

Information Item

Land Use Advisory Committee



Meeting Date: May 21, 2026

Topic

Flexible Development Guidelines Update

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| District(s), Member(s): | All |
| Policy/Legal Reference: | Minn. Stat. § 473.854 Imagine 2050, Land Use Objective 1, Policy 2, Action 2.3 |
| Staff Prepared/Presented: | Freya Thamman, Planning Analyst, Local Planning Assistance (651-602-1750) MacKenzie Young-Walters, Senior Planner, Local Planning Assistance (651-602-1373) |
| Division/Department: | Community Development / Regional Planning |

Background

In 2006, the Metropolitan Council (Council) convened a rural issues working group to examine the Council's density policy for rural areas and how development in these areas could impact the Council's goals of ensuring orderly and efficient development and the preservation of natural resources. This working group identified ambiguity in the Council's density policy that existed at that time and recommended that guidelines be developed around cluster developments and density bonuses in rural areas.

In 2008, after an extensive analysis and solicitation of feedback from communities, the Council adopted the [Flexible Development Guidelines](#) (Guidelines). The Guidelines apply to communities designated Diversified Rural within the Long-Term Wastewater Service Area (LTSA) and allow for those areas to exceed the maximum density of 4 dwelling units per 40 acres, so long as certain criteria are met. The most important criteria are that at least 75% of the developable land is reserved for future development at urban densities, which means the area to be efficiently provided with urban services must be identified. Over the years these guidelines have also been applied to all Diversified Rural communities to allow some development of adjacent rural areas prior to the expansion of municipal services. These Guidelines were later incorporated into Thrive MSP 2040 as part of the guidance for Diversified Rural communities.

Recognizing that there have been significant changes since the original development of these Guidelines, Imagine 2050 committed the Council to evaluating the need to update the Guidelines to ensure they align with regional goals and can effectively advance the policies of Imagine 2050. Since the Guidelines have now been in effect for 18 years there is also an opportunity to evaluate how effective they have been in promoting cluster developments and preventing the proliferation of the type of dispersed "estate lot" style developments that preclude the efficient expansion of the regional wastewater system. Additionally, the update will provide an opportunity to clarify the Council's expectations about how the Guidelines should be incorporated into the 2050 Comprehensive Plans.

Potential Areas of Update

As noted in the background section, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Guidelines in ensuring development within the LTSA conforms to Council policy and to update them to reflect the goals and policies of Imagine 2050.

Updated Guidelines could potentially serve the following functions:

- **Preserving the potential for future expansion of urban services**
This would be a refinement of the Guidelines' existing provisions. The purpose of the Guidelines is to preserve land for post-2050 growth and to accommodate the future extension of regional urban services within the Met Council's LTSA. The Guidelines provide for interim rural residential land uses without precluding the opportunity for future development and cost-effective and efficient regional wastewater treatment services. Staff will identify best practices and guardrails needed to ensure that these developments can eventually be served by the regional wastewater system without compromising the system's efficiency.
- **Preserving natural systems/sensitive areas**
With Imagine 2050's increased emphasis on protecting and preserving natural systems there may be opportunities to use the Guidelines to insulate natural systems and environmentally sensitive areas from development pressure. The focus would be on allowing the use of cluster developments in areas suitable for development in exchange for the permanent conservation or preservation of environmentally sensitive areas. Within the LTSA, policies would need to be developed to ensure that the areas being developed can be efficiently served by the regional wastewater system and outside of the LTSA that the resulting developments did not exceed overall density maximums.
- **Preserving agricultural areas**
Imagine 2050 also prioritizes preserving agricultural lands and ensuring that prime farmland and/or farmland of statewide importance stays in productive use. There may be an opportunity to allow for development in less productive areas or in areas that would allow the majority of the parcel to remain in productive use in exchange for permanent agricultural easements. This would only be possible outside the LTSA and policies would need to be developed to ensure that the resulting developments did not exceed overall density maximums.
- **Managing rural growth**
There are some areas outside of the LTSA where existing land use patterns and other characteristics may be able to accommodate growth with local densities higher than the established maximums. There may be an opportunity to support directing growth within the community to these areas through clustering or other mechanisms so long as the community's overall density does not exceed overall density maximums and result in a rural residential development pattern that could necessitate unplanned expansion of the regional wastewater system is not created.

Technical assistance

Provide education on best practices in implementing the Guidelines, as well as what will be required in 2050 Plans to be complete and in conformance with regional policy. Fact sheets and other resources will be developed to help communities understand what content their 2050 Comprehensive Plans will need to include to demonstrate consistency with the updated Guidelines.

Next Steps

The items mentioned in the previous section, with the exception of technical assistance, are preliminary concepts that staff will be exploring as the update moves forward. It is possible that some of them will ultimately be determined to be unworkable or not areas of interest for rural communities. To ensure that the update creates a product that both meets the Council's needs and



is relevant for affected communities staff is proposing the following process:

1. High level analysis of development trends in rural service area since 2008 to determine what issues are present and if the existing Guidelines have had the intended impact.
2. Analysis of 2040 Comprehensive Plans and associated ordinances to determine how Guidelines have been implemented, as well as a more general review of rural development ordinances.
3. Interviews with cities/counties who reference Guidelines in 2040 Comprehensive Plans to learn about their experiences with the Guidelines.
4. Focus group of affected rural communities to solicit input on existing Guidelines and proposals that result from steps 1-3.
5. Return to LUAC with proposed updates to the Guidelines.
6. Determine what information will need to be included in 2050 Comprehensive Plans to demonstrate consistency with the updated Guidelines and promulgate resources to help cities understand the updates and associated requirements.

Attachments

Flexible Development Guidelines Fact Sheet
2008 Flexible Development Guidelines

