



CITY OF HARRISONBURG COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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August 31, 2026

**TO THE MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA**

SUBJECT: *Consider request to amend the Comprehensive Plan to incorporate the Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan*

**EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES OF HARRISONBURG PLANNING
COMMISSION MEETING HELD ON:** August 12, 2026

Chair Baugh read the request and asked staff to review.

Ms. Soffel said in September 2023, the City of Harrisonburg received a Community Connectors Program grant from Smart Growth America, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The grant was focused on building capacity to co-design projects alongside impacted communities to advance new infrastructure projects that repair damage from divisive infrastructure. The Community Connectors team included the Northeast Neighborhood Association (NENA), Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project (SVBHP), Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR), Harrisonburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority (HRHA), and the City of Harrisonburg.

Over the next two years, the Community Connectors team led efforts that included:

- Facilitated Community Dialogues,
- Historical research on the history of and impact of Urban Renewal on Harrisonburg residents and businesses,
- The Complete Streets Leadership Academy and North Mason Street Complete Street Demonstration Project, and
- The Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan (SAP).

The Northeast Neighborhood SAP is the City's first small area plan for a neighborhood and is recommended in the Comprehensive Plan, Chapter 15. Revitalization. The Comprehensive Plan (page 15-4) states:

A number of neighborhoods around the City have experienced stress. Some are suffering from poorly maintained, deteriorating, or vacant homes and spot conversions of single-family homes to apartments, often for students. Other areas contain older deteriorating apartment buildings. Some are affected by encroaching commercial development or undesirable conversion of houses to non-residential uses. Impacts of traffic on highly traveled roadways may also be creating neighborhood stress. The Potential Small Area Plans map roughly identifies the boundaries of neighborhoods that could be prioritized for study. Actual boundaries for study will be identified at a future time in further consultation with community members. This plan recommends that for each of these areas a community-based neighborhood plan be developed to address these and other issues raised by the community.

The Northeast Neighborhood is identified in the Potential Small Area Plans map.

CHPlanning served as the planning consultant for the development of the Northeast Neighborhood SAP. Together, CHPlanning and the Community Connectors team worked with Northeast Neighborhood community members on a plan that “addresses displacement and other impacts of Urban Renewal, presenting possible early action steps and long-term solutions for addressing these impacts. The harms of Urban Renewal are generational. The plan proposes strategies to return functional control and ownership to community residents and organizations, and to restore a sense of engagement, place-making, and belonging.” (SAP, page 8)

Through this effort, the Northeast Neighborhood SAP was developed to guide future growth and investment in the area. Building upon Section 5 of the Northeast Neighborhood SAP, Section 6 includes an Implementation Matrix. The matrix identifies each SAP goal, strategy, and action, and assigns a priority, lead entity, potential partners, and potential funding sources. Lead entities and partners include City departments, other government agencies, and community organizations who can help implement or support goals, strategies, and actions.

Staff recommends that the Northeast Neighborhood SAP be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan as Appendix A. Once incorporated, the Northeast Neighborhood SAP will serve as a policy guide for City staff, Planning Commission, City Council, and other boards and commissions when evaluating future policies, studies, programs, funding opportunities, capital improvements, administrative approvals, and land use decisions affecting the neighborhood.

The Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan and additional information about the Community Connectors project is available at: <https://www.harrisonburgva.gov/community-connectors>.

Staff recommends approval of amending the Comprehensive Plan to incorporate the Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan.

Commissioner Jezior said my question is, when we create the next Comprehensive Plan, what then happens to this? Would we vote to add this into the new one as well?

Ms. Soffel said yes.

Councilmember Dent said would it still be an appendix or folded in somehow? Does it matter?

Ms. Soffel said we can define it at that point. But yes, we would incorporate this.

Chair Baugh said the details are to be determined, but we get to decide that at the Comprehensive Plan update. I think the answer is that we are all pretty comfortable with the idea that, whether it is this plan or a subsequent iteration of it, we would recommend doing that. But that is a decision to be made then.

Ms. Soffel said we have other plans like the 2017 Bike and Pedestrian Plan was before the 2018 Comprehensive Plan.

Chair Baugh said there are any number of examples of things that worked their way in from what had been parallel tracks with the Comprehensive Plan and then got folded into it.

Commissioner Seitz said I have two questions for staff. First, by including this, if this gets included in the Comprehensive Plan, does it increase the likelihood that some of the recommended strategies and actions, particularly those that would require the Department of Public Works and so on, would be included in the next Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)? In other words, does it increase the likelihood that they get included in the next CIP?

Mr. Fletcher said when projects are identified, the identification of projects and the needs for them is almost never-ending. It is constant. I think it helps different departments recognize the needs, and it helps them build the details and costs for the projects that go in. It gives them more information that allows them to build those projects better for the CIP. Are you asking about priority over other projects?

