

Subject: Draft Comprehensive Land Use Plan
Attachments: Aaron_King_re_Comprehensive_Plan.pdf

From: Aaron A. King
Sent: Friday, May 16, 2025 8:52 AM
To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>
Cc: Taylor, Christopher (Mayor) <CTaylor@a2gov.org>; City Council <CityCouncil@a2gov.org>
Subject: Draft Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Attached please find my comments on the draft comprehensive plan.

Aaron A. King, Ph.D.
Nelson G. Hairston Professor of Ecology, Evolutionary Biology, and Complex Systems
University of Michigan

16 May 2025

To the Planning Commission, regarding the Draft Comprehensive Land Use Plan:

I have lived with my wife in Ann Arbor for 20 years. Together, we own three residential properties. These include the modest house on a small lot in which we reside, a duplex in Lower Burns Park, and a downtown rental property. I rarely use our car, preferring to walk or bicycle most of the time. I support local businesses and participate in our local cultural life. I have been very happy here and would like to remain and continue to contribute to the life of this place.

Having lived in elsewhere across the country and beyond, including large cities (Houston, New York, San Francisco), mid-sized cities (El Paso, Oakland, Knoxville, Tucson, Montpelier, France, Trieste, Italy), and small towns (Roslyn, Wash., Davis, Cal.), I have had a variety of experiences that give me a deep appreciation for Ann Arbor's distinctive qualities. From my perspective, this town is special because of its varied neighborhoods, its abundance of trees, its historicity, its walkability, its lively downtown, its vibrant cultural life, its excellent public transit system, and its diminished but still appreciable variety of local shops, venues, galleries, and restaurants. Although our own son is grown and lives elsewhere in town, we live in a neighborhood where children play together in the streets and where neighbors talk to each other from their front porches and get together at block parties. I treasure this neighborhood life as an increasingly rare and precious thing.

I also support the broad goals of the development plan. A city that offers a home to many generations, income-levels, lifestyles, and subcultures is more vibrant, dynamic, and educational than one that is homogeneous. It is lamentable that too many working people cannot afford to live near their workplaces and tragic that so many young people are having to reshape their lives in response to high housing costs. I detest urban sprawl, which, quite aside from its massive negative ecological impacts, homogenizes the landscape and dulls the culture. I think that increasing the population density of the city would be a good thing.

But the devil is in the details.

As a professional ecologist and applied mathematician whose research and teaching focus on the dynamics of complex systems like ecosystems and societies, I think a lot about unintended consequences. In such systems, one often finds that there are critical thresholds or tipping points, where adjusting some variable at first changes the system in a desired direction and then, beyond some point, causes it to respond in quite another. One also frequently observes that although a system responds at first gradually to gradual changes in some condition, that tipping points exist, beyond which abrupt, disproportionate, even catastrophic consequences follow from modest adjustments. In the context of the life of cities, it seems to be the case that such relationships exist between population density and the vitality of street life. Increasing density from low values initially contributes to vitality. Beyond some threshold, however, the vibrancy of a neighborhood declines. Perhaps this is because, if buildings are too high, the streets beneath them become inhospitable. They certainly do in a continental climate like our own, where shade and wind shear turn the streets beneath our tall buildings into frigid, blustery

canyons for much of the year. In the specific case of Ann Arbor, beyond some point, density is incompatible with tree cover, which is important in so many ways, many of which we don't even understand, but can only feel. The scale of construction is not the only factor, however: the nature of the constructed spaces also matters. As buildings become higher, their upper reaches become invisible to the pedestrian, who feels excluded and unwelcome. This can be ameliorated with attention to making the streetscape inviting to the pedestrian. This requires thought, creativity, effort, and investment, however.

Some part of the threshold effect has to do not with architecture, but rather with human sociality. In both sparsely and very densely populated areas, people tend to be mistrustful of one another. In between, there is a sweet spot where one recognizes and can look out for one's neighbors but they are not so numerous that one seeks shelter from them. I believe we are at or near this sweet spot in our own neighborhood, and probably in many other neighborhoods in town.

With respect to the economics of development in Ann Arbor, it seems that the simple lessons taught in Economics 101 are not so straightforward to apply. For example, it is striking that, despite a great abundance of new street-level retail space included in the many new high-rise buildings downtown, most of it has remained empty for years. Economics 101 tells us that the oversupply should lead to drop in rent and increase in occupancy. This is either not happening, or is happening on a very slow timescale. I suspect that the issue may be that global capital is speculating in Ann Arbor real estate. With deep pockets and its sights set on capital gains, it does not bother with small-scale cash-flow issues. Similarly, and possibly for similar reasons, the massive increase in the abundance of luxury apartments and condominiums has not resulted in any decline in residential rents. Again, the issue may be one of time-scale. As the newer properties age, one expects that they will eventually become available to lower-income residents. However, this effect will only manifest itself on a timescale of decades (though having witnessed the cheap construction used in many of these places, I anticipate that it may happen more rapidly than intended). This simple observation is at odds with claims that these changes are meant to address the needs of people now. If those who support the current draft of the plan imagine that it will improve their lives, as opposed to those of their children or grandchildren, it seems likely that they will be disappointed.

I feel very strongly that the current plan is a deeply misguided approach to achieving worthwhile goals. It paints in very broad strokes, without the attention to detail that one reasonably expects from public servants whose job it is to come to grips with these details on behalf of their constituents. At its foundations are a number of deeply worrying assumptions about the city's trajectory over the years ahead and about the basis of the city's economy. The sources and reliability of the (very limited) data on which it is based are not what they could and should be. Also, the timetable for public comment on the plan seems unnecessarily accelerated, almost desperate. Indeed, were it not for my faith in the honesty and basic decency of my fellow citizens on the Planning Commission, the City Council, and the city staff, these features would cause me to wonder whether there might be underlying ulterior motives.

In sum, to use such a flawed vision as the basis for decisions that will shape the city into the future is to risk destroying the features that make Ann Arbor the special place that it is while yet failing to achieve the stated goals.

I have a number of specific suggestions that I would like to see considered.

1. The current projections for the city's growth should be replaced by more realistic ones. The vision at the basis of the current draft is simply not remotely credible.
2. Include explicit consideration of the scale and design of new construction. The city should reclaim a measure of control over the construction it allows. We should not sell ourselves short, but rather build for a city that future generations will be proud of.
3. Integrate more thorough consideration of natural features, environmental impacts, and infrastructure into the plan. In particular, impacts on shade, drainage, and water consumption should be more thoroughly considered, and better estimates of the cost of infrastructure upgrades needed to mitigate higher density are needed. The projected impact of known water-table pollution issues should be addressed as a part of this.
4. Slow down the process for the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan to allow more public involvement and a more expansive and inclusive vision. All of the conscientious citizens I know have been blindsided by this. While we can look into what precisely went wrong, it is certainly not a consequence of apathy or indolence on the part of these citizens and therefore must be viewed as a failure of the outreach effort. I cannot see how a conscientious public servant could view it otherwise.

I thank you for your continuing service, and for your attention to my concerns.

Sincerely,

Aaron A. King
411 West Jefferson Street
Ann Arbor