

Subject: The Transition District

From: Will Leaf
Sent: Friday, May 9, 2025 12:16 AM
To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>
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Hello Planning Commissioners and city staff,

Thank you for your heroic stamina in these meetings.

The memo below discusses how the city can safely incorporate uses that were previously envisioned for the Flex District in the Transition District. It includes example photos from other cities.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZzUpiWnm2f2cTcNt3CJW1rsf2FbEUaBq5Jnzi2tL11A/edit?usp=sharing>

Will

Summary

The current draft of the plan recommends creating a single Transition zoning district. I support this recommendation. It is neither necessary nor helpful to plan for several zoning districts within the Transition category. Instead of adding more districts, you can simply make the Transition district more flexible by allowing research and development and removing the ground-floor commercial requirements.

The Transition district's intent can simply be to allow for a wide variety of housing, business, research, and recycling activities while protecting residents from nuisances and dangers.

A single mixed-use district with performance standards would respect City Council's [instructions](#) to:

- “promote fewer zoning districts or categories, that contain more flexibility for re-use and adaptability over time”
- “emphasize values over specified land use limitations where possible”

In contrast, extra Transition districts would either:

- Restrict harmless uses that meet the city's performance standards for noise, odor, light, etc.—like research facilities and reuse centers.
- Allow harmful uses that do not meet those standards—like polluting salvage yards.

The Current Draft Calls for a Single District

On page 102, the “Zoning” row for Transition says:

“New mixed-residential district that self-regulates height when adjacent to established residential district.”

Benefits of a Single District

A single district would provide consistency in two key ways:

Flexibility in Use

Allowing a wide variety of uses throughout Ann Arbor would help remedy the city's shortage of housing and commercial space. It would also allow for an exciting mix of stores, housing, offices, research centers, and light industrial uses within walking distance of each other. Many other cities have mixed-use districts that allow light industrial uses.



An M1 district in San Francisco that [allows](#) housing and light industry. [[street view](#), [zoning map](#)]



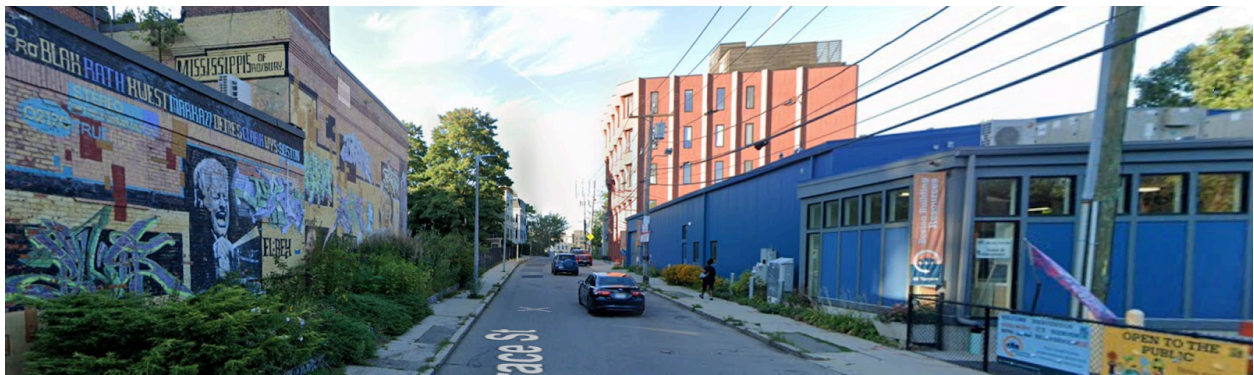
An RIV-IMU district in Pittsburgh that allows housing and light industry. [[street view](#), [zoning map](#)]

Circular Economy Uses

Thrift shops and reuse centers should be allowed throughout Ann Arbor, within walking distance of their customers, rather than confined to one industrial district. Other cities have successfully integrated reuse centers into walkable neighborhoods.



On the left is The Rebuilding Center in Portland, Oregon. It is a reuse and repair center in a residential neighborhood. [Street View. https://www.rebuildingcenter.org](https://www.rebuildingcenter.org).



On the right is The Boston Building Resources Reuse Center, next to an apartment building behind it. [Street View. https://www.bostonbuildingresources.com/reuse-center](https://www.bostonbuildingresources.com/reuse-center).

In many cases, light industrial uses are less noisy and disruptive than commercial uses like bars, restaurants, and liquor stores. If you go to South Industrial or Research Park in the evening, you will find far fewer loud and obnoxious land uses than in downtown or a busy commercial area.

Protection Against Nuisances and Dangers

While many industrial uses are benign, some are polluting and dangerous. Fortunately, the city has rules preventing industrial activities from harming neighbors. These rules explain how our light industrial districts are able to allow schools, daycares, and nursing homes by right without creating horrible conflicts.

Permitted Uses – (UDC, page 36):

<https://www.a2gov.org/media/rh4bt05h/unified-development-code.pdf#page=36>

Performance Standards – (UDC, pages 22-25):

<https://www.a2gov.org/media/rh4bt05h/unified-development-code.pdf#page=22>

Creating an extra Transition district for the former “Flex District” areas, with looser performance standards than those that currently exist, would be inequitable and dangerous, because these areas already hold sensitive land uses like schools and daycares.

It’s obvious that the children in these areas deserve protections against toxic dust and excessive noise, but the workers in nearby businesses deserve protections too. It would not be compassionate or equitable to risk their health and comfort for the theoretical benefit of allowing a “messy” recycling center that has not even been planned.

Answering Staff’s Questions

At the last meeting, staff asked some good questions, probing the commissioners on their vision for the Transition District. Here are some possible responses to those questions.

Should we allow X activity in Transition?

If the activity meets the city’s current light industrial performance standards for noise, odor, vibration, and similar harms, it should be allowed in Transition. If not, then it should not be allowed anywhere in the city, because cities have a responsibility to prevent nuisances and dangers throughout their boundaries.

It would not be equitable or compassionate to selectively allow dangerous or polluting uses on the south side of town, ignoring the people who already live and work there.

But don’t we need a messy recycling center within the city limits?

If the city wants to build a recycling center within Ann Arbor, it can buy land anywhere in the city, rezone it public land, and build a facility with good nuisance protections.

Reserving hundreds of acres as a nuisance-friendly industrial area is neither necessary nor sufficient for creating a recycling center.

What about uses that aren’t dangerous, but are just ugly and boring, like storage lockers?

Residents benefit from many unglamorous uses. Being able to walk to your storage locker is highly convenient, and there’s no reason to treat storage lockers like evil forces that must be contained in an industrial district on the south side of town.

When I started a mineral sunscreen company a decade ago, access to a storage locker was critical, and it would have been great to have been closer to one, so I didn't have to drive all the way down South State Street, worsening traffic for everyone else.

If you are dead set on restricting storage lockers, you could:

1. Ban them in Hub (Implemented by TC-1) and allow them in Transition.
2. Make them a special exception use in Transition.

Both of these policies would be more coherent than creating a separate zoning district in one part of the city for useful but unglamorous uses, forcing most residents to drive to them.

Changes to Make Transition More Flexible:

1. Under "Transition Building Form", change "low to mid-rise" to "low to high-rise."
2. Remove "active first floor commercial" requirements.
3. Add research and development to the list of permitted uses, as suggested by the economic development director.