

Planning Commission Meeting Minutes

Thursday, September 17th, 2026, 6:00pm
Municipal Hall Courtroom

1. Meeting Called to Order

Jason Lewallen called the meeting to order at 6:06pm

2. Approval of Minutes for May 21, 2026

Josh Dilbeck made a motion to approve the May 21, 2026 meeting minutes. Jimmy Thompson seconded, all approved.

3. Public Hearings

a. Consideration of a Variance Request by ALMS Homes, LLC/Michael Bouge to Reduce the Required Side-Yard Setback from 10 Feet to 5 Feet for Residential Development on Existing Nonconforming Lots

Staff presented the variance request from ALMS Homes, LLC to reduce the required side-yard setback from ten feet to five feet on existing nonconforming residential lots located along Cash Street.

Michael Bouge, representing ALMS Homes, LLC, presented the request. Mr. Bouge explained that the existing lots are very narrow and that it is difficult to find residential floor plans that fit the lots while meeting the required setbacks. He stated that the purpose of the requested five-foot side-yard setback was to provide additional space and flexibility for the footprints of the proposed homes. Mr. Bouge confirmed that the property was purchased the previous year with the intent of constructing residential homes.

Planning Commission members questioned Mr. Bouge regarding the hardship associated with the request, the existing nonconforming lots, the proposed house footprints, and whether the additional setback area would be used as needed. Mr. Bouge stated that some of the lots are so narrow that there are very few house plans that will fit and confirmed that the reduced setback would be utilized as necessary.

Discussion was also held regarding roof overhangs and the need to maintain appropriate separation between structures for fire safety. Mr. Bouge stated that the houses would need to remain ten feet apart. The Commission also asked about driveway access. Mr. Bouge explained that the homes along Cash Street would have driveway access from Cash Street and that some of the homes along Main Street would have rear access.

The public hearing was opened for comments for or against the variance.

Mark Murphy, 344 Yonah Street, spoke regarding the request. Mr. Murphy questioned whether additional variances might be necessary for minimum lot sizes, corner setbacks, and other dimensional requirements. He also raised questions regarding garage-door frontage requirements and the City's criteria for establishing a hardship. Mr. Murphy stated that he did not believe financial hardship alone constituted grounds for a variance and questioned whether the property could instead be resurveyed to better conform with current zoning requirements.

Mr. Murphy also referenced the City's Comprehensive Plan and discussed the future land-use designation of the property, the historic character of the surrounding neighborhood, smaller-lot housing, whether the project could be considered infill development or a subdivision, and potential sewer, stormwater, soil and water conservation, and land-disturbance considerations. He stated that he was not opposed to the property owner developing the property but believed alternatives should be considered that would better conform with current standards and the character of the neighborhood.

Brenda Garcia, 338 Yonah, stated that she had lived in the neighborhood since approximately 1989 and was familiar with the older homes in the area. Ms. Garcia expressed concern regarding the loss of older and historic homes and the effect that placing numerous smaller homes close together could have on the existing neighborhood. She also expressed concern for children who ride bicycles, play basketball, and play in the streets.

Ms. Garcia questioned what future development might occur along Cash Street, Nacoochee Street, and Yonah Street and expressed concern that continued development could change the historic character of the area. She stated that she would like to see the area and its older homes preserved.

Joy Campbell, 357 Yonah Street, stated that she had lived in her home for approximately 37 years and lives near Nacoochee Street across from the existing older home on the property. Ms. Campbell explained that she initially understood approximately eight houses were proposed and had accepted that development would occur but later became concerned after hearing that there were twelve lots.

Ms. Campbell asked the Commission to consider the perspective of residents who have lived in the neighborhood for many years. She discussed children playing basketball and other activities in the streets and stated that, although she understood change was coming and had no personal issue with Mr. Bouge, she felt it was important to speak on behalf of her home and neighborhood.

Beverly Whitehurst, 125 Cash Street, spoke regarding the proposed development and expressed concerns regarding the number of homes, children in the area, increased traffic, and the ability of residents to safely enter and exit the neighborhood near Main Street.

Tracy Morris, 515 Yonah Street, questioned the zoning of the property, minimum lot sizes, density, and how many houses could legally be constructed on the property. Discussion followed regarding the R-1B zoning designation, the existing recorded lots, and applicable zoning requirements.

Khris Maxwell, 338 Yonah Street, questioned whether approval of the five-foot setback variance was what would allow twelve houses to be constructed rather than eight. It was clarified during the discussion that the twelve lots already existed and that the variance request concerned only the side-yard setbacks, not the number of lots or houses.

Mr. Maxwell expressed concern that the homes would be located close together and could change the existing character of the neighborhood. He also expressed concern regarding additional traffic, children playing in the area, and the difficulty of entering Main Street. Mr. Maxwell asked what specifically was being gained through the setback variance. The Commission and applicant explained that the reduced setback would provide additional flexibility in selecting house plans that could fit the narrow existing lots.

Kristi Lewallen, 378 Cash Street, asked whether approving the variance could establish a precedent for future variance requests. Jason Lewallen determined it would not.

