

TO: Ann Arbor City Council and Mayor  
(with apologies to new council members who are not responsible for past actions.  
Ann Arbor Planning Commission  
FROM Barbara Carr  
SUBJECT: Zoning and Design Guidelines  
DATE: January 20, 2013

**Shame on you.** You have failed in your responsibility to represent the best interests of the community as Ann Arbor grows and larger apartment developments are built in the city. After the Fifth Avenue procedural mess, I heard that new zoning proposals were in the works. I assumed, incorrectly it seems, that they would include sensible limitations on plans for increasing density in the central and campus areas (not in itself a bad concept).

Why am I so appalled and angry? Behemoths have risen on South University and Washington/Huron, that seem out of scale for the locations and treat adjacent properties without respect, impinging on their integrity and livability. And more are on the way.

What is happening on Huron Street is especially frustrating and VERY noticeable. The new student apartment building that stretches through the block from Washington is an affront. It sticks out, being built closer to the street than nearby architecturally significant buildings; there is a very narrow set back (6-10ft?) on the east side adjacent to the historic Silas Douglass House (1848). That kind of distance may be acceptable in a single family residential area, but in this case it is disgraceful. What good are the new “design guidelines” if they still allow this kind of building?

A fourteen story building should not be allowed on a narrow street with low rise buildings all around it unless the heights is mitigated by some other design elements.. Consideration of light, air, and sight lines for neighbors should be given some priority. Height and mass should be considered in relationship to **the location**, not just commercial desires (and perhaps potential taxes).

I am no architect, no city planner, but I love this city and hate to see its heritage and charm damaged by developers who cannot be expected to care about aesthetics or history. Living in Ann Arbor since 1957, observing local politics and planning as an interested citizen, I am particularly saddened and disappointed by the current state of affairs and current leadership.

—Original Message—

From: Hieftje, John

Sent: Tuesday, January 22, 2013 4:45 PM

To: Barbara Carr

Cc: Planning; Anglin, Mike; Lumm, Jane; Warpehoski, Chuck; Briere, Sabra; Taylor, Christopher (Council); Kailasapathy Sumi; Teall Margie; Petersen, Sally; Higgins, Marcia; Kunselman, Stephen

Subject: FW: A citizen's message regarding zoning.

Dear Ms. Carr:

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts on this issue. Please allow me to respond to some of your points.

The "Fifth Avenue procedural mess" I believe you are referring to is for the block of 5th Ave. between William and Packard. If I am wrong, please let me know. This was a messy process as city council did just about everything they could to save the old houses but unfortunately could not. Let me note that this area is outside of downtown zoning and is instead in an R4C zoning.

There is indeed a process underway that will result in changes to R4C zoning. It has taken a long time but then planning/zoning processes usually do, this is in part because there is so much time set aside to gather input from residents. It should be coming to council soon.

As for downtown itself, there was a long and comprehensive zoning process that was completed in 2009. It started back in 2004 following approval by the voters of the Greenbelt program to save farmland in the townships and buy parkland in the city. The city has already worked with township partners and a federal program to save over 4000 acres of farmland and open space with more to follow. Several parcels in the city have been purchased to be preserved as parkland.

There continue to be many residents in our community who believe voting to forever preserve the countryside created a greater need for density in the urban core. This was part of the impetus to rezone downtown but it needed an update as it had not been looked at in a long time.

The R2D2 rezoning process for downtown spared no effort to gather the input of residents at every stage as well as some of the most highly respected experts on cityscapes in the nation. The process involved taking a long look at every downtown parcel and it created "Character Districts" to recognize the context of each area. It involved countless public meetings, input from hundreds of residents and in the end reached a consensus agreed to by almost everyone who participated.

That consensus called for greater density in the core areas of the city that are not protected in Historic Districts. Changes in the Historic Districts can only happen with the approval of the Historic District Commission and the HDC cannot be overruled except by appeal to a board in Lansing. Our historic districts are vital to the continued charm and vitality of our city and this is well recognized in the zoning and in state statute.

Most of downtown is set aside in a historic district or it is part of the UM Campus. Less than 40% is left over. The portion of Main that we all love is preserved as is much of State, William, Liberty, parts of Washington, etc. There is map showing this in an article up on A2.com.

The new zoning imposed a height limit of 16 stories downtown where one did not exist before but not all new projects are able to meet the requirements for this. As I recall, the building you mention on South University was approved prior to the new zoning. It was originally proposed at 26 stories but city council was able to get it down to 14. By state law, a building that meets the zoning for a particular area is considered to be "by right" and while there is time for input, the Planning Commission and City Council cannot say no.

Our city is one of only a couple in Michigan to have design guidelines and given state law, they are about as restrictive as they can be until they can be further encoded in the zoning. Still, since the process has been in place there has been a very high degree of compliance.

When I was growing up in Ann Arbor the houses near Downtown were owned by families and working people lived in downtown apartments. That changed as the student population grew and displaced them. Just a few years ago some of our neighborhoods were under constant pressure from investors. Every house that came on the market was snapped up to be converted to a student rental and this was seen by many families as detrimental to the neighborhood. As one resident said at a neighborhood meeting last year, "the steamroller has been stopped."

One of the outcomes of newer buildings going up in the city's core is creating more opportunities for others to move into the near campus houses as students move downtown. I have heard reports of families purchasing former rentals and in effect beginning to "re-colonize" areas that were once dominated by single family homes. More opportunities are being created for people who work in the city to live here as well.

I greatly appreciate your passion and share your love of our great city.

Thank you again for writing and if you would ever like to discuss this further please call my office for an appointment. (794 6161) I have open office hours nearly every week.

John Hieftje