

November 17, 2024

Ann Arbor City Planning Commissioners
Ann Arbor City Planning Staff, attn Hank Kelley
301 East Huron Avenue
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

Re: Council Resolution 24-1560 - expansion of in-home commercial uses

Dear Planning Commissioners and Staff:

I recently learned that Ann Arbor wants to expand commercial uses in residential neighborhoods to allow restaurants and other commercial businesses to be run out of homes, as reported in <https://www.mlive.com/news/2024/09/former-home-based-cafe-among-types-of-businesses-ann-arbor-council-wants-to-see-again.html>.

I am writing to you in the hope that you might be willing to hear from some residents who object to the expanded commercial uses that city council wants to permit in the residential neighborhoods.

My concerns are twofold. One relates to procedure, the other to substance.

This letter addresses only my procedural concerns, which include lack of transparency, rushed and superficial process, inadequate notice to voters, and no opportunity for public comment.

As a lifelong Democrat and liberal, it is disturbing to see the city require you to rush through significant changes without any public comment or notice. (See council's Resolution 24-1560, which expressly requires you to rush to conclusion without any public notice or comment.) The proposed changes raise complicated issues, issues as to which all residents should be apprised and be invited *and encouraged* to weigh in on.

The Democrats just lost a national election to people who are working to undo democracy. There are many reasons the Democrats lost, but one was the failure of the leaders of the Democratic party to step outside their echo chamber, meet with voters, and solicit the diverse opinions of Democratic voters. The result, in my opinion, was disastrous.

It is upsetting to find these same undemocratic practices (and failure to listen to voters) being deployed in Ann Arbor. Council's deliberate suppression of public notice and comment, and its hostility toward citizen input, is deeply disturbing.

I watched your video of the Nov. 12 planning commission meeting, and I appreciate the comments of commission members and staff. The distinction Hank Kelley made between "commercial" and "affordable commercial" was helpful conceptually, and their citation to current ordinance language (e.g., "subordinate" and "incidental") was illuminating and suggestive of an analytic framework that could inform further discussion. And I appreciate the commission's idea to ask council for clarity and for an extension of time.

I strongly suggest that you also ask council to require extensive public notice of the proposed changes, and to require that you solicit residents' opinions, and not just the opinions of those in favor of the changes. Please, no more buried public notices that regular people can't find or never see. I still can't locate where your public notices are listed. Real and extensive notice, please. Reach out to MLive and have them publish a discursive article about the proposed changes and include notice of public meetings and your contact information. Instead of surreptitiously quashing comment, as council is requiring, encourage people to talk.

Although some commission members said in your November 12 meeting that they wanted to hear from residents who desire expanded commercial uses, nobody in your meeting signaled any desire to hear from residents who do not want to expand commercial uses in residential areas. I suggest that you reach out to residents in a fair-minded way, seeking comments both *pro and con*. In a vital and functioning democracy, city leaders would embrace competing and diverse views. To do otherwise is to make a sham of the vital goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The Democrats' failure to meet with and listen to Democratic voters at the national level led to a terrible result, and the local Democrats' refusal to allow for robust and inclusive discussion may eventually undermine all your efforts too. There is much good you are doing, but if you proceed in a secretive, exclusionary, superficial, and half-cocked fashion, as council has directed you to, you are courting a political backlash. We cannot afford to treat residents' concerns with disdain.

The existence of commercial uses in residential areas is a complex issue. It requires a great deal of thought, analysis, extensive comment from residents (*on both sides and in between*), consultation with experts (*on all sides*), research, and rigorous assessment of numerous negative impacts. If city leaders aren't up for the considerable work of a legitimate process, with an open and extensive dialogue that is respectful of all residents' views, then the city leaders -- and you -- should abandon the project.

City council's attempt to rush this process without notice and comment could significantly and irrevocably harm Ann Arbor's neighborhoods, in manifold unintended ways. I urge you not to accede to council's undemocratic demands.

Special interests and billionaires are now calling the shots nationally, where the whims and ambitions of the wealthiest drive policy, and where those in power retaliate against dissenters, promulgate disinformation, sneer at divergent opinions, and maneuver by stealth. I urge you to insist on open debate in Ann Arbor, as a much-needed counterpoint to the widespread muzzling of dissent.

You have an opportunity, here, to stand up for democracy. Please take it.

Sincerely yours,

L. Ford
Ann Arbor