Beverly Whitehurst, 125 Cash Street, stated that four families live near the corner of Main Street and Cash Street and that their parking area exits near Main Street. The speaker expressed concern that the additional homes and vehicles could increase congestion and create a potentially dangerous situation for residents entering and exiting the area.

Following the public comments, the Planning Commission discussed the request further with Mr. Bouge. Commission members clarified that the matter before them was specifically the requested five-foot side-yard setback variance and not whether the applicant was permitted to construct homes on the existing recorded lots.

Mr. Bouge explained that without the variance, there were only a small number of floor plans that would fit the narrow lots. He stated that he did not want all the homes to look exactly the same and that the additional setback flexibility would provide more options and help the proposed homes better fit the character of the surrounding neighborhood. Mr. Bouge stated that the variance was not being requested solely because of the expense of obtaining custom house plans.

When asked about the anticipated price range of the proposed homes, Mr. Bouge stated that he expected the homes to be in approximately the low-to-mid \$300,000 range.

Sandra Miller, 243 Nacoochee Street, stated that she lives directly across from the property. Ms. Miller described previously seeing deer, rabbits, and other activity on the property from her front porch and expressed concern regarding increased traffic and noise associated with additional homes, vehicles, children, and pets. She stated that the neighborhood had traditionally been quiet and expressed concern that too many homes were being proposed on a relatively small area.

A question was also raised regarding the creek running through the property and how it would be addressed during development. It was clarified that the matter before the Commission was the setback variance and that other applicable development requirements would still have to be met.

Crystal Caudell, representing ALMS Homes, LLC, spoke in favor of the variance and clarified that the twelve lots were already recorded with the county. She stated that the Commission was not being asked to determine whether twelve homes could be constructed; rather, the request was specifically to reduce the side-yard setback.

She explained that ALMS Homes was requesting the reduced setback to provide additional house-plan options and to help the proposed homes fit the character of the existing neighborhood. She stated that approval of the variance did not mean the applicant intended to place the houses as close together as possible and that ALMS Homes would attempt to maintain as much separation as practical. She also acknowledged residents' concerns regarding children, traffic, and neighborhood character.

Following the public hearing and Commission discussion, **Josh Dilbeck** made a motion to approve the variance based on the hardship presented by the extremely narrow existing nonconforming lots and to allow the requested **five-foot side-yard setback**. **Jimmy Thompson** seconded the motion. All approved and the motion carried.

b. Consideration of an Annexation and Rezoning Request for Property Located at 1190 Old Cleveland Road, Parcel 086 038, to Annex the Property into the City of Cornelia and Rezone the Property to M-OP (Municipal-Owned Property)

Staff presented the request to annex approximately **21.75 acres** of property owned by the City of Cornelia into the city limits and zone the property M-OP, Municipal-Owned Property. It was explained that the property is contiguous to the existing city limits due to its location adjacent to the City's wastewater treatment plant. Staff stated that Habersham County had provided notice that it had no objection to the annexation request and that the Board of Education had not responded within its applicable response period.

The public hearing was opened for comments for or against the annexation and rezoning request.

David Zavala, 126 White Tail Lane, spoke in opposition to the request. He explained that he had purchased approximately 15 to 16 acres in the area with plans to construct his future home and later purchased an additional approximately three acres to protect the view and value of his property. He stated that he would have purchased the property being considered for annexation had it been available to him.

He expressed concern that the City's proposed future use of the property could significantly affect his property value, which he described as an important part of his savings, future, and retirement. He also expressed concerns regarding the visibility of the proposed facility, possible odors, and the impact on the City's efforts to beautify Cornelia. He asked whether the City had fully researched alternative locations and solutions and also questioned the anticipated cost of the project.

James Landrum, 1489 Old Cleveland Road, stated that he and his wife purchased their home in 2022 with the intention of it being their forever home. Mr. Landrum questioned whether members of the Commission would want the proposed facility located in front of their own homes. He expressed concern regarding having the proposed greenhouse/solar-drying facility visible from his property and questioned why another location could not be found for the proposed use.

Alice Venter, 580 Baldwin Falls Road, who stated that she was not a resident of Cornelia but had previous municipal experience and knowledge of wastewater-solids management, spoke regarding the proposed solar-drying system and alternatives. She explained that municipalities have faced increasing difficulty disposing of wastewater solids due to landfill requirements and described her previous experience with the City of Baldwin when it had to find alternatives for handling wastewater solids.

She discussed an in-vessel composting process involving wastewater solids and wood chips and described research previously conducted into systems capable of producing Class A material that could potentially be used or sold as compost. She stated that the solar-drying process itself did not necessarily create the odor some residents feared but acknowledged that facilities of this nature could affect perceptions and surrounding property values.

She discussed the possibility of using existing landfill space or working cooperatively with Habersham County and other local governments to identify another solution that could address the City's wastewater needs while reducing impacts on neighboring property owners. She encouraged continued public information and discussion regarding the proposed process.

