

From: R Bissell [<mailto:bissellw@umich.edu>]  
Sent: Friday, May 29, 2015 9:51 AM  
To: Taylor, Christopher (Mayor); Briere, Sabra; Kailasapathy, Sumi; Lumm, Jane; Westphal, Kirk; Kunselman, Stephen; Grand, Julie; Eaton, Jack; Krapohl, Graydon; Anglin, Mike; Warpehoski, Chuck; Planning  
Subject: Thoughts on the Ann Arbor Master Plan

Dear City Officials:

Members of the Board of Directors of the Northbury Condominium Association were unable to attend the community meeting at which residents were able to offer their views on the City of Ann Arbor Master Plan. Fred Mayer, our Vice President, has written the attached document, which the Board has endorsed, and which we hope will be accorded the most serious consideration as the various governmental entities move forward in addressing changes in the plan. We are committed to a vibrant, diverse, well-designed and environmentally responsible city. We urge the city's leadership to pay careful attention to the clearly articulated views that we feel represent not only those of our own community but also those of residents throughout the city.

Sincerely,

R. Ward Bissell  
Secretary, Northbury Board of Directors

## **NORTHBURY CONDOMINIUM ASSOCIATION**

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The Board of Directors of the Northbury Condominium Association is committed to improving the quality of life not only in the Northbury community but also within the City of Ann Arbor. Thus the Board feels compelled to comment on the Master Plan, and urges that you give careful consideration to the views that follow, carefully crafted by our Vice President Fred Mayer,

One of the major shortcomings of the City's present approach to master planning is the tendency to apply a single theoretical approach to all parts of the City with little regard to the feelings or desires of the people who live there. At present, it takes the form of trying to "urbanize" the built environment of all parts of the City, which forces those who wish to live in a quiet, green, residential setting to relocate to the surrounding townships. One of the attractive qualities of Ann Arbor up to this point is the diversity it offers in terms of the character of the built environment. Those who seek a vibrant, urban lifestyle can find it in the downtown and campus-area neighborhoods. Those who prefer a quiet, family-oriented neighborhood of single family houses set amongst abundant greenery can find that too. This diversity is worth pursuing if we wish to retain our position as an inclusive City with a place for a variety of lifestyles, but some of the policies of the current master-planning approach fail to pursue this goal. We believe that a less rigid, more flexible approach is needed that would give greater weight to the opinions of the residents, particularly in established residential areas.

We are not opposed to higher density, mixed use, or urban environments, but we feel they are most appropriate in the central area of the City where they are close to restaurants, shopping, the library, museums, theaters and other entertainment venues as well as the many cultural assets available on the University campus. These, after all, are the elements that give interest, vitality, and excitement to urban living. Some of the older, close-in-neighborhoods such as Burns Park and the Old West Side possess some of these same features, and their residents prefer this type of environment and choose to live in these neighborhoods for just such reasons. In other neighborhoods, however, people choose to live there because they want a low-density environment with lots of trees and open space and no commercial uses mixed in with their homes. This style of living may not be in vogue with planning professionals these days, but this does not mean the people should be denied the right to such a lifestyle if they so choose. It seems that the City needs to do a far better job of listening to and abiding by the wishes of the residents of established residential areas in its decision-making process if it wants to retain its vitality as a living environment with a diversity of lifestyles.

Such a policy would not eliminate the opportunity for the growth of either the tax base or the number of residential units available to those who choose to live here. The transformation that is taking place in the central area has added significantly to the tax base of the City, the number of units available, and the economic vitality of central Ann Arbor. This trend shows no sign of

stopping. In addition, a number of major arterials in the City, such as W. Stadium Boulevard, E. Washtenaw Avenue, and Packard Road south of Stadium, are also ripe for redevelopment, and some is actually taking place. If properly managed, these opportunities can serve to grow the tax base, increase the supply of housing and enhance the quality of life in the City. The encouragement of such goals should be a major objective of the master plan.

Finally, one of the major shortcomings we see in the current planning process is the lack of a mechanism to direct the actual design of a proposed project to increase its compatibility with the surrounding area and its overall impact on the community. Zoning, which is the major tool available to the City at present, is a negative tool. It tells the developer what he/she cannot do, but it does not let the City tell the developer what it wants done. The result has been a series of recent projects that are at best mediocre and in some cases downright ugly. In addition, developers are often insensitive to both environmental and human needs. The City needs to create more effective tools to control the actual design of projects to produce better quality outcomes. It has been said that design-review processes can stifle individual creativity on the part of the architects. This can be true, and a system must be developed which avoids this result. However, in the past fifty years we cannot think of a single example of outstanding design (outside the University campus) that has been created, although no such controls existed. Also, people mention the difficulties of establishing such controls under present State law, but the city of Kalamazoo has implemented such a process, so it must be possible. In summary, we feel it is essential that an effective design - review process be developed if the quality of projects being proposed in the City is to be improved and the controversy that has surrounded so many recent projects reduced.

With respect to issues currently facing the City, the proposed Toll Brothers development along Nixon Road provides an excellent case in point. The original plan presented by the developer did not include any commercial uses. The neighborhood has made its opposition to the inclusion of such uses in either the plan or zoning very clear. Yet the Planning Commission and staff have chosen to substitute their own preference for this type of development over the clearly stated views of the neighborhood. It is hoped that the members of City Council will choose to pay attention to the views of their constituents and overrule the Commission.

Other controversial elements of the proposed plans, such as the balance of higher and lower density units to the North and South of Dhu Varren Road, the wall of buildings along Nixon Road, the appropriate size and location of natural areas and landscaped buffers are in fact design issues, not zoning issues, and they should be resolved as part of the design review process, not as part of an annexation or zoning discussion. Our present planning review process, however, does not allow for this.

The Ann Arbor planning process as it exists today promotes unnecessary confrontations and controversy. Few people really object to the idea that the Toll Brothers parcel should become a part of the City and that it will ultimately be developed. The controversy stems from the nature and design of the development itself. Many of these issues could be resolved in a much less confrontational manner if the planning process is reformed to allow the neighborhood to share its views with the developer **prior** to the beginning of the design process, and if the City would then support the neighborhood preferences in its review and approval of the proposals when dealing with established residential areas.

These same principles apply to the proposed developments in the South Pond area and the site just north of Arborland. In fact, in any established residential area of the City, the views of the existing residents of that area should be the determining factors when reviewing proposed changes to the character of the existing residential community. There are ample opportunities in Ann Arbor for redevelopment and increased density that will both increase the tax base and enhance the opportunity for urban-style living. They include both the central city and the more densely developed areas along major arterials such as Plymouth Road, Washtenaw Avenue, Stadium Boulevard, South State Street, Main Street, etc. (but not arterials such as Hill Street, Geddes Road, Green Road, Pontiac Trail, Nixon Road, Pauline Boulevard, Seventh Street, Scio Church Road, etc). In this way Ann Arbor will be able to preserve its existing diversity of lifestyles while at the same time enhancing its tax base to support necessary city services. We believe these are both desirable and achievable objectives.

Sincerely,

R. Ward Bissell  
Secretary, Northbury Condominium Association