



CITY OF WATERTOWN, NEW YORK

CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

ROOM 305, WATERTOWN CITY HALL

245 WASHINGTON STREET

WATERTOWN, NEW YORK 13601-3380

(315) 785-7741

MEETING: October 6, 2026

PRESENT:

Michelle Capone, Chair

Linda Fields

Maryellen Blevins

Peter Monaco

Scott Garrabrant

ALSO:

Michael A. Lumbis, Planning and Community
Development Director

Geoffrey T. Urda, Senior Planner

Joseph Albinus, Planner

Angela Gorman, Secretary

Joseph Frateschi, City Attorney

ABSENT:

Lynn Godek

Planning Commission Chairperson, Michelle Capone, called the October 6, 2026, Planning Commission meeting to order at 5:15 p.m. The Commission reviewed the minutes of the September 1, 2026, meeting. A correction was identified under site plan approval, changing a repeated word. Ms. Capone asked for a motion regarding the minutes of the September 1, 2026, meeting. Linda Fields made a motion to accept the minutes with the suggested edit, and otherwise as written. Maryellen Blevins seconded the motion, and all voted in favor.

ZONE CHANGE REQUEST – A PORTION OF 465 FLOWER AVENUE WEST, PARCEL NUMBER 14-42-101.000

The Planning Commission then considered a request submitted by Jake Johnson, on behalf of Ives Hill Country Club 465 LLC to change the approved zoning classification of a 1.7-acre portion of 465 Flower Avenue West, Parcel Number 14-42-101.000 from Residential to Neighborhood Mixed Use (NMU). The area involved in the requested Zone Change includes the clubhouse and parking lot, including the restaurant inside the clubhouse.

Chair Capone began by explaining that the Planning Commission would make a recommendation only, and that the City Council was the body with the legal authority to approve or deny the Zone Change. She said that City Council would also conduct the formal public hearing, and act as lead agency for SEQRA review. Although no Planning Commission public hearing was required, public comments were invited at the meeting under a three-minute guideline.

Chair Capone explained that the restaurant presently operates as an accessory use to the golf course, which is the primary permitted use. The adopted Comprehensive Plan envisions the area as part the Low Density Residential future land use character area. Ms. Capone stated that the Residential Zoning District implements that vision, while allowing limited compatible uses, including golf courses.

She then described the range of uses that the NMU Zoning District permits, including automobile repair, car washes, and fuel/convenience stations. Staff's memorandum to the Planning Commission advised that the proposed Zone Change was not in harmony with the Comprehensive Plan. Chair Capone also raised potential spot-zoning concerns, emphasizing the need to consider whether a rezoning serves the community's general welfare rather than a single ownership interest.

Chair Capone then opened the floor to comments from those in attendance, asking that speakers state their name and address for the record.

Marcia Rittenhouse, 744 Massey St. South, expressed appreciation for Mr. Johnson's improvements but opposed the rezoning. She was concerned that the new classification could allow uses such as a gas station and alter the longstanding residential character of Flower Avenue West. She referenced an earlier unsuccessful rezoning effort in the vicinity.

Chair Capone reported that the City had received written comments from Alaina and Marcus Martin opposing the change and from Dave and Patty Johnson supporting it.

John Doldo III, 439 Harris Drive, also speaking as attorney-in fact for his mother, Patricia B. Doldo, opposed the proposed change. He urged recognition of privately maintained recreational facilities as community assets, noting that owners make substantial investments that benefit residents. He expressed hope that assistance could be found to preserve the golf course.

Mrs. Rittenhouse asked about the five-to-ten-year plan for the golf course and why a rezoning was being sought if no development was proposed. Chair Capone stated that the owner could address questions about his long-term plans and invited Mr. Johnson to explain the application.

Mr. Johnson thanked the neighbors for attending and described Ives Hill as a historic golf course dating to 1897. He said his intention was to preserve the golf course and restaurant, not pursue immediate redevelopment. He explained that he and his family personally carry substantial debt and operating expenses and that the present financial structure is difficult to sustain. He estimated an annual loss of approximately \$100,000 to \$150,000, with significantly invested cash and debt, and said he was seeking a practical way to maintain operations for another five to ten years.

Mr. Johnson explained that the golf course and clubhouse/restaurant are currently tied together financially because they are on a single tax parcel. Separating the approximately 1.7-acre restaurant into its own parcel could allow debt and financing to be allocated specifically to that property, support a longer-term lease, or potentially allowing a sale to an owner-operator with a direct stake in the business. He expressed concern that if the golf course ceased operating, the restaurant, as an accessory use, could lose its ability to operate independently. He characterized the requested change as a way to protect both operations from that outcome.

