

Subject: Draft Comprehensive Planning Process - Comments
Attachments: Ladewski - Comprehensive Plan Comments 5152025.pdf

From: Barbara Ladewski
Sent: Friday, May 16, 2025 5:31 AM
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Cc: Barbara Ladewski
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With many thanks to Mayor Taylor, Members of City Council, City Administrator Mr. Dohoney, Members of the City Planning Commission, and the many additional very dedicated City of Ann Arbor professional staff members and community members who have invested so much time and effort in our City's Comprehensive Planning process.

Please find these comments also attached below as a pdf to this email communication.

I appreciate very much all the thoughtful dedicated work that has been invested by so many in developing the draft document for the Ann Arbor Comprehensive Plan. And that so many folks seem to share the same goal that I too care so deeply about, from my professional perspectives as a human systems/computer systems analyst and from my personal perspective as a 50-plus year resident of Ann Arbor...that shared goal being, how to support a diverse sustainable robust healthy future for our community for our children/grand-children.

From a systems perspective, a human community can be fruitfully conceptualized as a complex system, a highly adaptive constantly-changing social system involving myriad interconnected elements and processes that mutually inform each other across space and over time. Population growth (or decline), and whether such growth or decline incorporates changes in population density (and whether any differences in density are uniformly or non-uniformly distributed across space), is simply one of many complex interconnected processes and elements of a complex community system that mutually inform each other. Therefore, from a complex systems perspective, it seems essential that community population growth...and whether such growth involves (or **ought** to involve) densification and whether any densification is (or **ought** to be) uniformly or non-uniformly distributed...should be examined within the broad context of the many interconnected elements and processes of the entire system. A complex systems approach to a complex community system.

Regarding using such a complex systems lens to examine ***our shared goal of long-term sustainability for our community***, I would like to make the following brief points:

(a) Studying complex systems, including studying population growth within complex systems, requires a solid foundation of triangulated reliable data. Human communities can be particularly challenging systems regarding gathering triangulated reliable data; gathering reliable population growth and demographic data can be particularly challenging. Therefore, systems analysts and city planners are often left to infer trends in total population growth or for specific demographic groups from incomplete data, or from secondary or tertiary sources.

The observed data that seem to be driving the current frantic call for rapid and irreversible densification seems to be the very real observation that housing and rental costs are the fastest inflating sector of our economy and are thus creating a crisis of housing affordability. The 20th-century approach to such a problem was often a fairly simplistic supply-demand argument...housing is too expensive, therefore there must be insufficient supply to meet demand, therefore we must build-baby-build more housing.

And, particularly if there seems to be limited expansion opportunity with respect to available land, then build-baby-build translates fairly quickly into calls for densification, with the crisis of housing affordability being used to justify rapid densification...with no time for adequate data gathering or planning...because of the magnitude of the crisis.

However, there are typically many other processes at work in complex community systems than simply supply-demand. And it can be quite challenging to gain access to important data to explore the additional processes that might be at work, including for example numbers of existing units of housing, occupancy rates of existing units, and uses of existing units for purposes other than full-time occupancy.

So, is the most effective way to slow rapidly escalating housing costs simply to increase supply? Probably not. Is the most effective way to slow rapidly escalating housing costs to raze existing functional housing and build new uniformly denser housing (new construction with an unspecified useful life, proceeding with minimal oversight)? Probably not.

Complex community systems seem to require nuanced diversified highly flexible planning frameworks to meet the needs of a very unpredictable future. Our Comprehensive Plan should provide such a framework. Frenzied supply-demand build-baby-build and rapid densification do not seem sufficiently robust to meet the challenging demands of the 21st Century.

(b) As some level of densification proceeds—How can City Council and City planners work together with developers across levels of analysis, and within appropriate lines of authority/responsibility, to create a diverse livable sustainable community, with beautiful functional well-constructed long-lived edifices and diverse vibrant cohesive livable neighborhoods?

