in the adopted ordinance protecting properties platted before the adoption date.

Drew Davis, 2364 Provenance Loop, Walla Walla – Mr. Davis acknowledged that much of what he planned on saying was included in a comment letter submitted to city staff. He disagreed with information provided as best available science and the resulting recommendation. Mr. Davis stated the city had latitude to deviate from the state's recommendation. Mr. Davis provided his understanding of the history of Walla Walla's waterways and his analysis of the number of homes that could be impacted by the CAO change. He recommended site specific studies due to the many variables found in the city. Citing the Growth Management Act and past land capacity analyses, Mr. Davis objected to what he considered an enhancement to local properties and encouraged further studies. Because of the proposed buffer changes, he asserted the Comprehensive Plan would be inaccurate if the changes were adopted. Mr. Davis echoed Mr. Watts' concerns about the inability to replace severely damaged structures and questioned how the property values would be affected. He recommended city staff reject its consultant's research and start anew with a different perspective, citing restrictive standards used by communities west of the Cascade mountains as a reason to re-study the area.

Barbara Knudson, 1011 Home Street, Walla Walla – Ms. Knudson currently owns a multi-acre property with creeks and ponds on it. She has no plans to build multiple homes due to city requirements to meet density standards. Ms. Knudson advocated to other homeowners that may be impacted by the proposed change to riparian buffers, for potential owners who would no longer purchase property along a creek, and for property owners who would be required to remove their existing lawns because of its proximity to the new buffer. She took exception to the number of properties at the south end of the city that are using septic systems and stated

the city should be providing infrastructure and requiring the properties to connect to city sewer.

Allen Ketelsen, 3050 Brisbane Street, Walla Walla County – Mr. Ketelsen owns a construction company. He stated that the proposed changes will impact his business and spoke about his inability to subdivide property he owns that Yellowhawk Creek bisects (this property is located outside the city limits) and other property along Russell Creek that will be impacted as well. He noted the number of his clients that will be impacted by the code change.

Chair Williams asked if anyone attending virtually would like to comment. Seeing none, he closed the public hearing at 7:39 p.m. He noted that there were two code amendments on the agenda and asked if there were any questions of staff regarding the annual code amendments.

Chair Williams asked for an explanation of the department name change. **Ms. Arteche** explained that “Community Development” was a more accurate representation of the services the department offered.

Commissioner Walden questioned the potential confusion of the city and county offices. **Ms. Arteche** responded with examples of communication and other types of public information will contain “city” in the heading.

Commissioner Jessee asked for additional information regarding a code change to 13.04 that changed the approving body from council to the City Manager. **Ms. Arteche** explained that this was a code amendment requested by Public Works and dealt with emergency situations that would require convening a special meeting by council to approve emergency connections to city utilities.

MOTION: **Commissioner Strickler** moved, and **Commissioner Alen** seconded to recommend approval of the draft 2026 Code Amendments to the City Council as presented.

Motion carried 7- 0

Chair Williams asked for commissioner comments regarding the Critical Areas Ordinance update.

Commissioner Strickler expressed his appreciation of wildlife in general and noted concern regarding how the increased buffers would impact local development. He commented on the lack of local control when jurisdictions are given state mandates that don't consider unique conditions. Citing a lack of in-depth information on how each potentially impacted property will be affected, he called for additional studies. Commissioner Strickler stated he felt the proposed buffer changes conflict with the Comprehensive Plan's ideal of infill development in the city and the Urban Growth areas. He noted that other cities have chosen to conduct their own studies and adopt their own version of the Critical Areas Ordinance, acknowledging that those cities paid for additional studies and had to legally defend their choice. Commissioner Strickler questioned if Walla Walla was pro-growth if the amendments are adopted.

Commissioner Jessee noted her agreement with other comments and concerns brought forward at the meeting by citizens and Commissioner Strickler. She proposed amending the draft ordinance to include language addressing grandfathered properties.

Commissioner Gahbauer noted his agreement with other written and verbal comments and concerns brought forward by citizens and commissioners. He noted that many streams in the area are not fish habitats and indicated there were other ways to achieve positive outcomes. Based on his own research, Commissioner Gahbauer noted that state policies provide flexibility for

jurisdictions such as City of Kenmore regarding implementing state requirements. He stated his belief that more time is needed to further study diverse options before approving the amendments.

Commissioner Jensen expressed her appreciation for attendees participating in person. She acknowledged the continually evolving science used to determine best environmental practices. Commissioner Jensen commented that she wasn't sure of how much time and flexibility the state would grant the city. She noted that the city could be better at communicating proposed changes that impact property owners and asked for greater clarification and more time regarding vesting rights.

Commissioner Alen thanked citizens for submitting comments regarding the proposed amendment. She encouraged the city to find ways to improve communication to citizens when code amendments are brought forward while acknowledging that is a difficult task due to the widely varied ways people consume information. Commissioner Alen stressed the need to review outcome data of how the proposed amendment will affect business and property owners. She asked for the approval process to be slowed and commented she would not be able to approve the amendments as presented.

Commissioner Walden asked what would happen if the code amendments were not adopted by December 31, 2026. **Ms. Arteche** explained that the city would be in direct violation of state law. **Commissioner Walden** noted her shift in understanding how the change could impact property owners upon hearing and reading testimony from citizens. She encouraged staff to change the proposed buffer requirements outlined in a comment letter submitted prior to the meeting without relying on scientific reports conducted for the city.

Chair Williams expressed his concern regarding voting on the amendments after hearing statements provided at the meeting and requested another workshop to further discuss the commission's options.

MOTION: **Commissioner Strickler** moved, and **Commissioner Jessee** seconded to recommend city council direct Development Services to revise the draft Critical Areas Ordinance to align with infill and Urban Growth Area goals of the Comprehensive Plan following available science matching local conditions, also taking into consideration the Washington statute allowing a city to adopt critical area regulations that can depart from science-based recommendations on the basis of legal, social, cultural, economic, and political information.

Motion carried 7- 0

6. STAFF UPDATES

Staff proposed cancelling the October meeting as there are no work items ready to present at that time, and asked for a formal motion.

MOTION: **Commissioner Walden** moved, and **Commissioner Alen** seconded to cancel the October 5, 2026 Planning Commission meeting.

Motion carried 6 - 1

- Bath & Bodyworks at the Town Center is slated to open October 3, 2026.
- WinCo anticipates opening to the public by late October.

7. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: **Commissioner Jensen** moved, and **Commissioner Jessee** seconded to adjourn.

Motion carried 7- 0

Meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.