Commissioner Seitz said just getting it more on the radar. There are a good number of items under the implementation plan targeted to the Department of Public Works and paid for out of the City budget. I would think that is something that has tracks through the CIP. I know there is a sophisticated scoring method for all the departments in terms of how they rank this. Does this raise awareness about the needs of these projects for City staff as they go through and score projects?

Ms. Soffel said I would offer that departments like Public Works have already taken the Small Area Plan into consideration in some of the projects for which they have applied for grants.

Commissioner Seitz said good.

Ms. Dang said in this case, Public Works was integrally involved. We are presenting it, but it is on behalf of a group of staff involved.

Commissioner Seitz said the second question I have is, under Strategy 8.1, it says update land use regulations and zoning to align with neighborhood preferences. Given that we are in this two-part zoning revision where part one is translating the essence of the old ordinance to new names and new classifications, what is the mechanism for communication with the group behind the Northeast Neighborhood Plan to make sure the zoning concerns and priorities that come along with this plan do not get lost in all the work that goes into the zoning ordinance revisions?

Ms. Soffel said with the importance of having this plan and having it be part of the Comprehensive Plan, we would make a special effort to communicate with the neighborhood for any engagement related to the zoning ordinance, any specific zoning ordinance amendments that we make later on, and for the next Comprehensive Plan.

Commissioner Seitz said thanks.

Commissioner Kettler said Strategy 3.2 is to educate both the public and City staff about the impacts of past urban renewal and opportunities for improvement. Given that we are about to go into the Comprehensive Plan, and the issues connected with urban renewal extend well beyond the Northeast Neighborhood, I am wondering whether that kind of education has a role within the Comprehensive Plan update.

Ms. Soffel said I would think so. There are efforts underway to educate the community. Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance has a sign-making or placemaking project. There are some art projects. In preparing this presentation, I made sure to include information on urban renewal, not just the small area plan. Wherever we have the opportunity to talk about it and raise awareness, we try to take those opportunities.

Commissioner Kettler said I ask because there are a lot of folks I know in the Northeast Neighborhood who are very well aware of it. There are a lot of folks I know outside of the Northeast Neighborhood who have no idea it ever happened.

Ms. Dang said if I may add a note, we are asking for your endorsement of the resolution that was included in the packet.

Chair Baugh said I was going to ask you. If we are so inclined, are we going to want the moving party to read it into the record, or are we okay with saying as presented?

Mr. Russ said as presented is fine.

Chair Baugh said I am sure you have noticed there is actually a particular resolution that we are being asked to adopt. Technically, I guess this is coming from staff. But I am going to take license and say that the applicant here is the Northeast Neighborhood Association and the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project. I would invite anybody from the Northeast Neighborhood Association and Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project to please come forward and tell us anything you would like us to hear or ask any questions.

Karen Thomas, representing the Northeast Neighborhood Association, said Ms. Soffel has told you everything I was planning to say, but I am going to read my little spiel anyway. I am a resident of the Northeast Neighborhood, a member of the Community Connectors Group with Smart Growth America and the Small Area Plan Action Team. I am also Director of the Northeast Neighborhood Association. I trust that you will support our small area plan that we, along with city staff and Northeast residents, through community engagement, have worked on for over three years now. What started as a plan to reconnect the Northeast Neighborhood by Mason Street, we found that there were deeper issues in the community, such as trust in City government, the impact of urban renewal, tragedy, and infrastructure, just to name a few. Residents of the Northeast who were fully engaged in developing this plan are committed to making it become a reality. We hope that other neighborhoods will follow our lead and make their small area plans also because we feel that all residents need to have a seat at the table and be involved in what is going on and what is coming into their neighborhood. Again, I ask you for your full support in making this plan a part of Harrisonburg's Comprehensive Plan. Thank you.

Monica Robinson, representing the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project, said good evening. What I wanted to add, Commissioner Kettler, was that our hope when we were talking about the Small Area Plan was that the whole idea of building trust back into the neighborhood addressed the fact that some of that trust was lost because neighborhood residents felt as if they were not included or seen in the overall Comprehensive Plan. I would hope that the history of the neighborhood becomes part of conversations when discussing what the vision of this area is going to look like over the next 20 years.