Mr. Johnson said he was willing to accept recorded deed restrictions limiting future uses to a restaurant and potentially offices, rather than the full range of NMU uses. He specifically disclaimed interest in car dealerships, car washes, fuel stations, and other retail uses. He said he had previously commissioned conceptual work for a Planned Development District (PDD), but that process would require more time and money and would likely involve a broader development

proposal than the limited financial restructuring he was seeking. He reiterated that his present intent was to keep the course and clubhouse operating substantially as they are.

Chair Capone asked whether a PDD would be a feasible path to achieving the same outcome. Senior Planner Geoffrey Urda explained that a PDD can include multiple parcels with separately specified permitted uses; for example, the golf course could remain a golf course while a separate clubhouse parcel could be authorized for a restaurant and perhaps offices. Planning Director Michael Lumbis said a PDD should be based on an overall plan for the entire site and can later be amended. Linda Fields referenced the previously amended PDD in the Home Depot/Cracker Barrel area as an example.

Scott Garrabrant asked Mr. Johnson to explain the financial benefit of separating the parcels in simpler terms. Mr. Johnson described the potential to attract a committed owner-operator, negotiate a longer lease, improve financing, and reduce the risk that difficulties with one business would automatically jeopardize the other. Chair Capone clarified that under the current accessory-use arrangement, cessation of the golf course would create a zoning problem for the restaurant, as a stand-alone restaurant is not an allowed use in the Residential Zoning District.

Commission members discussed the possibility of future owners changing the restaurant to another use. Mr. Johnson reiterated his willingness to impose deed restrictions. City Attorney Joseph Frateschi explained that City Council could condition a Zone Change on recorded restrictive covenants, potentially running with the land and enforceable by the City. He also noted that a substantial future site alteration, such as a new drive-through restaurant, could require site plan review, including traffic considerations. Peter Monaco raised the example of a future fast-food restaurant and asked about current operating hours; Mr. Johnson estimated closing around 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., subject to exceptions.

Mr. Urda distinguished a restrictive covenant from a PDD, specifying that a covenant could prohibit certain uses but may require court action to enforce, while a PDD would affirmatively establish the permitted use in the zoning itself.

Mr. Urda then explained that spot zoning depends on whether the Zone Change advances the vision in the Comprehensive Plan and the general interests of the community, not simply whether a parcel is rezoned differently from adjacent land. Linda Fields and other members expressed concern about potential spot zoning. Chair Capone reminded the Commission that the application before it was the requested NMU change, not a PDD application.

Mrs. Rittenhouse returned to express concern that the proposal to separate the restaurant parcel might signal an eventual sale or change in the golf course property. Chair Capone clarified that public comment was not intended as a direct question-and-answer exchange with the applicant and suggested that detailed questions for Mr. Johnson be addressed separately.

John Doldo III spoke again, describing the potential financial motivations for separating a parcel. He suggested considering restrictions both on the restaurant parcel and on continued golf course use. He reiterated that the golf course provides a public benefit despite private ownership and suggested tax relief as one way to support its preservation. He remained opposed to the requested Zone Change.

Marcia Pistner, 418 Flower Avenue West, commended Mr. Johnson's work and acknowledged the financial difficulty of operating the course. She nevertheless opposed rezoning, describing it as a "slippery slope" that might allow future commercial uses despite proposed deed restrictions. She supported preserving the golf course and restaurant but not changing the zoning.

Rita Gefell, 482 Flower Avenue West, stated that she had lived near the property for 38 years. She expressed sympathy for the applicant's financial losses but opposed the Zone Change, citing the established residential character of the neighborhood and the possibility of a different restaurant operator or format in the future.

Susan Johnson, 341 Flower Avenue West, opposed the request, stating that the surrounding area is residential and that a Zone Change could adversely affect Flower Avenue West, Ives Street, and Harris Drive. She distinguished the proposed change from the proposed educational use at the former St. Patrick's School.

Chair Capone requested a motion to recommend the requested zone change to City Council. A motion was made by Linda Fields to recommend that City Council change the approved zoning classification of a 1.7-acre portion of 465 Flower Avenue West, Parcel Number 14-42-101.000 from Residential to Neighborhood Mixed Use (NMU). Maryellen Blevins seconded the motion, and all voted in opposition.

Chair Capone announced that with the preceding vote, the Commission is not recommending that the City Council approve the requested Zone Change. Chair Capone cited concern that the change could be perceived as spot zoning while expressing support for the applicant's efforts to preserve Ives Hill and encouraging further discussions with City Staff about alternatives.

Mr. Lumbis indicated that City Council was expected to schedule the public hearing during its October 19, 2026, meeting for November 2, 2026, at 7:15 p.m. This was an anticipated schedule and could be subject to change.

There being no further business, Mr. Monaco moved to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Blevins seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. The meeting was adjourned at **5:59 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted,

Angela Gorman, Secretary