



Title: 2027 Watershed Management Plan: Land Use Integration

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Purpose:

At the September 16, 2026, Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) meeting, staff will share their work to understand and build expertise in the land use planning process and the policy tools or system changes that can be leveraged to support better water resource outcomes. Staff and the CAC will discuss how, with this understanding, we may engage with our partners during [the 2027 Watershed Management Plan \(WMP\)](#) process to develop recommendations for integrating water more effectively into land use planning processes.

Summary:

The lakes, streams, and wetlands that make up our landscape create a sense of place that provides a local identity, adds economic value, and increases well-being. The Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD) recognizes that protection and improvement of these water resources is best achieved through close coordination and partnership its public and private partners acting on the landscape. This partnership approach is embodied in our [Balanced Urban Ecology](#) (BUE) philosophy, knowing that land use decisions shape the long-term impacts on water resources, and healthy natural systems support thriving communities.

There is strong support from MCWD's cities and other public partners for this philosophy of partnership and integrated planning. However, putting it into practice remains challenging due to institutional barriers, competing priorities, and resource constraints faced by cities. MCWD is typically engaged late in the land use planning process, in the design and permitting stage of a project, once plans are fairly fixed.

MCWD sees opportunity to support integration of water resource considerations earlier in the planning process as the decisions that shape development patterns and infrastructure investments are being made. By aligning our processes and providing guidance and resources to support integrated planning, MCWD can improve watershed outcomes while strengthening relationships with cities, counties, regional agencies, and private developers.

This work represents one of the four focus areas of the 2027 WMP and includes two main elements:

- 1) Improving our understanding of the land use process and identifying opportunities to better integrate water resource considerations.
- 2) Developing recommendations that communities may choose to use, adapt, or build upon to support local water resource goals.

There are many actors, plans, and established practices under the land use umbrella. For the purpose of this CAC discussion, we will constrain this conversation and memo to a subset of the land use process and related recommendations. Before discussing potential recommendations and opportunities, it is useful to understand the existing planning system. The information in Attachment A provides a high-level summary of the relevant actors and planning processes, with links to additional information and examples.

September 16, 2026, CAC Meeting:

We will explore where water resource considerations are currently incorporated into planning processes, where opportunities for improved integration may exist, and how MCWD can support local governments and other partners in considering water earlier in planning and decision-making processes.

The CAC's feedback will help staff evaluate whether the purpose and value of this work is clearly communicated, identify themes that resonate with a non-technical audience, and refine how these concepts are introduced to local government and community partners through future WMP engagement activities.

We invite CAC members to locate and briefly review their city's most recent Comprehensive Plan and Surface Water Management Plan. As you review, you may consider how water resources are presented and discussed. Is water identified as a community priority? How specific is each plan on water resource projects? How are resources allocated to decision-making or implementation of these projects? How well are water resource considerations integrated into other planning decisions, such as community development?

To support discussion, the CAC will be asked to consider the following questions:

1. What insights or new understandings did this generate about the connection between land use planning and water resources? What gaps did it uncover?
2. Are there examples from your own community where water considerations were successfully integrated into planning decisions, or where opportunities may have been missed?
3. How would you expect this conversation to be received and what might cities be concerned or excited about?

Attachment A – Land Use Planning Context

As described in the CAC memo, there are many actors, plans, and established practices that influence land use. This attachment provides a high-level summary of actors and plans, with links to additional information and examples.

To improve existing processes, plans, and decisions, we need to understand the current systems. Land use planning involves a layered set of actors operating at the regional, county, local, and private levels. Understanding each actor's role and authority helps clarify where and how MCWD can engage.

- **Regional:** The Met Council establishes growth forecasts for metro cities, local infrastructure standards, and regional policy direction. Transportation funding priorities are set through regional processes.
- **County:** Counties translate regional policy into transportation, drainage/sewer, and infrastructure investments. While they do not control zoning, their infrastructure decisions shape city development capacity. County-level park agencies align system plans to regional parks policy.
- **Local:** Cities have land use authority, which is the legal power given to a government body, agency, or official board to regulate, plan, and control how real estate and property are developed and used within a specific jurisdiction. Cities control land use designation, zoning, capital programming, and development approvals. They serve as the central coordination hub between regional requirements, county infrastructure, and private development and are MCWD's most consequential partner.
- **Private Sector:** Developers respond to policy signals, infrastructure timing, and market conditions. Their proposals trigger cross-jurisdictional coordination during development review. The review ensures that any given proposal meets local plans and regulations.

This system of actors corresponds to a set of planning processes. They operate as a waterfall, moving from broad regional policy down to site decisions. Regional oversight, county infrastructure planning, city implementation, and private development form a continuous line: decisions made early in long-range planning constrain what's possible during development review which is why MCWD's typical point of engagement at the development review and permitting stages is the point with the least remaining flexibility. The planning processes described below are also the places MCWD believes opportunities exist to incorporate water considerations earlier.

- The Met Council's **Regional Development Guide (RDG)** coordinates planning across the metro area. The RDG provides guidance for the development of comprehensive plans that span individual governments.
 - [Current RDG, for 2050](#)
- **City Comprehensive Plans** establish a long-range vision for land use, housing, transportation, infrastructure, and parks. Comprehensive plans guide all zoning regulations, capital investments, and development decisions.
 - Example plans: [Orono](#), [Plymouth](#)
 - [Description of Comprehensive Plans](#)
- Cities are required to include a local **Surface Water Management Plan (SWMP)** as part of their comprehensive plan. Most cities currently treat the SWMP as a separate workstream from core comprehensive planning, often contracted out to consultants and included as an appendix. These plans report on the programs and practices of the stormwater drainage systems that directly impact water resources in the city.
 - Example plans: [Wayzata](#), [Chanhassen](#)
 - [Plan requirements](#)
- **Capital Improvement Plans (CIPs)** allocate funds for infrastructure needed to support growth and achieve other comprehensive plan goals
 - Example plans: [Minnetonka](#), [Medina](#)
- The **development review process** applies policy and infrastructure decisions to individual projects. Developers must get approval that a project is aligned with local comprehensive plans and regulations.
 - Example city processes: [Victoria](#), [Minneapolis](#)
- A project aligned with these local plans will then apply for permits, including at MCWD.