I should give my name. Councilmember Robinson. I live in Harrisonburg. This was a great project. I was not only a resident, not acting as a Councilmember, but actually acting as a member of the community along with the Executive Director for the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project. We felt very honored to be a part of the development of the Small Area Plan created through the Community Connectors Program. As a community-based organization, we value the opportunity to help ensure that history, stories, experiences, technology, and contributions of Black communities are recognized and reflected in the future vision of our community. That is what we feel like the Small Area Plan does. Community engagement is essential to the success of every City project. When residents, community organizations, and local stakeholders are meaningfully involved in the planning process, the City is better able to understand the needs, history, priorities, and hopes of the people it serves. We believe authentic community engagement should continue

to be a fundamental part of how the City approaches future planning and development. Tonight, we are respectfully asking for the support of the Planning Commission in adopting and advancing the Small Area Plan. Endorsing this plan is not only an investment in thoughtful and inclusive planning, but also an important step toward rebuilding and strengthening trust between neighborhood residents and City government. Meaningful follow-through on community-driven plans, like you were talking about earlier in terms of zoning, demonstrates that residents' voices are heard, valued, and reflected in decision-making. It helps restore confidence in public processes and fosters stronger long-term relationships between the community and the City. Our hope is that the City will recognize this Small Area Plan as an important and meaningful component of the City's Comprehensive Plan and use it to help guide future decisions, investments, and opportunities within the community. We are proud to contribute to a process that honors our shared history while creating a more inclusive, connected, and vibrant future for generations to come.

Chair Baugh said thank you.

Councilmember Robinson said you are welcome.

Chair Baugh opened the public hearing and invited anyone in the room or on the phone wishing to speak to the request.

Panayotis Giannakouros, City Resident, called in and said I attended many, if not all, of the input processes as Secretary of the Harrisonburg Martin Luther King Jr. Way Coalition at the invitation of the Northeast Neighborhood Association. And I feel that I have an obligation to report at least one very important consideration in this plan. That is Goal 8.5, which states that the City will use proactive code enforcement to prevent underutilized properties from falling into disrepair. We tried and tried to figure out how that was inserted and could not determine it to my satisfaction. We tried to excise it and could not. I would raise some concerns about this. To show the difference, consider the City of Richmond, where I was present when they reported on a very different way to handle properties falling into disrepair. That was with a credit and incentive program to address deferred maintenance and the issues of such properties. This was done at the same time that they instituted very robust protections against tall grass and weed ordinances, with a presumption in favor of the resident. Ironically enough, Frank Hopkins was in the room when that decision was made without opposition. Note this approach that Richmond had, which is very different from the approach in 8.5. What could go wrong with 8.5? Goal 8.5 sets up the two legal pillars that were established after urban renewal to allow for the orderly taking of property. Those two pillars were, one, deciding a public nuisance, which is the code enforcement, and two, the presence of a plan. This would allow authorities to establish a public purpose, which had not been adequately done in urban renewal. When I raised these concerns initially, when I raised the concern that there were ongoing processes of displacement, Councilmember Robinson threatened me. When I, toward the end of the process, raised again whether there was anything structurally in this plan to prevent a repeat of urban renewal, Amy Snider refused to answer the question. Is there cause for concern here? Are

there better ways to approach this? I urge people looking at this not to look at this as a horse full of gifts. Read it as a legal contract that can and will be used against you. From that perspective, I hope this goes forward with potentially appropriate modifications to really serve the purpose that was promised to the residents. Thank you so much.

Chair Baugh closed the public hearing and opened the matter for discussion.

Commissioner Kettler said I had one question similar along the lines of Commissioner Seitz. Commissioner Seitz asked a question about how this impacts where something goes in the CIP and how that works. I am pleased to see the implementation matrix in the way that it is. I think it is a very helpful way to go about it. Strategy 6.2, just as an example, is to convert North Mason Street to a major neighborhood destination by attracting businesses and promoting community activation. The lead entity on that is Harrisonburg Department of Community Development. My question is, we have all of these goals and strategies for City departments, how does that get implemented in terms of a plan within the department?

Ms. Soffel said when applicants or people come to ask us questions about properties and their ideas of what they would like to do, we guide them based on the plans that are in place, based on the Comprehensive Plan and based on the Small Area Plan. One example is the Roses Shopping Center. Any time somebody asks us about that, we point to the Small Area Plan and what the neighbors' desires are for that.

Chair Baugh said this is impressive. It may not be perfect in the eyes of any of us. There are probably things about it that anybody would look at and say, I can live with 95 percent of this, but there is that one little provision. That is part of the human condition. But this is an impressive effort that I know has a lot of fingerprints on it. I cannot make a motion, but I imagine if there is any sort of motion to approve this, I am going to vote for it.

Commissioner Seitz said move to approve the resolution as presented.

Commissioner Kettler said second.

Chair Baugh called for a roll call vote.

Councilmember Dent	Aye
Commissioner Kettler	Aye
Commissioner Jezior	Aye
Commissioner Seitz	Aye
Vice-Chair Porter	Aye
Chair Baugh	Aye

The motion to approve the resolution to recommend the Northeast Neighborhood Small Area Plan be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan passed (6-0). The recommendation will move forward to City Council on September 8, 2026.

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