Developers operate at the edifice/project level of analysis; City Council and City planners operate at the community level of analysis, while providing important oversight for the edifice/project level of analysis. It is important not to assume that developers can (or should) do the high-level integration work required at the community level of analysis. If City Council (supported by City planners) does not exercise their authority/responsibility to do the high-level integration work and the lower-level oversight work, then that integration and oversight work will simply not be done. And our City will become a collection of individual hastily constructed edifices, not a diverse livable sustainable community with beautiful functional well-constructed long-lived edifices and diverse vibrant cohesive livable neighborhoods.

As an example of this levels of analysis/authority issue, City Council recently voted to eliminate the Design Review Board, signaling its intention to integrate such design review work into the general project development process. However, that vote was taken without a proposal having been developed and offered regarding how design review processes and personnel would become integrated into the general project development process. Without City Council and City planners suggesting explicit changes to the general project development process to incorporate design review, it seems unlikely that the new process will include the effective integrated design review and oversight that only City Council and City planners can provide.

(c) As some level of densification proceeds—How might property ownership shift from private individual to corporate ownership? How might the percentage of individual property owners shift compared to renters? How might the percentage of small local businesses shift compared to large national chains?

The greater the aggregation of land parcels, the larger the footprint and the taller the structures, the greater the number of units per structure, then the more likely for property ownership to shift from individual/small business to corporate ownership. Such shifts, should they occur, seem likely to continue fueling the current exponential rise in rents and the current exponential rise in structural costs as new steel and concrete mega structures replace still functional smaller frame and brick structures, reliable data regarding building costs/rents/occupancy rates becomes more and more difficult to obtain, and individuals of moderate means become increasingly shut out from participating in property ownership (the highest inflating sector of our economy).

Our City Comprehensive Planning process ought to proactively address this crucial issue, so that the financial benefits of densification are not disproportionately enjoyed by developers.

(d) As some level of densification proceeds—Who will shoulder the substantial costs of the infrastructure upgrades required by densification? Without proactive planning, the brunt of these costs could be

disproportionately borne by current individual property owners, given that infrastructure upgrades typically precede the development that requires them.

Our City Comprehensive Planning process ought to proactively address this crucial issue, so that current individual property owners are not forced to shoulder a disproportionate fraction of the costs of the infrastructure upgrades required to support densification.

(e) As some level of densification proceeds in our own community—What reliable data do we have regarding how such densification processes have impacted other communities?

It seems important to acknowledge that an important fraction of the academic literature in many fields has been written by parties with a substantial self-interest related to the question being studied. Such conflicts of interest can add a slant to the perspectives being presented in the literature, sometimes without such conflicts of interest being acknowledged. The city planning literature is not different in that regard. Therefore, it is important to understand such potential conflicts of interest, and to read widely...and with some skepticism.

(f) Finally, it seems important to revisit the sections of the Comprehensive Plan that summarize resident input into the process.

As a long-time qualitative researcher, it is my professional opinion that the very important community engagement work that has been done to date represents and should be framed as a community outreach effort designed to engage the community in the planning process and to enrich the community conversation about land use possibilities. ***If there is a need for a study to sample and summarize community opinion regarding those possibilities, then a formal study should be designed with appropriate survey protocols followed to ensure a professional unbiased survey and summary of results.***

Again, many thanks to all for all the hard work that everyone has invested in developing this draft report.

Best regards,
Barbara

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Examining theory/practice related to human systems and human learning/ social sense-making:
Examining how we humans make sense together (and sometimes don't)--across levels of analysis and cognitive/ social/ affective/ spiritual dimensions across the lifespan; examining structure/ function of individual mind/brain that enables social mind; developing theory/ treatment options for disruptions of social mind (Alzheimer's/ dementia/ PTSD/ autism/ chronic homelessness); integrating theory/ practice in diverse practice contexts (formal and informal); professional education/ development

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