One citizen stated that he had conducted some preliminary research regarding solar drying and understood the process to involve converting sewage/wastewater material into a usable product. He stated that the public should be given sufficient information and an opportunity to research the proposed process.

He described previous experience with composting operations in Pennsylvania and expressed concern regarding possible odors. He stated that Cornelia already experiences odors associated with an existing nearby industrial operation and expressed concern about placing another potentially odorous operation relatively close to the city. He stated that he supported innovation and growth but opposed the proposed location due to its proximity to the community.

Mr. Zavala questioned whether the photographs and information presented represented the full extent of the City's plans for the property. He expressed concern regarding the visual impact of the proposed facility from Old Cleveland Road and surrounding properties and asked whether additional site plans, landscaping plans, or other details were available.

Staff explained that the City was not proposing immediate construction of the facility and that engineering and construction were expected to be years away. Staff further explained that significant grading was anticipated and that hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of dirt could potentially be removed to lower the development area closer to the elevation of the existing

wastewater treatment plant. It was also explained that future development would be pushed away from Old Cleveland Road and closer to the City's existing wastewater treatment plant.

The speaker stated that he supported the City improving and growing but wanted appropriate protections in place for surrounding properties. He asked whether a visual buffer or other landscaping could be guaranteed and whether more detailed construction plans could be provided before the property was annexed.

Discussion followed regarding the possibility of establishing a **green buffer** as a condition of the annexation and rezoning. It was suggested that planting a buffer before construction could allow vegetation to mature during the years before the facility was developed. Staff stated that the City Commission could potentially place such a condition on the property.

Staff also explained that a stream runs through the property and that applicable stream-buffer requirements would have to be maintained. It was stated that the proposed facility would not be constructed directly along Old Cleveland Road.

Suzanne Myers, 128 Village Drive, stated that she owns property adjoining or near the subject property and has owned it for approximately 15 years. Ms. Myers expressed significant concern regarding the impact of the proposed future use on her property value. She questioned why the city would annex the particular tract for the proposed use when the surrounding area feels more rural in character.

Ms. Myers stated that her property is valuable and that she was concerned about a facility of this nature being located immediately adjacent to it.

Additional discussion was held regarding the location of surrounding properties, existing equipment on neighboring property, the visibility of the proposed facility, and potential effects on property values.

David Zavala asked whether the Planning Commission could postpone or table consideration of the request to allow neighboring property owners additional time to research potential conditions and discuss possible protections with the City. Another member of the public stated that because construction was not expected immediately, there appeared to be time for additional consideration.

The Planning Commission then discussed the City's recently amended annexation ordinance and the criteria applicable to annexation requests. A Commission member questioned whether the City had satisfied the new requirements.

Staff explained that under the amended ordinance, an annexation application must identify the proposed use and include a site plan rather than simply requesting annexation without a stated purpose. Staff stated that the current application included the proposed use, site information, and photographs of facilities like the one being considered and therefore complied with the City's current annexation requirements.

Discussion continued regarding the site plan, proposed grading, anticipated facility location, traffic, and existing wastewater operations. Staff explained that trucks already travel to and from the wastewater treatment plant and stated that the proposed process could potentially reduce the number of trips to the landfill.

Commission members also discussed infrastructure and utility availability. Staff stated that water and sewer service were already available in the area and explained that expansion of the wastewater treatment plant would need to occur before the proposed future facility could move forward.

When asked about the anticipated timeline, staff explained that the project depended on financing and completion of the wastewater treatment plant expansion and that the costs of that project had increased significantly since planning began.

During further discussion, it was clarified that the Planning Commission was not approving construction of the solar-drying facility at this meeting. The matter before the Commission was the annexation and zoning of the City-owned property. It was also clarified that the City already owned the property and could potentially pursue development through Habersham County if the property remained outside the city limits. The purpose of the annexation was, in part, to bring City-owned property into the City of Cornelia.

Discussion was also held regarding the property's existing county zoning and how zoning would be handled upon annexation.

After the public hearing was closed, the Planning Commission discussed whether the application satisfied the criteria contained in the City's annexation ordinance. A Commission member stated that the City had identified the proposed use, stated its intent, and provided the required plans and information.

Josh Dilbeck made a motion to recommend approval of the annexation and rezoning request based upon the application satisfying the requirements of the City's annexation ordinance. Jimmy Thompson seconded the motion. All approved and the motion carried.

It was clarified that the Planning Commission's action constituted a recommendation to the City Commission and that the annexation and rezoning request would proceed to the October 6, 2026 City Commission meeting for final consideration.

Members of the public were advised that they could attend the October 6 City Commission meeting to provide additional comments regarding the annexation request.

4. Next Regular Board Meeting

The next regular Planning Commission meeting is scheduled for **October 15, 2026 at 6:00pm.**

5. Adjourn

Jason Lewallen made a motion to adjourn the meeting. **Josh Dilbeck** seconded, all approved.

Meeting adjourned at **7:22pm**

Members Present:

Josh Dilbeck, Jason Lewallen, Jimmy Thompson, Donald Anderson, Ally Sosebee

Absent:

Portia Burns, Gwen Wiley